

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYAKHEL

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "Vayakhel: The Tabernacle Beyond Space": the Sanctuary and Shabbat, a place and a time of meeting, and why time governs place. From the golden calf to the gathering on the day after Kippur, from the thirty-nine labors to the five passages on Shabbat, all the way to the fire one must not kindle oneself.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table of Parashat Vayakhel

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When the Guide Takes the Place of His Source



PRESENTATION

Forty days after Sinai, the people do not say: G-d brought us up out of Egypt. They say: “this man Moshe, who brought us up.” Then, before the calf, they repeat exactly the same phrase. It is around this phrase that the sin plays out.

THE QUESTION

In what way is the sin of the golden calf first of all a sin of attachment to the man rather than to the One who sends him — and why does this danger hold for all times?

THE ANSWER

“For this Moshe, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him” (Shemot 32:1); “This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Shemot 32:4).

There was a moment, says the Rav, when the people clung to the personality of Moshe rather than to the One who inspired him, who had delegated him. It is Moshe who brought us up out of Egypt, they say; now make us a god who can bring us up from here. And they made a calf, saying: this is your god, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt. So a substitute for Moshe in a sense takes over the people's source of inspiration.

And this holds for all times. When spiritual leaders begin to substitute their word for G-d's and to seek to impose their authority in every direction, without cooperation or consultation among themselves, in a splintering of the various strands of belief — each with his own philosophy, even in religion, unfortunately — and without leaving any margin of openness, then we are in the very closedness of the golden calf.

We cannot avoid these failings, the Rav acknowledges: it happens. But the Torah provides a remedy, and it is with that remedy that the parasha opens.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A substitute for Moshe in a sense takes over the people's source of inspiration.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes become attached to a voice more than to what it conveys. If our teacher, our rabbi or our role model disappeared tomorrow, what would remain of what he taught us? And do we know how to listen to a guide other than our own?

Gathering, on the Day After Kippur



PRESENTATION

After the golden calf and Moshe's intercession, the first act is not to build: it is to gather. “Moshe assembled the whole congregation of the children of Israel.” It was, says tradition, the day after Kippur. And the people are called there *adat*, a word the Rav connects with testimony.

THE QUESTION

Why must the people be gathered before being told about the Sanctuary — and what is a people of witnesses not entitled to claim?

THE ANSWER

“Moshe assembled the whole congregation (*adat*) of the children of Israel” (Shemot 35:1).

We have one day, says the Rav, the day of this gathering, of this catching of breath by the people of Israel, when we give up our individualities. And this gathering, by itself, remedies every going-astray of the people. That is why, on the day after Kippur, Moshe assembles the whole congregation of the children of Israel.

Now the children of Israel are called here *adat bnei Yisrael*: the witnesses of the people of Israel. We can only be witnesses of His presence, of His revelation. We must not go beyond that; we must not have pretensions. We bear witness to His word, and that brings us back to quite relative proportions. The golden calf was born of a pretension; the gathering undoes it.

That is how the parasha of Vayakhel demands the regrouping of all forces, on the day after Kippur, when we have all made a fresh start, when we have achieved our unity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We can only be witnesses of His presence, of His revelation. We must not go beyond that; we must not have pretensions.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is a way of serving that is already a way of putting oneself forward. Where did we speak in our own name, when we had only to bear witness? And what part of our individuality would we have to give up for the family truly to come together?

Why Shabbat Before the Mishkan?



PRESENTATION

One would expect Moshe to go straight into the plans of the Sanctuary. He begins by recalling Shabbat. And the rule our Sages draw from this is clear: Shabbat is not set aside to build the Mishkan.

THE QUESTION

If the Mishkan is the place of meeting with G-d, why can it never override Shabbat, which is only a time?

THE ANSWER

“Six days work shall be done, but the seventh day shall be holy to you” (Shemot 35:2); Rashi: he placed the warning about Shabbat before the command to build, to teach that the building does not override Shabbat.

