

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYETZE

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture “Vayetze: The Confrontations of the Patriarchs”: each of the patriarchs faces a force that contests him, and the last, Lavan, does not oppose the truth head-on — he bleaches it and translates it. A tower without heaven, twelve stones fused together, a blank page, and what passes intact from father to son.



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

A Judaism without borders?



PRESENTATION

Yaakov leaves for two reasons: to flee Esav's threats, and to seek a wife within the circle of the Hebrew family. In this second motive the Rav detects a danger: remaining attached to the old kinship rather than to the land.

THE QUESTION

Can one be oneself outside one's borders, and what does a Judaism risk that would like to be the conscience of the world from anywhere at all?

THE ANSWER

“Whoever lives outside the land of Israel is as one who has no G-d” (Ketubot 110b).

The risk is a cosmopolitan Judaism, without national borders, without a national entity, that would like to go on being the conscience of the world. But G-d's will, when He directed Avraham toward the land of vision, was altogether different: first a national entity, and then, from that place, to try to shine outward.

Outside our borders we are obliged to take the thinking of others into account, and there is a possibility of drowning the purity of the divine message beneath garments, beneath a covering that has more to do with appearance than with being.

That is why it is said that whoever lives outside the land is as one who has no G-d: he cannot express himself fully, clearly, distinctly, without a touch of the culture of the people among whom he lives. The Rav notes that today one hears some people call themselves Jews, but of Christian culture.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We cannot be ourselves outside our borders.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Wherever we live, we carry a touch of the culture around us. Which one, in our home, has ended up covering something of our identity? And what, on the contrary, has remained intact?

SUBJECT 02

Three adversaries for three patriarchs



PRESENTATION

Each of the patriarchs is met by a force that contests him. Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov each have an attribute, and facing each one stands a rival. The last, the Rav shows, is the hardest to pin down.

THE QUESTION

Why is Yaakov's adversary Lavan, and why is he harder to face than Yishmael or Esav?

THE ANSWER

“You will grant truth to Yaakov, kindness to Avraham” (Michah 7:20).

There are three forces that rival the three patriarchs. Facing Avraham's chesed, his kindness, stands Yishmael. Facing Yitzchak's rigor, Esav. And facing Yaakov's emet, his truth, stands Lavan.

None of these forces opposes an attribute from outside: each is its possible counterfeit, which makes the confrontation far more difficult. Lavan does not fight the truth head-on: he translates it, he dilutes it, he bleaches it.

Lavan is also the Aramean, and the same letters give the cunning one, the deceiver, the dishonest one: it is said of him that he sought to uproot the people. That is why Yaakov would like to be able to part from him for good.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Lavan represents a real danger for him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Kindness can become laxity, rigor harshness, truth a compromise that no longer says anything. Which of our qualities is most at risk of turning into its counterfeit? And who around us helps us see it?

SUBJECT 03

“The daughters are my daughters”



PRESENTATION

Lavan's name means white, to whiten, and our Sages interpreted it: he will whiten the sins of the children of Israel. The Rav pauses on this paradox.

THE QUESTION

How could the one who tried to take our own children from us “whiten” Israel?

THE ANSWER

“The daughters are my daughters, the sons are my sons, the flock is my flock, and all that you see is mine” (Bereshit 31:43).

What do we have to do with a Lavan who would whiten the children of Israel, when he himself sought to abolish the very meaning of kinship, the root of lineage in Israel, that of the patriarchs? Everything Yaakov had achieved, Lavan declared to be his.

And this claim does not belong to the past. We go on living it on various levels, says the Rav, when people want at all costs to take from us both the land and our Judaism, our values, our spirit, our spirituality.

The contradiction is thus at the heart of the problem: a name that promises whiteness, borne by the one who wants to erase the roots. It is this contradiction that the lecture will unfold.

