

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYETZE

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayetze: The Journey into the Unknown”: every departure from
one's parents' home is an exile, between what stays fixed and what
changes. A stone that gathers, a ladder that is first of all a ladder
of values, a small bone called Luz, and the request for bread and a
garment of a man setting out.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

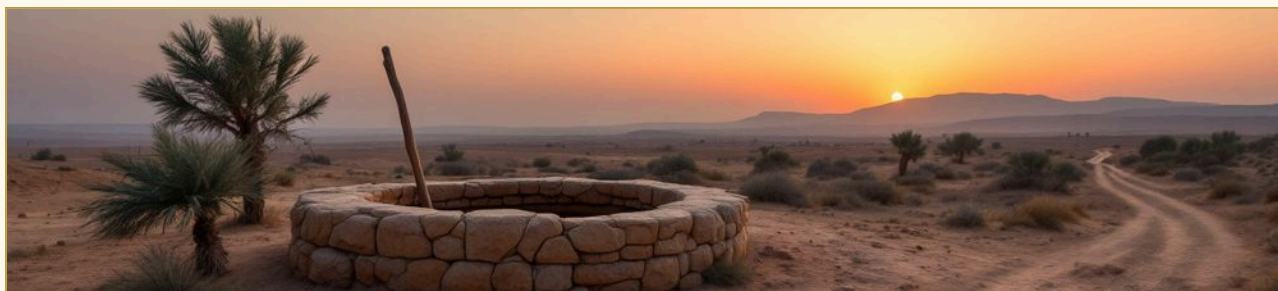
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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table of Parashat Vayetze

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SUBJECT 01

The letters of Beer Sheva



PRESENTATION

The Rav opens the chapter of Yaakov's departure with a remark: it has been pointed out that in the letters of Beer Sheva one can read the names of Ever and Shem, the masters with whom Yaakov studied.

THE QUESTION

What does the very name of the place Yaakov leaves tell us, and why must one, at some point, leave home?

THE ANSWER

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

In other words: we have finished our studies, we have finished the house of study, and in any case we must leave home. One leaves it for family reasons, since Yaakov is fleeing Esav; but one also leaves it in order to be able to build one's own home. So Yaakov has two goals.

A son, says the Rav, is the one who carries his father's march forward through time, beyond time. That is how life is.

But one still has to be able to do it. Between what was fixed and secure and what is called to evolve, the son's march is never guaranteed in advance.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Must one succeed in this march?

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There comes a moment when we have “finished our studies” at home and must go off to build our own. What did we learn from our parents that serves us in building our own household? And what will our children take with them from our home?

SUBJECT 02

Leaving one's parents' home



PRESENTATION

Yaakov leaves Beer Sheva. He has two goals: to escape his brother and to find a wife. But every departure from one's parents' home, says the Rav, is in itself an exile.

THE QUESTION

Why is leaving one home to build another experienced as an exile, and not as a beginning?

THE ANSWER

“I will return in peace to my father's house” (Bereshit 28:21).

We do not know what awaits us in life. We have left what was stable, what was fixed. We knew who we were; we were taken care of. And we move forward facing a world that never stops changing, and these changes concern us and frighten us.

That is why Yaakov's prayer concludes this way: if G-d protects me, if G-d assists me in all I do, I will build my father's house as it should be, and there will truly be peace. For as long as I have not brought my father's house to completion, as long as I have not taken part in building it, it is bound to be destroyed. What then would this exile be for? From the moment one cuts oneself off from one's roots, one is an uprooted man.

Rereading this chapter, it is our own march that we are reading. We have these two identities, Yaakov and Israel. We are in our daily struggle as Yaakov, and we do not reach our goals in one go: it is stone after stone.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Whoever has no past has no future.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Many leave slamming the door and call it becoming themselves. What has each of us left unfinished in our parents' home? And what would have to be done, this year, for that house to stand?

SUBJECT 03

What does not change



PRESENTATION

To speak of Yaakov's march, the Rav goes back to the birth of the people. The crossing of the sea is the breaking of the waters that gives birth to the child, at the end of a pregnancy and its pains. The people is born: now it must be educated.

THE QUESTION

What does one first give a newborn people, when everything around it is going to change?

THE ANSWER

At Marah, G-d gave them Shabbat, the red heifer and the laws (Rashi on Shemot 15:25).

Its first education consists of three laws. First, the laws themselves, the rigor of the law. These do not change: however far one advances through change, the laws are immutable. The Shulchan Aruch is there: it is the reference.

But He also gave them Shabbat; He initiated them into its holiness. That means rising above things, not remaining chained to the world of nature, learning to tear oneself away from natural conditions in order to stand beside the One who changes the givens of nature.

