

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYETZE

10 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayetze: The Flight to Haran”: a departure that is anything but
an improvised flight, fourteen years of preparation, two blessings
to become Israel, the evening prayer, and the night when Yaakov
encounters the makom, the place.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

Fourteen years before leaving



PRESENTATION

Yaakov leaves Beer Sheva for Haran, and the text takes care to recall that he listened to his father and his mother. He has their blessing and their advice: go. Yet he is not at ease, and he first goes to consult Shem and Ever, the authorities of the time.

THE QUESTION

Why does it take fourteen years to decide to leave, when the parents have already said to go?

THE ANSWER

“Yaakov listened to his father and his mother, and he went to Paddan Aram” (Bereshit 28:7); Yaakov studied fourteen years in the house of Ever (Megillah 17a).

It is because this departure is problematic in itself, and the midrash does not evade it. Can one leave the land of Israel because we are afraid, because we no longer feel safe there? Can one prefer life in Haran at the risk of truly losing one's identity there? What will become of Yaakov there? Clarifying this question, knowing whether this departure was justified or not, took him fourteen years.

Shem and Ever are those who kept the identity of the Hebrew despite the generation of the dispersion, despite the breakup of humanity into seventy peoples. They remained faithful to this identity and sought to pass it on through the family of Avraham. It is with them that Yaakov goes to arm himself.

One may be surprised at the length of time. It tells us that one is never armed enough to undertake such a journey.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There he tried to strengthen himself to face the life of exile, because he is afraid of failure.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often leave quickly and arm ourselves afterward. Before the next great change in our life, whom would we go to for advice? And what would we take with us so as not to become someone else?

SUBJECT 02

Yaakov must become Israel



PRESENTATION

Yaakov leaves with two goals: to escape Esav and to find a wife somewhere other than among the daughters of Canaan. But the Rav adds a third, which overrides the other two: he is the third patriarch, and the dimension of Israel falls to him.

THE QUESTION

What is the difference between being Yaakov and being Israel, and why must one leave in order to become the second?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Yaakov must become Israel.”

Yaakov cannot take a Canaanite girl without mortgaging his future identity. But he has not given up something else either: returning one day from his exile with Lavan with much more assurance, so as to be able to face Esav. He is not leaving only to flee.

For the dimension of Yaakov and that of Israel are not the same. The dimension of Yaakov is a national dimension, a nationhood in itself. That of Israel is a spiritual identity: it is what confers on him the universal title of Adam, what projects him onto a new humanity of which he would be the promoter.

To pass from one to the other, a single blessing is not enough. That is why, says the Rav, Yaakov leaves armed with two.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Let us not forget that he is the third patriarch, and as such, the dimension of Israel falls to him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Belonging to a people, and carrying a message for all mankind: the two do not always go together. In our home, what belongs to “Yaakov” — our origins and our customs — and what belongs to “Israel,” what we might have to bring to the world?

SUBJECT 03

The stars and the dust



PRESENTATION

Yaakov leaves armed with two blessings. Avraham's spoke of the stars of heaven; Yitzchak's, says the Rav, speaks of the dust of the earth. The two do not say the same thing.

THE QUESTION

Should man be torn away toward heaven or sunk into the earth, and what does Israel become when it receives both?

THE ANSWER

“Look now toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them [...] so shall your offspring be” (Bereshit 15:5).

Avraham's blessing tears man away from the daily round of life and turns him toward a heavenly view. He was taken outside and invited to count the stars, if he could. The offspring G-d expects of Avraham is an offspring that aspires toward heaven, toward the heights: a spirituality.

But should man be torn away from life here below? No. Then comes the second blessing, Yitzchak's: like the dust of the earth. You are going to be involved in the development of the earth, in all the problems inherent in everyday life.

And you will be Israel only by having the voice of Yaakov while using the hands of Esav. Yaakov's way is wholly spiritual; Esav's hand is practical, material. But this is difficult to achieve on foreign soil.

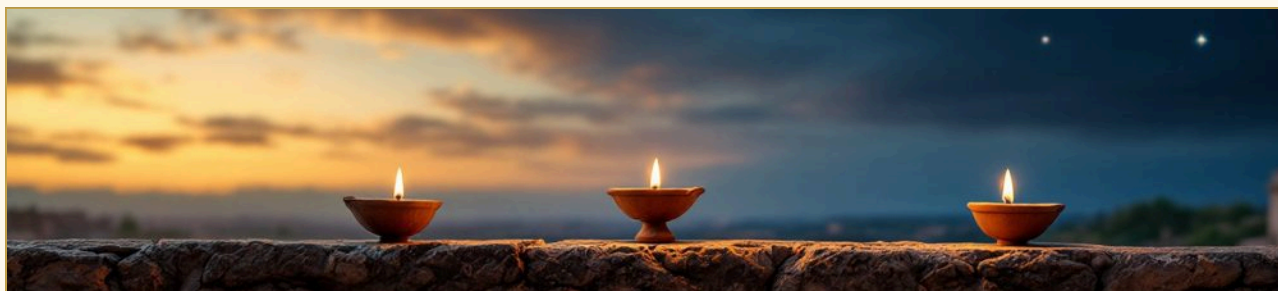
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What is Israel? It is to be both Yaakov and Esav at once.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are those who only know how to dream and those who only know how to do. Which way does each of us lean? And what should we borrow, this week, from the hands of the one we judge too down-to-earth?