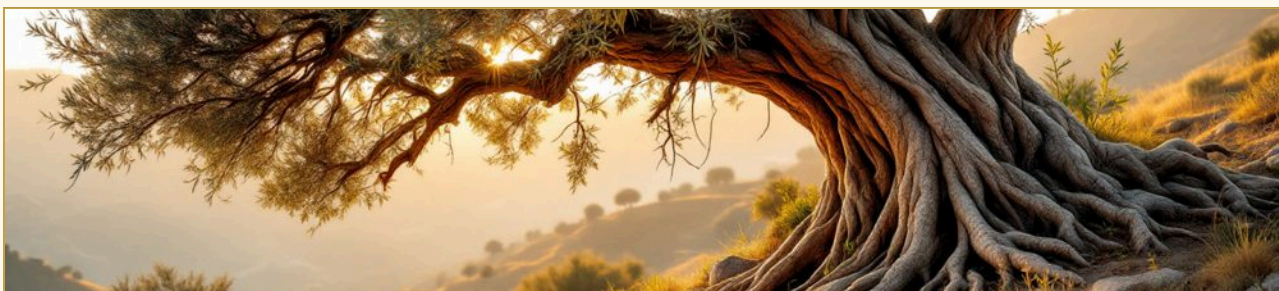
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He wanted to take our own children from us; he claimed them as his.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are voices that claim our children: fashions, screens, ideologies. What in our home wants to make our children “its” children? And what do we pass on to them that ties them to their roots?

The umbilical cord of the world



PRESENTATION

Yaakov takes some of the stones of that place. Now this place, the Rav recalls, is the embryo of the earth, attached to it as if by an umbilical cord.

THE QUESTION

What role does Israel have toward the other peoples: to remake humanity, or to restore it?

THE ANSWER

“He took of the stones of the place” (Bereshit 28:11).

Just as the umbilical cord nourishes the child in its mother's womb, Yaakov, through the truth he reveals, is called to nourish the other peoples, whom the people of Israel contains within its being. For the people of Israel is the sum of all this humanity, and that is why Yaakov is the portrait of Adam.

We are not going to make humanity over again: we are going to restructure it, to found it anew on what already exists. We want to restore it to what it was at the origin, and rid it of all the impurities it has accumulated through all its attempts and failures.

This place is the focal point of humanity, the one on which the Sanctuary is to be built: the point of junction between the created world and spirituality, between heaven and earth.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not claim to make a new world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To restore is not to demolish in order to rebuild. In our family, what is there to restore rather than replace? And what have we received from others that we could nourish rather than reject?

SUBJECT 05

A law without heaven



PRESENTATION

The generation of the Tower of Babel also wanted to erect a building that would serve as a reference for all humanity. The Rav contrasts it with what the people of Israel receives as soon as it leaves Egypt.

THE QUESTION

Can a society decide on its own what is good and what is bad?

THE ANSWER

“Let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose top reaches the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Bereshit 11:4).

Babel wanted to build with bricks, sand and cement — things that hold firm. It wanted to give humanity a law, but a purely earthly one, detached from everything spiritual: they are the ones who build, they are the ones who define the law, they are the ones who judge what is good and what is bad.

Now three things were given to the Jewish people on leaving Egypt: the law, Shabbat and the red heifer. We cannot function without legislation. But this legislation must draw on a moral conscience embodied by Shabbat, by the sense of the sacred; it cannot be a court that decides by itself: it must refer to a revealed book.

And as for what sets the laws of pure and impure, it is not a matter of debating it, of deciding whether it is fitting or not. One can extract the pure from the impure, but that secret G-d alone holds.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often decide what is “good” according to what suits us. On what question have we set our own rules without seeking a higher reference? And what would a view from above us change?

SUBJECT 06

A tower for oneself, an altar for Him



PRESENTATION

Avraham had already answered Babel. His first stop in the land of Canaan was Shechem, and there he built an altar. The Rav pauses on the choice of this place.

THE QUESTION

Why is Avraham's first answer to Babel an altar, and why at Shechem?