And He gave them a third law, that of the red heifer, which we know purifies the impure and is capable of making the pure impure. Who can extract the pure from the impure, and decide what will be impure?

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Laws have no meaning without a goal, and the goal is the holiness of Shabbat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, what never changes, whatever happens? And have we explained to our children toward what goal these fixed rules lead?

SUBJECT 04

The stone that gathers



PRESENTATION

The red heifer purifies the impure. But where does impurity come from? The Rav gives its root, and contrasts it with Yaakov's gesture in the morning: he takes the stones, unites them, and pours oil on them.

THE QUESTION

Why is death the root of impurity, and how is Yaakov's stone the opposite of a tombstone?

THE ANSWER

“He took the stone he had placed under his head, set it up as a pillar, and poured oil on its top” (Bereshit 28:18).

The root of impurity is death. And death is confinement: it is when everything is shut in, nothing moves, one is reduced to a limited, closed space, and a single stone is there to mark it.

Yaakov does exactly the opposite. He takes all the stones, unites them into a single stone, and pours oil on it. His stone does not mark an end; it shuts nothing in: it gathers.

That is Yaakov's contribution: a unity of life, with its twelve edges, its twelve hours a day of life and reflection. Man is capable of welding these elements to one another. That is what humanity is: being the unifying element.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If he succeeds at it for himself, he must be able to share it with the other.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A stone can shut in or gather. Is there something in our life that has frozen, closed in, that no longer moves? And what have we managed to gather that we could share?

SUBJECT 05

He lay down in that place



PRESENTATION

The text takes the trouble to say that Yaakov lay down in that place. The detail might seem pointless. The Rav sees in it a key: the place becomes prayer when it is linked to a time, and that time is the night.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah specify that Yaakov lay down, and why is one not permitted to deprive oneself of sleep?

THE ANSWER

“He lay down in that place” (Bereshit 28:11); “Night to night declares knowledge” (Tehillim 19:3).

When one is in harmony with one's time and one's place, change is positive. The place becomes a prayer because it is bound to a time. And this time of night, take note, is not negative: it is a time of dreaming, a time of awakening, a time of inner reflection, a time that longs for a new morning, a new day, a future.

That is why the detail matters. Someone who wants to deprive himself of food — that is his problem. But to deprive oneself of sleep, to deprive oneself of entering the night and engendering a new morning, that is not permitted. One day must prepare another day, and the night brings counsel.

Why? Because it is the time of dreaming, the time when one must rethink the goal that unites heaven and earth. And that goal may be my home, the Sanctuary, Jerusalem, or the very space in which I live with the other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Life is not completed in a single day.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often treat sleep as lost time. What important decision have we made “after a night”? And what, for each of us, is the goal that unites his heaven and his earth?

SUBJECT 06

To flee or to face



PRESENTATION

For now, Yaakov is fleeing Esav. We flee everything we cannot measure ourselves against, everything we dislike. But the Rav refuses to see this exile as something merely negative.

THE QUESTION

Is exile only a flight, or can it prepare one to face?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Exile in itself is not entirely negative.”

There is a positive aspect to this exile, insofar as it prepares Yaakov to confront Esav later on, rather than running away from him. For the moment, of course, he is fleeing him.

But some have dared to say that if Yaakov is condemned to exile, it is because he never tried to win his brother over. He had the means to do so, since he was the *emet*, the truth.

For Esav is not falsehood: he is shreds of *emet*; he is its shadow. The one who carries the whole truth thus had what he needed to go toward the one who holds only shreds of it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there is someone we avoid rather than face or appease. Have we really tried to go toward him? And what has the distance taught us for the day we will have to meet him?

SUBJECT 07

The ladder, Sinai and money



PRESENTATION

In his dream, Yaakov sees a ladder. It has been noted that sulam, ladder, has the same numerical value as Sinai, and, written with a vav, as mamon, money. The Rav pauses on this second connection.

THE QUESTION

What is truly “my” money, and how can it become a ladder?

THE ANSWER

“A ladder was set on the earth, and its top reached the heavens” (Bereshit 28:12).

What is the difference between kesef and mamon? Kesef comes from the verb kasof: to long for, to covet. Mamon is what has been allotted to you, a fixed budget.

You may have money: what is truly your money is what passed through your hands and what you invested. That is what builds your sulam, your own ladder.