Until now, says the Rav, we have spoken only of the design of the Sanctuary; we now move on to its construction. But first of all, Moshe is keen to recall that the people's initial meeting with Hashem takes place first through Shabbat: this time beyond time, which preceded even creation and became its goal. We become true partners of G-d only in the time of Shabbat. To suspend all activity as He did is G-d's first institution within His own creation.

G-d sought a time of meeting with man, then a place of meeting: the one is Shabbat, the other the Mishkan. But the Mishkan cannot take the place of Shabbat. The avodot may be performed in the Sanctuary on Shabbat; melachah may not be done there.

Melachah is transforming something and giving it a form, a reality of its own. Avodah is simply moving objects within a space. In our home, on Shabbat, we do not kindle a fire, we do not carry anything outside, we do not write a letter or two, we do not tie or bind. But we may move objects around inside, even if it tires us a little.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We become true partners of G-d only in the time of Shabbat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are sometimes ready to encroach on Shabbat for a good cause. What project, even an excellent one, eats into our rest, our family, our study? And what difference do we make, in our week, between tiring ourselves and transforming?

Where Do the Thirty-Nine Labors Come From?



PRESENTATION

The labors forbidden on Shabbat do not come out of nowhere: they are the thirty-nine labors that founded the world and that served to build the Tabernacle. The Rav arrives at their count from the utterances and the letters of creation.

THE QUESTION

How can a list of household prohibitions be, in reality, the list of the acts that founded a world?

THE ANSWER

Sefer Yetzirah: ten utterances of creation, twenty-two letters, and seven double letters — bet, gimel, dalet, kaf, peh, resh, tav.

There are ten utterances of creation, the Rav explains, but there are also twenty-two letters of realization: in speech there is the content, the plan, the sound; the letters are the tools that build this universal edifice. Among them, seven are marked with a dot and are therefore doubled. That brings us to twenty-nine letters; with the ten utterances, we get the full set of labors.

These labors fall into five chapters, four plus one, for there are four constituents of the universe: in today's language, gas, liquid, solid and energy; in that of our Sages, earth, fire, water and air. For earth, the one who builds and the one who demolishes. For fire, the one who kindles and the one who extinguishes. For water, the one who writes and the one who erases. For air, the one who ties and the one who unties, the one who assembles and the one who dismantles.

The fifth is out of the ordinary: makeh be-patish, giving form to matter, making it into an instrument. And our Sages also counted the stages of the most ordinary acts: eleven for bread, starting from plowing; eleven for clothing; seven for working leather.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The letters are the tools that build this universal edifice.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often see Shabbat as a list of forbidden things. Let each person name the act by which, in his week, he truly builds, writes, assembles or shapes. What changes when he suspends it one day in seven?

A Handkerchief in the Pocket



PRESENTATION

Among the forbidden labors, there is one that transforms nothing: carrying an object from a private domain into the public domain. A handkerchief in the pocket. What does it do? Apparently, nothing at all.

THE QUESTION

How does the mere passage of an object from one domain to another, or the giving of form to matter, touch on the very act of creation?

THE ANSWER

Yesh me-ayin: being drawn out of nothingness.

First there is a being, says the Rav: G-d, who conceded a tiny part of His light, of His being, for the creation of this world. He then transformed it into ayin, into nothingness — a clearing away of that first yesh, entirely spiritual. And from it was born the second yesh, that of our material world: yesh me-ayin, being out of nothingness.

Makeh be-patish, giving form to something that was formless, joins that first act of building the universe; that is why it is one of the labors forbidden on Shabbat.

And carrying? One may wonder what, at bottom, a handkerchief carried outside in one's pocket actually does. It is that this transfer from one domain to another recalls the first transfer, the first passage from nothingness to being: this passage from one state to another, from one level to another, this bringing to light of a reality, of a domain. That is why hotza'ah, carrying from a private domain to a public domain, is forbidden on Shabbat.