THE ANSWER

“He built there an altar to the L-rd who had appeared to him” (Bereshit 12:7).

Shechem is no ordinary place: it is there that kingship will be shaken, there that this kingship, which ought to be a representation of the heavenly kingship, risks being altered and led astray, so that it becomes a kingship for its own sake, a monarchy.

Avraham sensed this danger. And what did he do? He set up an altar to proclaim the divine unity and to call upon the Name.

To Babel, which builds a tower to make a name for itself, he opposes an altar that is not for himself. And Yaakov, at the moment G-d reveals Himself to him, makes the same gesture in his own way: he takes stones.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we build — a career, a home, a reputation: is it a tower to make a name for ourselves, or an altar serving something greater than us? Let each person name one thing he is building, and say for whom.

Twelve stones, one single stone



PRESENTATION

Yaakov takes some of the stones of that place and puts them under his head. How many did he take? Some say three, others two, others twelve. For the Rav, the question is a reading of history.

THE QUESTION

What is a man seeking when, on the night of his exile, he takes scattered stones and wants to make a single block of them?

THE ANSWER

All these stones gathered in one place and became a single stone (Chullin 91b).

Some say he took three: one for Avraham, who did not succeed because of Yishmael's presence; one for Yitzchak, who likewise failed, because of Esav; and his own. I, says Yaakov, want descendants who will be the cement of a house with twelve edges — the possible combinations of the letters of the Name — and I want to make them into a single block.

A third version says: neither three nor two, but twelve stones, which fused of their own accord to become just one. This stone is the foundation stone of the people of Israel, the stone of the altar, the place of communication between the upper world and the lower world.

It is the opposite of Babel. The tower did not hold: there was dislocation, and each people carried off a fragment of truth. When we live outside the land, we are always among fragments of truth. But a fragment of truth is not the truth: the truth emerges from Jerusalem, and it is that of Yaakov.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

These stones must form a single block.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each person at this table holds a fragment of truth and sometimes takes it for the whole truth. On what do we think we alone are right? And what would we have to give up for the block to hold?

White and black



PRESENTATION

Others have written of the red and the black. For us, says the Rav, the Torah is white and black: the tallit we wear, the scroll of the Torah. And Lavan is white.

THE QUESTION

What becomes of a blank page when one writes on it, and what happens when the writing fades?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “For us, the Torah is white and black.”

White, in its movement, is the sum of all colors; and the sum of all colors at rest is black. As long as the page is blank, one can write anything one wishes on it. From the moment one has written, one has conditioned it. Everything then depends on the content.

If one has written something holy, the page itself becomes holy. Until then, the parchment had only a market value; once a Torah scroll, tefillin or a mezuzah has been written on it, it takes on a sacred value.

And if the writing has faded, the scroll has lost its function: one can no longer read from it, one can no longer wear the tefillin, one can no longer keep the mezuzah. But neither can one throw the parchment away.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our children are a little like this blank page: what we write on it conditions them. What are we writing there, consciously or not? And is there in our home a faded “parchment,” a lost tradition, that we keep without being able to throw it away?

SUBJECT 09

The heart and the fifty paths



PRESENTATION

Lavan's name carries two assets, says the Rav: lev, the heart, and nun, which equals fifty — the fifty paths, not of wisdom, but of analysis and deduction. The second is a trap.

THE QUESTION

Can the law be made subject to the way one feels it?

THE ANSWER

Lavan: lev, the heart, and nun, fifty.

Woe to the one who reasons only with the heart, or who would express his truth only through his emotions. Thought, rigor of thought, aims to be fixed, logical, stable, settled. Emotion, for its part, changes with moods, with situations.

If one claims to make the law subject to the way one feels it and lives it, adapting it into all sorts of forms, one has written on the lavan, on the whiteness, things that do not hold up and that are limited in time.