For Yaakov is the portrait of Adam, whose stature, say our Sages, stretched from one end of the universe to the other, and from the earth up to heaven. Such is the calling of his descendants, of everyone who recognizes himself in Yaakov.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

You helped, you gave: that is what remains in your hands.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If each of us drew up a list of “his” money in the Rav's sense — what he invested, helped with, gave — what would he find? And which rung of his ladder did he build this year?

A ladder of values



PRESENTATION

A ladder is set on the earth, its top reaches the heavens, and angels of Elokim go up and down on it. We always talk about the angels, the Rav remarks. We should first know what we are talking about.

THE QUESTION

Who are these angels going up and down, and what does it mean for a person to have a ladder?

THE ANSWER

“And behold, angels of Elokim were ascending and descending on it” (Bereshit 28:12).

The angels of Elokim are not the angels of the Name: they are the world of nature, the laws of nature, the laws of causality. Storms, winds, fires, everything that stirs the world, everything that makes the world change around me when I would like to live in a bubble: these are messengers. An object itself becomes a messenger when it brings back to me the memory of a loved one.

But what I aspire to is that these messengers be lined up on a ladder of values. Before doing anything at all, one must have criteria. And the top that reaches the heavens is not a point in the sky: the essential thing is that the ladder be set in a vertical thrust, first ascending, then descending, for the criteria we have chosen must be carried out here below.

Then I learn to go beyond these laws and to perceive the presence of a providence that defies nature. I settle into a world of permanent miracles, because I regard every opportunity to live as a miracle in itself. What becomes stable is the miracle.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

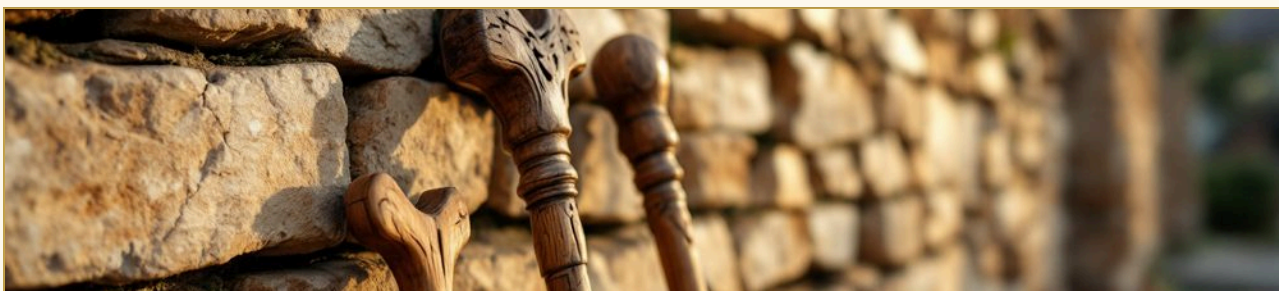
Having a ladder of values in life is essential.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Most often we decide first and look for our criteria afterwards. What are the three rungs of each one's ladder, in order? And what have we settled this year without consulting any of them?

SUBJECT 09

The G-d of Avraham your father



PRESENTATION

At the top of the ladder, G-d presents Himself to Yaakov through his fathers: the G-d of Avraham your father, and the G-d of Yitzchak. The Rav notes that only Avraham is called “your father.”

THE QUESTION

Why does G-d present Himself through the fathers, and how far back must we go to know who we are?

THE ANSWER

“I am the L-rd, the G-d of Avraham your father and the G-d of Yitzchak” (Bereshit 28:13).

When one makes this ascent from below to above, from the world of action to the origin of thought, one cannot fail to attach oneself to the patriarchs. I attach myself to the avot through my parents, my grandparents, my ancestors.

If Avraham alone is called “your father,” it is because he was the first initiator. Otherwise, we generally go back only three generations. There is no need to say: we are the descendants of so-and-so, and so-and-so, and so-and-so. We are the descendants of the avot.

And we are the descendants of our parents, of our grandparents, whether we knew them or, unfortunately, did not.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

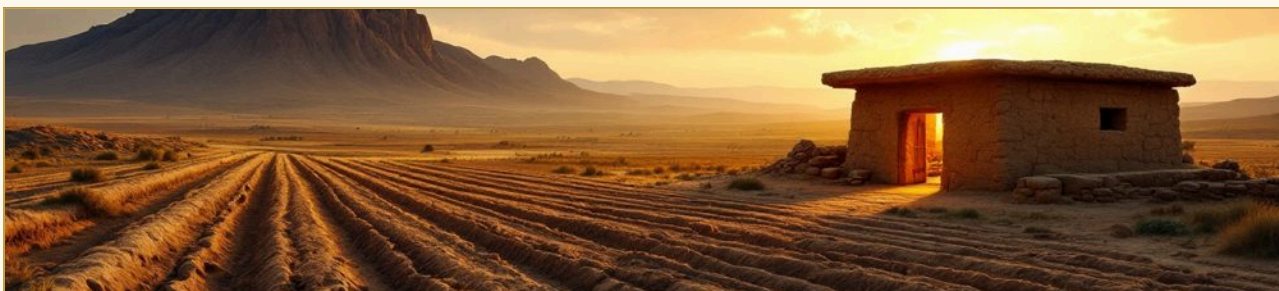
Their story is the one we continue.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we know about our great-grandparents? Let each person tell one thing he knows about an ancestor, and say what part of that ancestor's story he is continuing today.