The prayer of the in-between



PRESENTATION

The advice of Shem and Ever is not enough for Yaakov: he will also put the question to G-d, in prayer. Now each of the patriarchs instituted one of the three prayers of the day, and each bears his stamp.

THE QUESTION

Why is Yaakov's prayer the evening prayer, and what does it say about the person who recites it?

THE ANSWER

Avraham instituted the morning prayer, Yitzchak the afternoon prayer, Yaakov the evening prayer (Berachot 26b).

The morning prayer is Avraham's. It is the beginning, wholly tinged with chesed, kindness: at the starting point of the day, we give thanks for the possibilities offered to us. Avraham aspired to break free of conditioning by the laws of nature.

Yitzchak instituted Minchah, the prayer of the declining day. It is the end point, the hour of reckoning: what have we done with our time, what have we done with our life? If the morning prayer carries the attribute of kindness, this one carries that of justice: one must give an account. Yitzchak is the one who concentrates his whole life on an altar.

Yaakov, for his part, stands in the space of time between heaven and earth, between Shacharit and Minchah. His prayer is Arvit, the evening prayer, between the day that is ending and the one that has not yet begun.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Yaakov needs mercy; he needs an exceptional providence.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In the morning we give thanks, in the afternoon we take stock, in the evening we ask for help. Which of these three prayers comes to us most naturally? And when did we last need help that went beyond the ordinary course of things?

Only one-fifth



PRESENTATION

Yaakov goes to arm himself with Shem and Ever because he is afraid. Not only of Esav: he is afraid of failure. And this failure, says the Rav, bears a name in the history of Israel.

THE QUESTION

What failure does Yaakov fear, and what becomes of faith when it has to pass into action?

THE ANSWER

Only one in five came out of Egypt (Rashi on Shemot 13:18).

It is the failure of the Exodus from Egypt. How many came out? One-fifth of the people; four-fifths did not come out. The problem is always that of emunah. When we are confronted with what we have been waiting for, are we capable of giving up everything to answer it?

The people in Egypt had certainly affirmed its Judaism in all its forms. But when Moshe came to announce that G-d was going to take them out of Egypt and lead them to the land of Israel, four-fifths could not make it real. Judaism is not reduced to abstract beliefs or philosophical positions: it is a matter of making this expectation concrete.

Yaakov's twenty years with Lavan prefigure this exile. Just as Yaakov comes out of Lavan's house with the framework of a complete family, the people will come out of Egypt having lost four-fifths of its number, but with its structure as the house of Israel.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

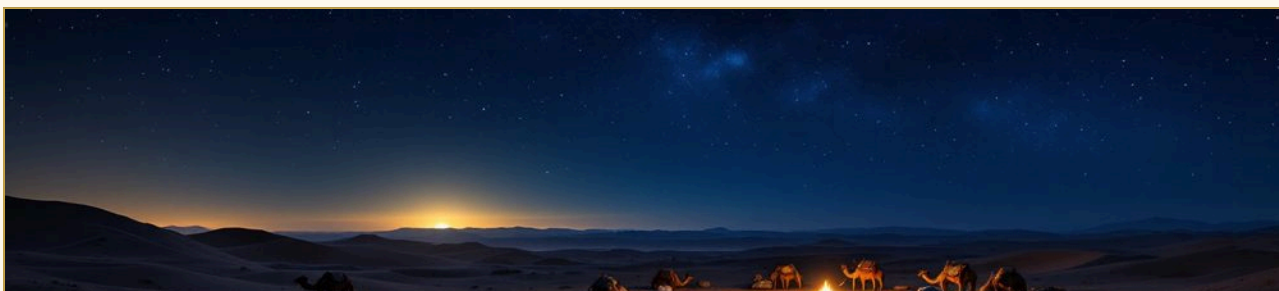
What is faith? It is bringing our principles of life into line with reality.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have convictions we readily affirm. Which one, in our home, has remained a mere principle? What would it take for it to pass into reality — and would we be among the fifth who come out?

SUBJECT 06

The night between the promise and its fulfillment



PRESENTATION

The structure of the house of Israel, says the Rav, demands maturity. He then lays down a principle about the promises in the text: about what separates the moment they are made from the moment they are fulfilled.

THE QUESTION

If a promise is already on its way to fulfillment as soon as it is made, why is it delayed, and where does the night come from?

THE ANSWER

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” (Pesach Haggadah).

As soon as a promise is made in the text, it is already in the process of being carried out. The question is what man will answer to this promise. Perhaps he is not ready; perhaps he does nothing to deserve it. The delay does not come from above, and that is why we find ourselves plunged into night.

Now there is no mitzvah specific to the night. All the mitzvot are concentrated on the course of the day; the night sometimes merely completes what was not done. That is why we ask at Pesach how this night differs from all others: that night shines like the day; it is considered as day; it is a night of vigil in which we think the Exodus from Egypt through again.