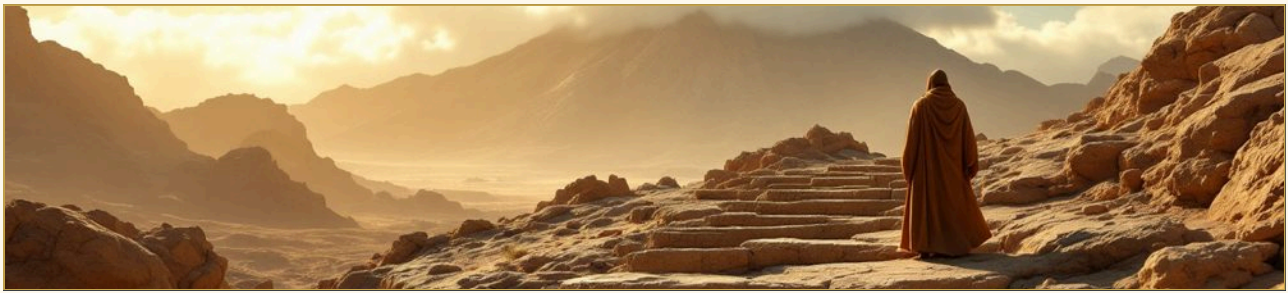
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This transfer of objects from one domain to another is what recalls the first transfer, the first passage from nothingness to being.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We judge our acts by their visible size. What small gesture — a word, a message, an object passed from hand to hand — has carried something from one world to another in our life? And how do we live the eruv, or its limits, on Shabbat?

Six Days, Always



PRESENTATION

The verse does not say only that the seventh day is holy. It begins: “Six days work shall be done.” Before the revelation, already, the cloud had covered Sinai for six days, and Moshe was called only on the seventh.

THE QUESTION

Why can we not make this world a sanctuary all at once — and what does Shabbat gather of what we lived through during the week?

THE ANSWER

“The cloud covered it six days, and He called to Moshe on the seventh day” (Shemot 24:16).

When G-d ceased, on Shabbat, to intervene in His creation, says the Rav, He suspended all His interventions. As a result, when we want to make this world a sanctuary for G-d, we cannot achieve it in one go. We always need six days: “six days you shall labor.” Even for G-d's revelation, Moshe had to wait six days of preparation. Nothing is offered to man for free.

He must invest himself to discover this spirituality, to bring about this meeting with the divine. And sometimes it comes at the very edge: a fraction of a second, a minute, a moment of elevation in prayer. It is these moments that we add up and concentrate in Shabbat, since it is their purpose.

When we celebrate Shabbat, we celebrate it with the holiness of the action we carried out each day. It is these sparks of holiness, these words, these sounds, these projects that make up our sanctuary.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Nothing is offered to man for free.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes expect great spiritual moments without preparing anything. What instant of elevation, even a single minute, did we experience this week? Let each person bring one to the Shabbat table, so that we can add them up together.

Nine Times in Creation, Eighteen Times in the Sanctuary



PRESENTATION

The Rav points out two counts. In the account of creation, the name Elokim recurs nine times with the creative utterances. In the building of the Sanctuary, the phrase “as the L-rd had commanded Moshe” recurs eighteen times.

THE QUESTION

What does this passage from nine to eighteen say about man's role — and what does it have to do with the mezuzah placed on the door of our homes?

THE ANSWER

“As the L-rd had commanded Moshe”; “Three times a year all your males shall appear before the L-rd” (Devarim 16:16).

The Sanctuary, says the Rav, set its seal on the work of creation: in it we reproduced the model of the universe created by G-d. Nine times in creation, eighteen times in the building of the Sanctuary: that is, in the Sanctuary there is truly a partnership between G-d and man, a raising of this universe to the level of a sanctuary where man and G-d meet. Three times a year, man presents himself at the pilgrimage festivals: he sees, and he shows himself.

We dream of this sanctuary when we build our small dwelling and mark its door by putting up the mezuzah: it is a manifest wish to make this dwelling a small sanctuary.

And these small sanctuaries, added together, make up the great Sanctuary, in which there is room for all humanity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

These small sanctuaries, added together, make up the great Sanctuary.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The mezuzah on our door says something about what we want to make of our home. What, in our house, truly makes it a small sanctuary? And what part of the work belongs to G-d, and what part belongs to us?