SUBJECT 10

A mountain, a field, a house



PRESENTATION

Each of the patriarchs, say our Sages, named the place of the encounter with G-d in his own way: Avraham calls it a mountain, Yitzchak a field, Yaakov a house. The Rav reads these three words as three ways of living.

THE QUESTION

Why could what Avraham and Yitzchak built be destroyed, and why is Yaakov's house for eternity?

THE ANSWER

A mountain for Avraham, a field for Yitzchak, a house for Yaakov (Pesachim 88a); “Zion shall be plowed like a field” (Michah 3:12).

Avraham reached a boundless spirituality: that is a mountain. He was the driving force; he deployed all his energy. Yitzchak is capable of placing himself on the altar, but he remains passive in his trial: he submits to the law and dedicates it to his Creator. That is what is called a field: left untended, it is covered with thorns; worked, it yields an abundant harvest.

But what they built was destroyed. The First Temple, says the Rav, was destroyed by Yishmael; the Second by Esav, and it is said that Zion became like a plowed field.

Yaakov, for his part, makes this world habitable. His bed is complete: there is neither Yishmael nor Esav among his descendants. That is why the house of G-d belongs to him, and it is for eternity. But this can only come about in this land, a sample of the Garden of Eden, where man recovers his true dimension as Adam.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Outside the land, one can only dream.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A mountain impresses, a field demands work, a house welcomes. Does our home look more like a mountain, a field or a house? And what would it take for it to become a house where everyone feels at home?

SUBJECT 11

Luz, the place nobody wanted



PRESENTATION

On waking, Yaakov calls this place Beit-El, house of G-d. But the text specifies that the city was formerly called Luz: a forsaken spot in which people took no interest at all.

THE QUESTION

Why did the house of G-d have to rise precisely where there was nothing of any worth?

THE ANSWER

“But Luz was formerly the name of the city” (Bereshit 28:19).

Luz is the almond, and it is also the name of the small bone that is moistened with the wine at the close of Shabbat, to give it new vigor until the holiness of the next Shabbat. These are sanctifications that add up, that do not repeat themselves: careful, says the Rav, this is not a photocopy.

This little bone, this insignificant little kernel, is what can take part in building Beit-El. This forsaken place that nobody wanted becomes the house of G-d.

For what we retain from the course of a life is what remains, what is immutable, what does not move, what one leaves behind: the stone one gives to those who follow so that they may go on building the same edifice one dreamed of.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This little bone, this insignificant little thread, can take part in building Beit-El.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We look down on what is small and wait for spectacular beginnings. What insignificant detail in our home turned out to carry the whole house? And who around us is treated like a forsaken place?

SUBJECT 12

“Bread to eat and a garment”



PRESENTATION

Yaakov makes a vow just after G-d has promised him protection and return. And what he asks for is strangely modest: bread to eat and a garment to wear.

THE QUESTION

Why does a man who has just been promised everything still ask for bread and a garment?

THE ANSWER

“If G-d will be with me [...] and gives me bread to eat and a garment to wear” (Bereshit 28:20).

We know perfectly well that bread is for eating and a garment for wearing. But Yaakov is repairing Adam's sin: a food that was not the one G-d had approved for man, after which he discovered himself naked and had to be covered in his dignity. Yaakov asks for bread in its dignity, for a garment in its dignity.

If I manage to correct this bread and this garment that Adam lacked, I will be at peace with my father's house. And the criterion — it is not I who will determine whether it is good or bad. We are vulnerable, we are fragile, and we cannot help judging ourselves.

He adds: of all that You give me, I will set aside a tenth. The tithe one sets aside consecrates all the rest. With nine people we cannot recite kaddish or solemnly proclaim our holiness: one more is needed, and it is the tenth that carries the whole.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He wants to be himself in everything.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We ask for more, rarely for better. If each of us had to rephrase his request in terms of dignity rather than quantity, what would he ask for? And what tithe, of his money or his time, would consecrate all the rest?