

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 2)”: a covenant that
threatens the descendants, a land meant to become the mirror of
Eden, and a trial wrongly translated as “sacrifice”. The Rav reads
in it the answer to the question that governs the world: kindness
or justice?



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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SUBJECT 01

A Covenant That Will Cost Dearly



PRESENTATION

Just before the binding of Yitzchak, Avraham makes a covenant with Avimelech for coexistence between the Philistines and his descendants in the Land of Israel. The text makes no drama of it. Rashbam, Rashi's grandson, is the only one to see a danger in it.

THE QUESTION

Why would a peace covenant with an idolatrous neighbour threaten the descendants — and how is it linked to the trial that follows?

THE ANSWER

“It came to pass after these things” (Bereshit 22:1) — Rashbam: after the covenant with Avimelech.

There is always a link, outer and inner, in the order of the Torah's chapters: the preceding chapter governs the reading of the one that follows. Now accepting this coexistence, the Rav explains following Rashbam, will force them to give up a great deal, to remain open to other beliefs and other cultures, and this will end up affecting the children, with marriages on both sides.

A covenant with an idolater allows his idols and his cults to coexist with the ideal forged by Avraham.

The Rav acknowledges it: the midrash makes no allusion to this danger; it is this commentator's own view. But it is very apt, and it explains the sequence: the binding comes as a final test of Avraham's unconditional commitment.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It will hold back the momentum of this land.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes call openness what is only the fear of displeasing. What concession, made to keep the peace, have we seen come back in our children? And where, for us, is the line between welcoming the other and losing ourselves?

SUBJECT 02

Leaving without fleeing



PRESENTATION

Between G-d and Avraham, the Rav recalls, no mitzvah has yet been commanded, there is no Torah yet: nothing but the prospect of the land. His first revelation is the act of setting out toward this land. His whole story is read from this one promise.

THE QUESTION

What distinguishes Avraham's departure from that of his descendants — and how does one make a decision that commits a whole life?

THE ANSWER

“Go for yourself, from your land, from your birthplace and from your father's house” (Bereshit 12:1).

Avraham leaves neither his homeland nor his family under the blow of a pogrom, antisemitism or poverty. He comes from a noble and wealthy family, he lacks nothing, and yet he decides to go up to Israel. His descendants, for their part, will leave Egypt running, expelled. Between the two departures lies a whole world: that is the whole difference between the fathers and those who will come after.

What he undertakes, he undertakes with his eyes closed. When one sets oneself a goal, if one starts analysing every facet of the problem, one never gets anywhere and does not go far. One must close one's eyes and set one's direction from an inner call, which is subjective.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When one moves on to the stage of carrying it out, one must do so with open eyes, with reason, with wisdom.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which great decision of our life did we make “with our eyes closed”, on an inner call? And which did we miss, because we wanted to analyse everything — or because we did everything without thinking?

SUBJECT 03

The land, mirror of Eden



PRESENTATION

If Avraham goes up to Israel with nothing pushing him, it is not to add one more nation to the other nations. The Rav draws from this a definition of the land, which also sheds light on the danger of the covenant with Avimelech.

THE QUESTION

Why does one go to the Land of Israel, if not to found a nation like the others?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “The mirror of the Garden of Eden is the Promised Land.”

The point is to give the world an example of what it means to sanctify a life here below, and to make the land a state of Eden.

Adam received the garden without any merit, and he was driven out of it. Here, man rebuilds this land, and it is the fruit of his hands. That is why he has the duty to stand guard, to raise an army, to build a State — but a State directed toward an ideal.

To get there, the Rav adds, the people must first shed the shell of exile, of life within the various cultures and civilizations, which prevents it from being itself, from finding its identity again and overcoming its divisions and fears so as to achieve its unity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not go to Israel to found a nation; we go to Israel to fulfil ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A home too can be a small “promised land” or merely a roof. What in our home was received without effort, and what is truly the fruit of our hands? What “shell” should we shed to be more fully ourselves?

The Satan, or Pure Reason



PRESENTATION

Our sages place an accusation at the origin of the trial. The Satan comes to say: You have done so much for Avraham, You promised him descendants and a people, and he has offered You nothing in gratitude — not a sacrifice, not a gesture.

THE QUESTION

What is the Satan, if not a character — and why does his objection sound like an accountant's?

THE ANSWER

“Is it for nothing that Iyov fears G-d?” (Iyov 1:9).