That is what Lavan wanted: to reduce Yaakov's thought to a moral conscience without a people, Jews of various cultures and nothing more. In this way he sought to abolish the heritage of the ancestors.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

“That’s how I feel about it”: how many of our decisions rest on that sentence? On what subject at home have our moods taken the place of a rule? And when has a rule protected us from ourselves?

SUBJECT 10

The one who would translate everything



PRESENTATION

Twenty years later, the separation from Lavan is sealed by a heap of stones. Yaakov calls it Gal'ed, the witness heap; Lavan insists on giving it an Aramaic name. It is the only Aramaic translation in the Torah.

THE QUESTION

Why is Lavan so set on translating, and how can a translation be a danger?

THE ANSWER

“Lavan called it Yegar Sahaduta, and Yaakov called it Gal'ed” (Bereshit 31:47).

A mound of stones is set up between the two men. A peace pact is made, but from now on each forbids himself the intimate and spiritual life of the other. Yaakov calls it Gal'ed; Lavan insists on giving it an Aramaic name that means roughly the same thing. Why? Because he would like to replace Hebrew with a universal language — an Esperanto, perhaps.

Now the word targum, translation, has the same numerical value as tardemah, deep sleep, anesthesia. This universal language that Lavan would like to give humanity is only a translation. It can only be lip, an outward language that does not express the depth of thought.

That is why we always study, not from the translation, but from the essence of the text, from its letters.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

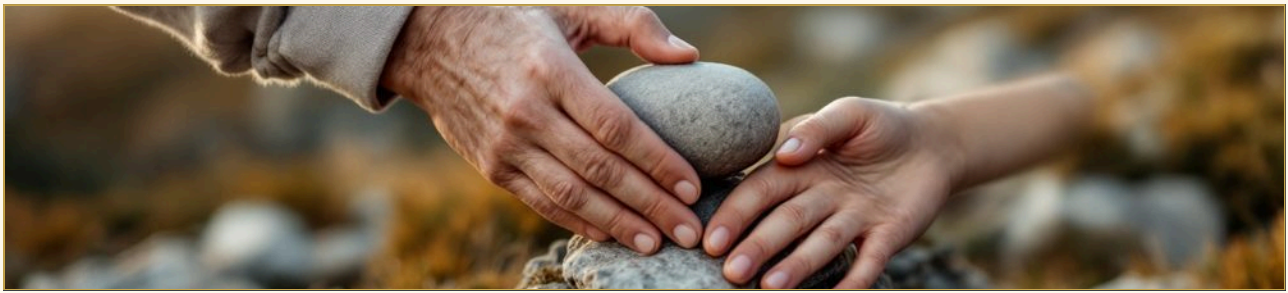
A translation betrays the essence of the text, the essence of the language in which it was spoken.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We translate our heritage into the language of the place where we live, and we call it transmission. What have we explained to our children while losing the essential along the way? And what should we give them in the original language?

SUBJECT 11

Even: the father and the son



PRESENTATION

In parting from Lavan, Yaakov is set on keeping the stone. The stone recurs again and again in his story, and in that of the Torah. The Rav reads it even in the word that designates it.

THE QUESTION

Why is the Torah transmitted on stones, and what does the very word “stone” say?

THE ANSWER

“You shall set up great stones [...] and you shall write on them all the words of this Torah” (Devarim 27:2-3).

The Torah was given on tablets of stone. And when the people of Israel is to enter its land, it is asked to set up stones on which the essence of the whole Torah will be written. This stone is the very foundation of Israel's being. But for that, one must first part from Lavan.

Even, the stone, is av and ben: the father and the son. It is what is passed down from father to son, what makes up the faithful identity of the transmission of values, what does not betray, what does not change through the generations and civilizations. In the language of our Sages, the stones are also the letters.

That is why, when we visit the grave of a loved one, we place a stone on it: to say that we faithfully keep his remembrance, his memory, and that we take it upon ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our family has been passed down from father to son without being betrayed? And what stone would we ourselves like to leave to those who will come after us?