

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYERA

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayera: The Promises to Avraham, Part 1”: a visit from G-d
without a single word, on the third day after the circumcision, and
what the earth could not produce in man. From the free gift that is
almost impossible to find to the tent left open in a heatwave, all
the way to Avraham's only reward: the path traced for his
children.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

A visit in which G-d says nothing



PRESENTATION

This is G-d's third appearance to Avraham. The first announced the land, the second descendants, on condition of circumcision. Avraham has just performed it, and this time G-d says nothing. Rashi specifies: it is a visit, the kind one pays to a sick person.

THE QUESTION

What is the purpose of a divine appearance without a single word — and how does a man come to be the object of such a vision?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd appeared to him” (Bereshit 18:1) — Rashi: to visit the sick.

If someone came today to declare such a thing, the Rav remarks, he would be locked up. Yet the text states that Avraham is the object of a vision — a vision in which there is nothing more to tell him, except to encourage him.

When a person is bedridden, has lost his strength and energy, and discovers he is powerless, his mind begins to rise above the pettiness of life and everyday pleasures: he moves to another level of reflection. This is what the Chazon Ish called becoming an angel at moments. He has disconnected from everything; he realizes his powerlessness to fight the forces he is letting go of.

What remains is to remove his weakness. That is the role of the angel Refael, whose name comes from the verb meaning to heal.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The encounter with G-d takes place in going beyond oneself, through chessed.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Sometimes it takes a sickbed for our thoughts to stop being petty. Let each say what he once understood during an illness. And who around us should we have gone to see simply to encourage him, with nothing to say?

What the earth did not produce



PRESENTATION

To understand this vision, the Rav goes back to the creation of man. The earth was commanded to bring forth the animal, the creeping thing, the beast of the field, “and it was so”. But for man, a word is no longer enough: G-d intervenes Himself.

THE QUESTION

What is there in man that nature could not produce — and what does it mean to be “in the image” of G-d?

THE ANSWER

“Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kind” (Bereshit 1:24); “He breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Bereshit 2:7).

Man nonetheless contains everything the earth produced. He crawls for his food, he is a beast of burden, he struggles fiercely to survive, for the created world is made of a permanent tension between created forces that are nonetheless complementary. Even human intelligence belongs to nature.

What nature does not give is the living soul, the soul capable of giving life. For this, G-d takes matters into His own hands: He uses the earth and His breath.

And to be in His image, the Rav explains, is to be capable of chessed, of kindness, of a free act in all that we do. That is what in us does not come from the earth — and that is why the encounter with G-d will pass through kindness.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What does not belong to nature is the divine breath G-d placed in man so that he would be in His image.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Eating, working, defending ourselves, reasoning: nature gave us these. What did we do this week that did not come from it, a gesture nothing obliged us to make? Let each cite one — his own or that of someone else at the table.

Does a Free Gift Exist?



PRESENTATION

Five relationships between a person and his fellow are counted: father to son, rich to poor, employer to employee, strong to weak, and that of the man who, of his own free will, makes a gift. Yet, says the Rav, there is no free gift: there is always an underlying interest.

THE QUESTION

If even the recognition we expect is a way of asserting ourselves, is an entirely free gift still possible?

THE ANSWER

A chassidic tale: Rabbi Zusha and the Maggid of Mezeritch.

The only truly free act is the one G-d ascribed to Himself in creating the world and man, against the opinion of the ministering angels, who judged it impossible to entrust man with such a responsibility. For us, the disinterested gift is almost impossible to find.

Rabbi Zusha receives five hundred coins from his master to marry off his daughter. At the inn he finds a woman in tears: she has lost five hundred coins, the money for her daughter's wedding. He tells her he has found the sum, but refuses to return it without a commission. Scandal, judgment before the town rabbi, humiliation.

To his master he will explain: in giving this money, I felt an immense pride rising in me. To fight it, I demanded compensation, knowing I would be humiliated and given nothing. At the price of this humiliation, my act became entirely free.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Even expecting recognition from the other is a way of asserting oneself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We give, and we expect: a thank-you, a reputation, a position. Let each ask himself what he really expected in return for his finest gesture of the year. And what would we be ready to give if no one were ever to know?