The Satan takes on the guise of Elokim and can borrow its language. It is the evil inclination — but the word has a misleading moral connotation: it is a tendency of the mind, bound up with the nature of things. Creation is the work of Elokim, who coordinated the forces so that there would be order in nature and causality. The Satan belongs to this order: it espouses pure reason.

The scene recalls Iyov: a righteous man, blessed, surrounded by his wife and children, who offers a sacrifice every day for the good he receives. Pure reason, which analyses every action of the earth's inhabitants, objects: he lacks nothing; serving G-d is the icing on the cake for him; it costs him nothing.

The answer is the same in both cases: this man is truly righteous, whole, sincere. If he were asked even for his son, he would give him. And so we move to the act, to the trial.

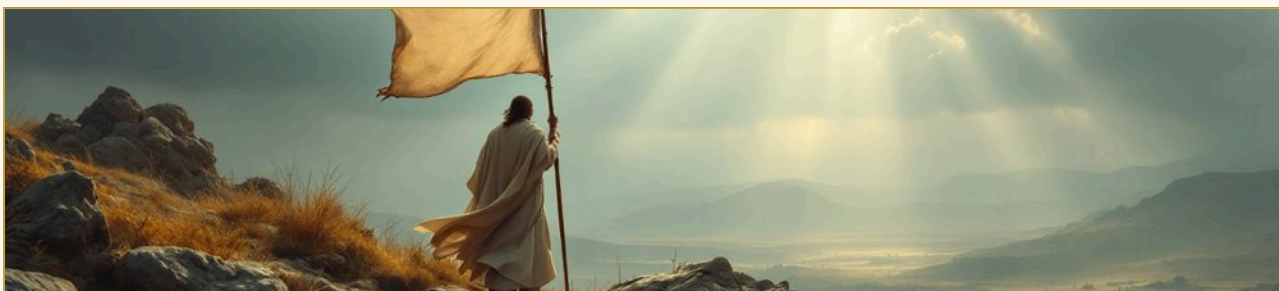
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Pure reason is Elokim. Pure reason is also the Satan.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often judge other people's faith like accountants: “easy for him, everything goes his way”. Let each ask himself what in his own practice costs him nothing. And what would we still do if it began to cost us?

Believing beyond what one understands



PRESENTATION

“It came to pass after these things”: the Rav hears in this word a cry of distress, painful, that draws a thick cloud before our eyes. It is the second trial of the same order: the first invited Avraham to sacrifice his past; this one invites him to sacrifice his love.

THE QUESTION

Why does G-d test — and what is false about keeping the mitzvot only because we understand them?

THE ANSWER

Ramban on Bereshit 22:1: the trial is for the good of the one who is tested.

The nisayon, the trial, is pure reason wanting to see the limits of the fear of G-d, the limits of the soul. For if we keep the commandments because we understand them well, in the end we serve only ourselves: they are no longer the expression of our faith.

The mitzvot should stand beyond reason. Understood or not, we do not perform them because we have absorbed them, but because they remain the expression of the divine will and we believe in them.

And the purpose of every trial is to bring a person to another level of spiritual life. The Ramban says it always benefits the one who goes through it: it gives him a new impetus and makes him, in the sense of the word nes, a banner, a standard-bearer, a mark of recognition for the whole world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The object of every trial is to set aside every subjective meaning of man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there a mitzvah we do without understanding it, and another we abandoned the day the explanation stopped convincing us? Let each name one. And which trial, looking back, made us grow?

Why did Yishmael have to be sent away?



PRESENTATION

Before the binding of Yitzchak, there had been a first sacrifice: Avraham had had to part from Yishmael and send him into the desert. It was not easy. And yet, the Rav stresses, this sending away was not counted as a trial to Avraham's credit.

THE QUESTION

Why is the sending away of Yishmael not a trial, while the binding of Yitzchak is one?

THE ANSWER

“Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian... mocking” (Bereshit 21:9).

There, there was a reason. Yishmael was metzachek, the one who plays: he was squandering the present. The merit of this separation therefore belongs rather to Sarah.

There is more. Yishmael, too, was distinguished by chessed, like his father. Yet can a whole world be founded on chessed alone? He had to be sent into the desert.

The binding of Yitzchak, on the other hand, apparently had no reason at all. Its purpose lies entirely in the verse that concludes it: now I know that you fear G-d.