The First Shabbat Belongs to All Humanity



PRESENTATION

The Torah's passages on Shabbat are usually counted as four; the Rav finds five, each motivated in one way or another. The first, in Bereshit, gives no reason: G-d stops of His own accord. The second comes with the manna.

THE QUESTION

What does a Shabbat that G-d keeps without any stated reason, even before it is given to Israel, teach us — and why does the manna cease on the seventh day?

THE ANSWER

“Six days you shall gather it, but on the seventh day, Shabbat, there will be none” (Shemot 16:26).

The Shabbat of Bereshit, says the Rav, is a Shabbat of G-d, not a Shabbat of man, and it is not motivated. We do not know why G-d decided, on the seventh day, to suspend His universe and leave part of it to be worked out with man.

This first Shabbat is universal; it is not specific to the Jewish people. Where the L-rd suspends His creation, stops it, consecrates it and blesses it, He invites all humanity to imitate His way. When King Shlomo built the Temple, he too left room for any stranger who wished to bring an offering and bear witness to G-d's sovereignty in the world. For the essential reason for Shabbat is first of all to affirm G-d as the Creator of the world.

Even before we were given Shabbat, we were told in advance that on the seventh day there would be no manna. G-d provides for man's needs every day of the week except Shabbat — as at creation, when He gave him all the vegetation to eat before bringing him into Shabbat.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The essential reason for Shabbat is first of all to affirm G-d as the Creator of this world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Shabbat is a gift made first to the whole world. How could we let a neighbor, a colleague, someone who does not know it, taste something of it? And do we trust the “manna” enough to truly stop?

A Shabbat Tied to Nothing



PRESENTATION

Shabbat is tied to creation, to the manna, to the Sanctuary. But one passage ties it to none of these. It says only: it is a sign between Me and you, for your generations.

THE QUESTION

What does a Shabbat justified neither by creation, nor by the exodus from Egypt, nor by food mean — and why does G-d link it at once to the Mishkan?

THE ANSWER

“But you shall keep My Shabbats, for it is a sign between Me and you for your generations, to know that I am the L-rd who sanctifies you” (Shemot 31:13).

Creation, the provisioning of the world, the Mishkan; the fourth, the Rav explains, is the holiness of the people of Israel. Here, the holiness of Shabbat is the one that sanctifies the people of Israel. We are not told that it is because the L-rd brought us out of Egypt, nor because He created the world.

In other words: if you want to be initiated into holiness, you must go through Shabbat.

But since this would remain somewhat abstract for us, G-d links this manifestation to that of the Mishkan: He makes it real, tangible, through the Sanctuary. The Sanctuary is thus a way of making man's thought converge on the reality of a world one would like to see imbued with the spirit of Shabbat, a world that could secure man's freedom.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If you truly want to be initiated into holiness, you must go through Shabbat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often keep Shabbat for good reasons: rest, family, tradition. If all these reasons disappeared, would one remain? What, in our Shabbat, makes us a little holier than the day before?

No Other Way Out but Shabbat



PRESENTATION

In the second tablets of the law, Shabbat is tied to the exodus from Egypt. And in Mishpatim, it is given so that the ox, the donkey, the servant and the stranger may rest. The prophet, for his part, asks us to make it a delight.

THE QUESTION

Why is Shabbat the only way out of servitude — and why does the prophet make it a day of delight rather than a day of austerity?

THE ANSWER

“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt” (Devarim 5:15); “You shall call Shabbat a delight” (Yeshayahu 58:13).

The Shabbat of the exodus from Egypt, says the Rav, appears clearly only in the second Decalogue. There Shabbat is tied to a will to free man from all slavery, from all conditioning, and it takes on a communal and social character. But it also acknowledges that beyond any mastery we may have over the world, there is a manager above us who governs everything.

In Mishpatim, Shabbat is given so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that your servant and the stranger may recover their strength. The reason given: you knew these servitudes in Egypt; you want to get out of them? There is no other way out for you but Shabbat.