Why the Eighth Day?



PRESENTATION

The Rav makes the visit to Avraham the direct consequence of the circumcision. For an act of kindness first presupposes unconditional love — and this love, he says, is possible only once it has been cut free of its excrescences.

THE QUESTION

Of what exactly is man circumcised — and why does the milah take place on the eighth day, outside the framework of creation?

THE ANSWER

The blessing of the Amidah: “Heal us, O L-rd, and we shall be healed”.

The excrescences are four: that of the flesh, that of the heart and of desire, that of speech overstepping its limits, and that of the ear that lends itself to every kind of conditioning. They correspond to the four levels weighed in a person's life: physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual reality.

The cutting away passes through the organ entrusted with reproduction, with conception, with the continuation of creation. When we manage to remove these excrescences, we have gone beyond the framework of creation. That framework is seven days; the milah, which carries the four circumcisions together, is on the eighth.

In daily prayer, the allusion is found in the blessing asking for healing: grant us help, so that we escape the hold of these excrescences — desires of the flesh, psychological, intellectual and spiritual deviations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must know how to practise circumcision at every level.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us knows the word he said too many this year, and the ear he lent to someone who did not deserve it. Which of these four excrescences has grown most in us? And which are we ready to trim before next year?

SUBJECT 05

The fever of the third day



PRESENTATION

The milah is performed on a child on the eighth day. The father, meanwhile, burns in his heart: he cannot bear the suffering of this long-awaited newborn. One can lend oneself to performing this mitzvah, says the Rav; but it is on the third day that the question arises.

THE QUESTION

What does Avraham, circumcised at ninety-nine, go through on the third day — and why is it at that precise moment that G-d visits him?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 18:1: it was the third day after his circumcision.

There is a spiritual fever a person feels at certain moments, accompanied by a sense of revolt and, at the same time, an unshakeable faith. The father wonders whether one must suffer like this to answer the divine will. It is this ardour that grips Avraham on the third day.

He wonders whether this milah does not cut him off from the rest of humanity and from all his friends. He knows it is a trial he cannot ask of others: they will not follow. Was this really where he had to begin?

The way Avraham measures himself against the trial is by wrestling with this ardour that questions him and to which he must respond. It is in this state that the visit comes.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are right decisions that, at the moment, cut us off from others. Have we known that “third day” when we wonder whether we did the right thing? Who helped us through it — and whom could we help through theirs?

Pleading for the Wicked



PRESENTATION

The free act does exist, the Rav asserts. But it is not always found where one looks for it. And from this kindness he derives one of the most surprising passages of the parashah: Avraham taking up the defence of the people of Sodom.

THE QUESTION

Where is true chessed to be found — and why does Avraham plead for corrupt people?

THE ANSWER

“Walk before Me and be whole” (Bereshit 17:1).

When we have given someone advice, a useful tip, shared a teaching, helped him fulfil himself as a person created in the image of G-d, we have performed a free act. Charity toward others is only an incidental chessed.

Just as one does practice exercises before solving a harder problem, the acts of kindness of the different stages of life prepare the man who will connect heaven with earth, and set the whole of creation as a sacred entity.

That is why Avraham will take up the defence of Sodom. These are corrupt people, wicked; but he is concerned to bring this world to fulfilment with the stamp of the divine, that of kindness. Avraham walks before G-d: he sketches what G-d would like to make of His world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Since the creation of the world was at its origin nothing but an act of kindness, one must persevere on this path.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have a list of people we have decided are beyond hope. Let each name one, silently. And let him ask himself what advice, what teaching, what help he could still offer him.

“Wait, Let Me Take Care of These”



PRESENTATION

Avraham has just been circumcised at an advanced age; he is in pain, exempt from receiving guests. What is more, the sun has been taken out of its sheath: scorching heat, people stay shut indoors. Yet he sits at the entrance of his tent, and when he sees three passers-by in the distance, he runs toward them.

THE QUESTION

How can a man ask G-d, who came to visit him, to wait — and what does this gesture say about true service of G-d?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 18:1: that day, G-d took the sun out of its sheath.