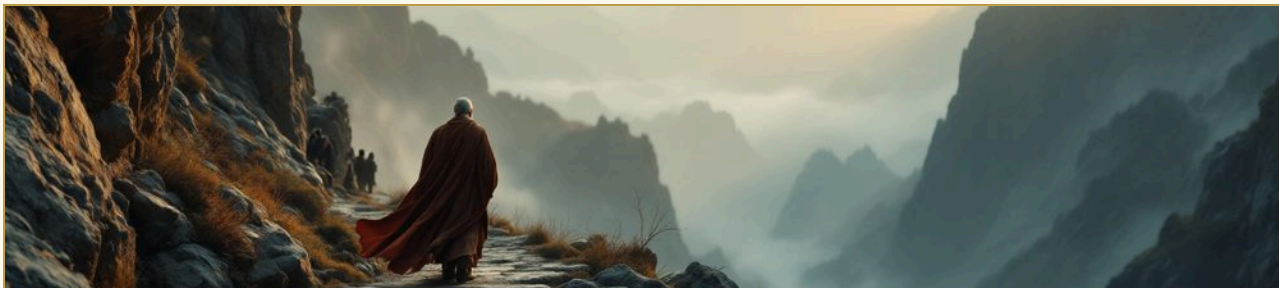
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He was squandering the present and, in squandering the present, the future was heavily mortgaged.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A squandered present mortgages the future: that is true of a child, and true of us. To what did we give whole days this year without building anything? And what in our home deserves to be kept at a distance to protect what we are building?

“Now I know that you fear G-d”



PRESENTATION

When the angel stops Avraham's hand, he pronounces the only gain of the trial: “Now I know that you fear G-d.” The Rav pauses on what this fear means here, and on the promise that accompanies it.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to “fear G-d” — and what does one no longer fear when one truly fears Him?

THE ANSWER

“Now I know that you fear G-d” (Bereshit 22:12); “your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies” (Bereshit 22:17).

You do not fear for your own person. You do not fear the theories that challenge you. You do not fear what people will say, nor the consequences, nor the misinterpretations of your acts: you act only out of fear of G-d.

And because you have proven it, because you did not hesitate to bind your only son, the land I promised you will come to be, and you are given the guarantee that, whatever happens, I will always be at your descendants' side.

The Rav opens a parenthesis here: this promise recalls the blessing given to Rivkah as she left, that her descendants inherit the gate of those who hate them (Bereshit 24:60). Enemies must be fought; but one must also be able to convince them, so that in the end they come to you.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What stops us most often: fear for ourselves, fear of criticism, what people will say? Let each say which weighs on him most. And what decision would we make tomorrow if it no longer weighed on us?

SUBJECT 08

Thirteen years or eight days



PRESENTATION

“After these things”: which things? The Rav reports a discussion between Yishmael and Yitzchak. Yishmael boasts: I accepted circumcision at thirteen; you had it done to you at eight days old, you did not even feel it.

THE QUESTION

Does the merit of a mitzvah depend on consent — and what does Yitzchak answer the one who calls him a mere performer of a rite?

THE ANSWER

Talmud, Sanhedrin 89b: “after the words of Yishmael to Yitzchak”.

Yishmael's argument is that of reason: I consented, I have the merit of the milah; you do not, you only performed a rite, a ritual.

Yitzchak answers: if I were asked to sacrifice my life, I would give not just one limb, I would give my whole self. I am thirty-seven years old today, and I can decide it.

Immediately afterward, says the text, G-d tested Avraham. Here again, it is pure reason that steps into this dialogue to find out the limits of the soul — limits meant, the Rav recalls, to bring us to another plane, to a higher level.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We received many things without choosing them: a name, a tradition, habits. Which of them have we since chosen anew? And what of ourselves would we be ready to give for what we have received?

“Raise Him Up,” Not “Sacrifice Him”



PRESENTATION

Akedat Yitzchak is translated as “the sacrifice of Yitzchak”; that is wrong, says the Rav. Akedah means binding: one ties, one binds someone to a reality. And the text does not say: slaughter him, but: bring him up.

THE QUESTION

If G-d did not ask for Yitzchak to be slaughtered, what did He ask — and why did Avraham want to go all the way?

THE ANSWER

“Go to the land of Moriah, and bring him up there as an offering” (Bereshit 22:2).

Avraham is sent to the land of Moriah, which is once again the land to be consecrated: the Land of Israel, which is to be sanctified. And he is asked to raise his son up, not to slaughter him.