Man's passage through the night is therefore problematic in itself. And it is this night that Yaakov will have to cross.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The time that passes between the promise and its reality is the time that we ourselves lose.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there are promises that are waiting: a project, a reconciliation, a return. Which one is waiting in our home? And what, on our side, is holding it back?

He encountered the place



PRESENTATION

The text says: he encountered the place, and he spent the night there. One does not encounter a space. And the word makom, place, is also one of the names by which we refer to G-d.

THE QUESTION

What exactly does a man in flight encounter when he reaches a place that is not even named?

THE ANSWER

“He is the place of the world, and the world is not His place” (Bereshit Rabbah 68:9).

Makom is an attribute of G-d, and it means space. No object can exist without its space: nothing hangs in mid-air. Space is what gives real existence to all things. Blessed be the Makom: blessed be the One who ensures the existence of all things. He encompasses all of creation; He is the place of the world, but the world is not His place.

That is why, in the Ashkenazi world, one comforts a mourner by saying HaMakom rather than the Name: the one who has left this world no longer has a place, but there is another place, the one that encompasses all places, and it is He who will sustain you. The Rav also notes that the numerical value of Makom, one hundred and eighty-six, is the sum of the squares of the letters of the Name.

But one does not “encounter” a space. Our Sages read a prayer here: Yaakov insisted on obtaining a revelation assuring him that he would return from this expedition safe and sound.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Makom is the place that justifies the existence of every being.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we comfort someone, what do we say to him? And for each of us: what is the “place” — a home, a person, a prayer — that keeps him standing when everything wavers?

A trace in both places



PRESENTATION

The text takes care to say that Yaakov went out from Beer Sheva and went toward Haran. It could simply have said where he was going. The Rav pauses on this departure, and on the place par excellence.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah say where Yaakov is leaving from, and not only where he is going?

THE ANSWER

“Yaakov went out from Beer Sheva and went toward Haran” (Bereshit 28:10).

When someone leaves a place, one sees what stamp he left on it, what aura. But the place where he arrives also receives something: it is another way of crowning it, of giving it an attribute of makom, of making it habitable. Our Sages compare this departure to Moshe leaving Pharaoh to consult G-d: before leaving Beer Sheva, Yaakov too wants to inquire after the divine will.

The makom par excellence is Mount Moriah, the place where the Sanctuary was built. It is from there that all of space unfolded, and that is why this place is the concentrate of space, the matrix of all creation. It is there that the Creator established His bond with the world He created.

And it is with Yaakov that this dimension of makom appears, because he made this world habitable for G-d: he established the junction between heaven and earth, and in the space that separates them, he set up a ladder.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us leaves a trace in the places he leaves: a home, a classroom, a job. What trace did we leave in the last place we left? And what do we bring to the place where we arrive?

SUBJECT 09

The one who takes another's place



PRESENTATION

At night, the man who has left his place is in danger. The Rav then recalls who, in the Torah, is condemned to exile, and what this says about each person's own space.

THE QUESTION

Why is exile the penalty for one who has deprived another of his space?

THE ANSWER

“You shall be a wanderer and a fugitive on the earth” (Bereshit 4:12).

The one condemned to exile is the person guilty of an unintentional killing: he is assigned a place of refuge, for fear that a member of the family might pursue him out of vengeance. And Kayin, who killed his brother, hears: you shall be a wanderer on the earth.

For the very nature of the space in which we live, the space that is our own, can condemn us to exile, simply because we refused someone else his own space: we drove him out of it.

One can, of course, be memale makom, hold someone's place in the interim, complete what he could not accomplish. But at the origin, each person has his makom, what allows him to live. And this makom that is his own, he can lose through his own fault.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Every person is irreplaceable; every person has his mission to fulfill.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily take the place of others: at work, among siblings, at this very table. Whose space have we taken this year? And what is ours, the one nobody can fill in our stead?

SUBJECT 10

The king who puts out the lights



PRESENTATION

The text does not merely say that the sun set. Our Sages read that G-d made the sun set before its time, because Yaakov had to be kept in that place.

THE QUESTION

Why did night have to fall on a man in flight, and what can be found in the darkness?

THE ANSWER

G-d made the sun set before its time in order to speak with Yaakov in private (Bereshit Rabbah 68:10).

When a king wishes to be alone with his favorite minister, he has the lights put out: it means he truly wants to speak with him in intimacy. What is at stake here is the conversation that encourages Yaakov to go out into the outside world. Without it, he could not claim the title of Israel; he could not be Adam.

At night we light things artificially because we are afraid of remaining in the dark. At night we are powerless, we plead for mercy; by day we discover the world, by night we grope and touch only fragmented pieces of what surrounds us. But the night has one advantage: left alone with myself, rethinking myself in this solitude, I can arm myself with new energies.

Let us not forget that in the Hebrew calendar the day begins at night. It is not I who end my day in the night: it is the night that projects me toward the day.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The night is charged with a future project.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We light up our nights because we are afraid of remaining in the dark. What do we do with our hours of darkness: do we fill them or do we cross them? And what has each person's last difficult night ended up teaching him?