We grumble when, at a counter, someone is served before us. And here Avraham says in effect to his Creator: wait, let me finish with this, let me take care of these travellers. Even when G-d exempts him from all effort, he considers it his duty to press forward and defy every obstacle.

He does not want to remain alone with himself; he does not want to look after himself alone: he carries the desire to meet the other. That, through meeting the other, is true service.

A world in which everything was give-and-take would be heading for ruin: it has already happened once, with the flood. The midrash even has kindness come to complain: since Avraham has been here, I am out of work; he does everything in my place.

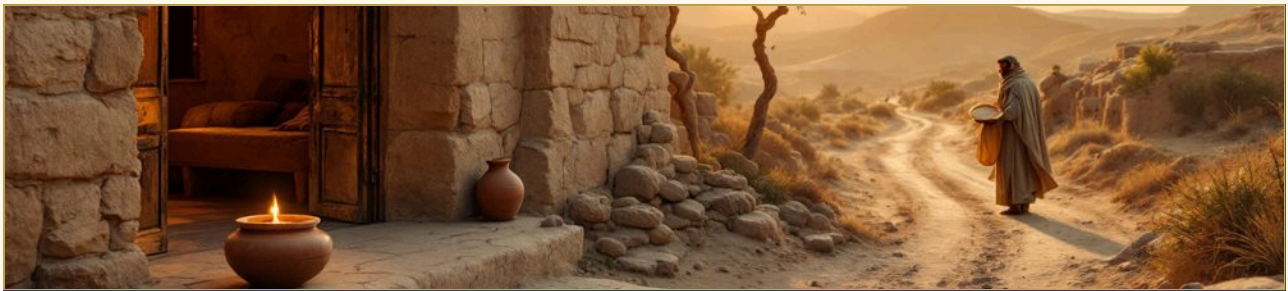
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One tsaddik is enough to save the generation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all had a good reason this year to keep the door closed: fatigue, illness, heat, lack of time. Let each name his. And let him also say who passed by his door in the meantime.

Torah, service and kindness



PRESENTATION

“The world stands on three things: Torah, service and acts of kindness.” It is also taught that Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov studied in the great academy of Shem and Ever. But, the Rav specifies, it was not that Torah that served them.

THE QUESTION

Why is study not enough to make a person of kindness — and why is Shem, the patriarchs' teacher, not counted among the fathers?

THE ANSWER

“The world stands on three things” (Pirkei Avot 1:2).

When one studies, one studies the love of kindness as one would read an instruction manual explaining how to behave — which does not mean one will do it. In study alone, one can remain in the heavenly spheres debating endlessly; in service alone, one pours out one's soul in prayer.

Each of the fathers fulfilled himself through one path: Avraham through chessed; Yitzchak through his strictness, his self-mastery, the introspection he carried out on himself; Yaakov through the synthesis of the two, and that is why he is loved.

Shem, for his part, is not counted among the fathers. Study, for some, places them in the heavenly spheres and disconnects them entirely from the earth: no more adapting what they have learned to the world in which they live. By building one's home, by serving the community, one makes the connection between the heavenly world and the earthly universe.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The yeshivah gives you the weapons. But it is up to you to make it happen.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We know a great deal about kindness. What did we learn this year, in synagogue, at school or in a class, that we have not yet done? Let each choose just one of these “instructions” and say when he will put it into practice.

Men or angels?



PRESENTATION

Avraham's three visitors raise a question the commentators dispute. The text sometimes calls them men, sometimes angels. They eat, their feet are washed: can one really share a meal with angels?

THE QUESTION

Were Avraham's visitors angels or men — and what does this double name say about what we are?

THE ANSWER

“Three men were standing by him” (Bereshit 18:2); “The two angels came to Sodom” (Bereshit 19:1).

For the Rambam, one cannot picture a man eating with angels: the scene can only be a prophetic dream. Rabbeinu Bachya opposes him on this point. The Rav explains it this way: a person is sometimes entrusted with a mission that makes him, at moments, an angel — a messenger.