Avraham, for his part, wanted to go all the way. How else could he justify his act before all those who were watching and wondering whether he was truly sincere to the end in his attachment, in his ideal?

That is why, when his hand is stopped, the answer is: I did not tell you to sacrifice him, I told you to raise him up. Now you have raised him up; all that remains is to bring him down from the altar.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are speaking of elevation, not of sacrifice.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are things we believe we must sacrifice, when we are only asked to raise them up. Let each think of a child, a project, a relationship: what would it mean, this week, to raise it up rather than sacrifice it?

SUBJECT 10

Kindness or justice: who will govern the world?



PRESENTATION

Behind one man's trial, the Rav sees a much broader question: which measure should govern the world? Avraham and Yitzchak, father and son, each embody one — and they are not alike.

THE QUESTION

Why can the world be governed neither by kindness alone nor by justice alone?

THE ANSWER

“In the beginning, Elokim created” (Bereshit 1:1): the measure of justice.

Avraham is the source of everything, but he is wholly chessed. Is it possible to found a whole world on kindness alone? Yishmael, too, was distinguished by it. Yitzchak, for his part, is driven not by his father's measure, but by strictness: the sense of justice, of fairness, of just distribution.

Now the world was created by Elokim, that is, by the measure of justice. And this measure is harsh: it imposes the law, it imposes judges and enforcers who govern the whole universe by constraint.

G-d judged that the world would not endure if it remained governed by the laws of causality alone, and He joined the measure of kindness to the first to ensure the survival of His universe. It remains to be seen which of the two must govern.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There really is a problem as to what the driving force of this world should be.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family too, there is the one who forgives everything and the one who upholds the rule. Who at home is more of an Avraham, and who more of a Yitzchak? What would happen if one of the two governed alone?

SUBJECT 11

Yitzchak pleads for his children



PRESENTATION

The Rav reports an aggadah from tractate Shabbat. Weary of Israel's conduct, but bound by His promise to the fathers, G-d comes to Avraham: your children have sinned. Avraham answers that they may be blotted out. Yaakov, asked in turn, gives the same answer.

THE QUESTION

Why is it Yitzchak, the man of strictness, who alone takes up Israel's defence?

THE ANSWER

Talmud, Shabbat 89b.

Kindness has its limits, and Avraham himself knows it. Yitzchak, however, answers: You tell me they are my children; are they not Yours as well? You brought them out of Egypt, You called them “My firstborn son”.

Then he starts counting. A life is seventy years; he takes half of it upon himself at the outset, deducts from the rest the hours of prayer, the Shabbatot and the festivals, and offers to share what remains. If need be, he will take it all upon himself.

He bases his right on his silence: I did not move for a single moment when You asked my father to bind me. You did not even address me, and I answered yes, when I could have told my father he had been dreaming, that he was the victim of a hallucination.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to condemn when we think ourselves beyond reproach. For whom around us can we still “count” the mitigating circumstances? And of whom did we say too quickly that there was nothing more to be done?

SUBJECT 12

Three times “here I am”



PRESENTATION

The account of the binding sounds the same word three times: hineni, here I am. And throughout the chapter, only the name Elokim appears — until the moment an angel of Hashem cries out to stop the hand.

THE QUESTION

What do Avraham's three “here I am”s say — and why, on the day of judgment, do we recall the binding of Yitzchak rather than the trial of Avraham?

THE ANSWER

“An angel of the L-rd called to him from heaven: Avraham, Avraham! And he said: Here I am” (Bereshit 22:11).

The first answers G-d: Avraham sets everything aside, without recalling that only yesterday he was promised a great people, a land, and this son born late, the son of his own body and not of his disciples. The second answers his son, who questions him on the way: here I am, I am entirely yours, my love for you is boundless. For three days, Avraham himself is torn: should this world be run by kindness or by justice?

The third comes when the angel stops his hand: the first two, one wholly kindness, the other wholly justice, find their synthesis in it. What was bound, conditioned, is the measure of justice itself. That is why it is not Elokim who stops the hand, but an angel of Hashem, the angel of kindness.

And that is why, on Rosh Hashanah, the day of justice, we ask that the binding of Yitzchak be remembered in our favour: he alone, being justice itself, could defend us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not an uncompromising justice, not a pure justice: it is a justice overflowing with kindness.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have a strictness we are proud of, and which has sometimes hurt someone. Where, this year, should our justice have been stopped by a hand? And who at this table is still waiting for an unconditional “here I am” from us?