That is why the prophet makes this Shabbat livable: you will delight in it, you will choose the best dishes, the best fruits, you will enjoy it in joy. It is not a day of a nazirite's withdrawal, of asceticism, but a Shabbat in which you live this divine closeness from within.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not a day of a nazirite's withdrawal, of asceticism, but a Shabbat in which you truly live this divine closeness from within.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Does our Shabbat also free those who work for us? What do we do so that our Shabbat is a delight and not a series of prohibitions? Let each person suggest a permitted pleasure to add to next Shabbat.

SUBJECT 11

Why Recall That No Fire Is Kindled?



PRESENTATION

The prohibition of fire is already included among the other labors of Shabbat. And yet, just before the building of the Sanctuary, the text takes the trouble to name it separately: do not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on Shabbat.

THE QUESTION

Why must fire, precisely, be named at the threshold of the Sanctuary — and which fire must we beware of?

THE ANSWER

“You shall not kindle fire in any of your dwellings on Shabbat” (Shemot 35:3); “a torch of fire passed between those pieces” (Bereshit 15:17); “a strange fire, which He had not commanded them” (Vayikra 10:1).

The answer is easy, says the Rav: every revelation of G-d to man took place through a fire. The first time is in the covenant between the pieces, made with Avraham: a torch of fire passes between the pieces. Then G-d reveals Himself to Moshe in a burning bush that is not consumed. At Sinai, there is fire at the top of the mountain. And when G-d reveals Himself inside the Sanctuary, there comes the divine fire that settles there.

So what is the danger? Substituting a human fire for this divine fire. That is what Nadav and Avihu did: they did not wait for the L-rd to reveal Himself in the Sanctuary at its inauguration; they brought their own fire — meaning a personal way of conceiving the divine service. That is also what happened with the golden calf: the gold was thrown into the fire, and out came a calf.

So the Torah says: beware — I give you a Shabbat, I give you a Sanctuary, as meeting points of the human and the divine. They are imbued with a holiness in which personal initiative has no part.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

So what really is the danger? It is substituting a human fire for this divine fire.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are fervors we invent ourselves and mistake for revelation. Have we added something of our own accord to our practice? Where does personal enthusiasm end, and where does strange fire begin?

The Letter Missing Where the Light Is Pure



PRESENTATION

The Rav points out, without having time to develop it, that the letter samekh is missing from certain passages: that of the Sanctuary, that of the menorah, where pure light is spoken of. And among the names of the figures since the beginning, only one contains it: Yosef.

THE QUESTION

What does a closed letter say about the wear and tear of the spiritual life — and how did Yosef open it?

THE ANSWER

“For the increase (lemarbeh, written with a final mem) of the government and for peace without end” (Yeshayahu 9:6).

The samekh, says the Rav, is a vicious circle, a closed letter. The most fearsome letters are of this kind: sam, poison; today, samim means drugs. The samekh and the final mem are dangerous because they are closed; they must be given an opening. For the mem, a remedy was found: in the prophet Yeshayahu's description of the Messiah's role, a final mem is placed in the middle of a word; it was, so to speak, converted.

The samekh was converted by Yosef. Rejected by his brothers, sold as a slave, condemned on the word of Potiphar's wife, thrown into prison: after going through all these trials, he earned the title Yosef the righteous. That is the segulah of the Jewish people: to bear all these wanderings, all the tragedy of history, and in spite of everything to make its presence felt.

In the passages of the Sanctuary and of the menorah, there is no samekh: there is no garment that does not get soiled, no food that does not spoil, no spiritual life that is not neglected. There must be free zones, a light that does not settle us into the repetitive circle. We can be overcome by wear and tear; but we must be able to plunge back into Shabbat, to remake ourselves in this Mishkan, to find again the original fire.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We can be overcome by wear and tear, but we must be able to plunge back into Shabbat, to remake ourselves in this Mishkan, to find again the original fire through which G-d manifests Himself to man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all live in circles that close in on us: the same gestures, the same fatigue, the same quarrels. Where have we been going round in circles for a long time? And what free zone — an hour, a place, a moment of Shabbat — could we protect from wear and tear?