This interplay is possible only if the world has been conceived as a divine creation, and not as a world into which a soul would have to be breathed after the fact. The universe is already heaven and earth, spirit and matter; but a space separates them, a tension exists between them, and man stands in the middle to join them: to bring heaven down to earth, to raise earth toward heaven.

When this work is accomplished, the world no longer appears made of forces tearing one another apart, but of forces that complete one another.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A man, when he is attached solely to the problems of the earth; an angel, when he rises and gives this matter a divine breath.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has at some point been someone's “angel”, the messenger who arrived at the right moment. Let each recount a time when someone was such a messenger for him. And for whom could we be one this week?

The Friend Who Said Yes



PRESENTATION

The appearance takes place “by the oaks of Mamre”. Avraham had three close friends: Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Two of them tried to talk him out of being circumcised: all this morality you teach is very fine, but this cutting of your flesh serves no purpose.

THE QUESTION

Why does the place of the appearance bear the name of a friend — and what had the other two misunderstood?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre” (Bereshit 18:1).

The first two do not see the link between flesh and spirit. They do not know that the support of all spirit is this flesh, and that it carries man to his heights. There have indeed been countries that banned circumcision, judging it cruel to the child.

Only one encouraged him. Mamre tells him: if this truly follows from your convictions and your faith, you must do it, even at the cost of being at odds with others for a while. The world must learn that with circumcision, one makes no pesharah, no compromise.

Spiritual life is something that costs us dearly, but in which something comes to be. The place of the appearance bears this friend's name: it is the tribute paid to the one who proved more than tolerant.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Chessed is not a compromise; spiritual life is not a compromise.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are more often Aner and Eshkol than Mamre: faced with a loved one's difficult decision, we counsel caution and call it friendship. To whom, this year, should we have said “do it” rather than “think it over again”?

SUBJECT 11

Avraham's only reward



PRESENTATION

The fiery furnace, the risk of remaining childless, a rebellious son in his own house, the destruction of Sodom, his wife taken from him: the Rav lists Avraham's trials, and asks an almost irreverent question.

THE QUESTION

Considering the life he led, what did Avraham really receive as his reward?

THE ANSWER

***“Ma'aseh avot siman labanim”:* the deeds of the fathers are a sign for the children.**

His reward lies in this: what he did committed the generations to come, and his descendants chose to restore the Creator's work so that it would not go to ruin. That, says the Rav, was his sublime reward.

Yet the sages' formula must be read correctly. It should be understood not as a sign, but as a lantern for the children: what parents do is what is invested in their children. A child begins first by imitating; what we have been is what they will be.

That is why the Torah lingers over so many details, when everything could have fitted into one or two verses: it shows Avraham running in every direction, offering, insisting. We, his children, are woven of these same attributes.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

True chessed is the path we trace for the generation to come.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our children will not remember all our speeches, but they will imitate our gestures. Which gesture of our parents or grandparents do we still carry today? And which gesture would we like our children to receive from us?

SUBJECT 12

Down to the fourth generation



PRESENTATION

After the lecture, a participant objects: if children pay for their parents' sins down to the fourth generation, that “sticks in the throat a bit”. The Rav answers that it does not stick at all — provided the verse is read differently.

THE QUESTION

How should we understand that the sin of the fathers carries over to the children down to the fourth generation?

THE ANSWER

“Visiting the sin of the fathers upon the children, to the third and fourth generation” (Shemot 20:5).

One must ask what the subject of the verb is. It is not G-d who strikes the children: it is the sin itself that carries over of its own accord down to the fourth generation. And it is at the fourth generation that G-d intervenes to stop it, when those concerned have not understood that they are caught in a whirlwind from which they will not escape.

Just as there is a physical and psychological heredity, we build within ourselves a spiritual constitution that passes on of its own accord to our children, for good as for ill. Deviation acts like a cell that has strayed from its path and would destroy the whole tissue of the being.

As long as the four levels of being have not all been affected, repair can happen of its own accord; when they all have, a re-creation is needed. But every day, the Rav adds, we renew our cells: physical cells age, but the cells of thought can be recovered in all their splendour.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A good deed, of its own accord, makes its way.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We have inherited good and less good habits. Which one in our family would we like to stop before it reaches the next generation? And which would we want to pass on at all costs?