

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYETZE

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayetze: Rachel and Leah, the Two Faces of Israel”: two sisters
opposite in everything, who together built the house of Israel —
one loved even before the marriage, the other brought into the
house by a substitution. And a question that shifts the whole story:
it is not the perfect being who leads the world to its completion.



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

Together, the house of Israel



PRESENTATION

It is the women who built the house of Israel. The text devotes whole chapters to Sarah, to Rivkah, then to Rachel and Leah. And it is these two sisters who are remembered when a couple is blessed.

THE QUESTION

Why do we bless the bride by wishing her to be like Rachel and like Leah, two such different women?

THE ANSWER

“May the L-rd make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and like Leah, who both built the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11).

The feminine presence to which the text devotes whole chapters is Sarah, with the problem Hagar poses her; Rivkah, with the diverting of Esav's blessing to Yaakov; and then Rachel and Leah, of whom it is said that together they built the house of Israel.

But Rachel and Leah are two entirely distinct, entirely different personalities. One will be loved even before the marriage; the other will enter the house through a substitution.

Rachel, says the Rav, is the revealed world; Leah, the covered, hidden world. That is why they are named together when a couple is blessed: each is what the other is not.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

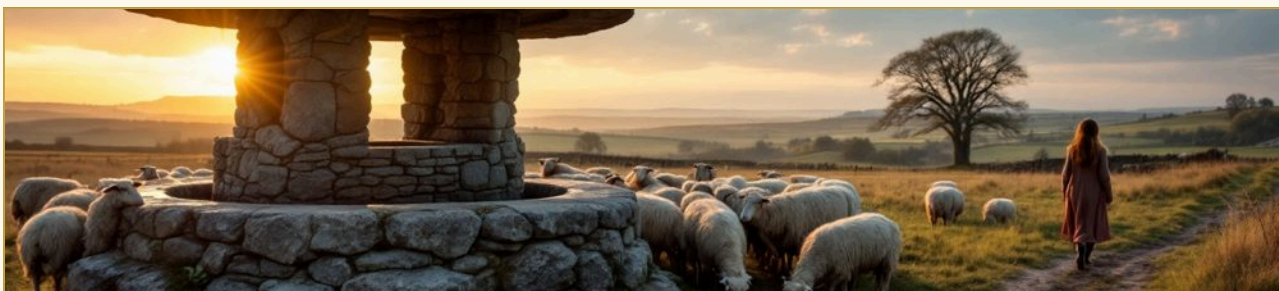
Both are complete; both merge into a single personality.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a couple, in a family, we are seldom cut from the same cloth. Which are the two most different personalities in our home? And what does each bring that the other could not?

SUBJECT 02

The only love before marriage



PRESENTATION

The biblical text almost never speaks of love before marriage. Of Avraham and Sarah, nothing of the kind is said; of Yitzchak and Rivkah, it is after the marriage that the text notes that he loved her. There is only one exception.

THE QUESTION

Why is Yaakov's love for Rachel the only one the Torah mentions before marriage, and how far does it lead him?

THE ANSWER

“Yaakov loved Rachel, and he said: I will serve you seven years for Rachel, your younger daughter” (Bereshit 29:18).

One could mention David and Michal, but that love hardly came to fruition. Amnon's is a forbidden love; it cannot serve as a reference. The only couple truly loved before marriage is Yaakov and Rachel, and he carries this love through to the end.

For her he will agree to work another seven years. He will give her priority in every circumstance: it is always Rachel who is named before her sister. And when he must meet Esav and divide his camps, it is she whom he places last, to shelter her from any blow.

Rachel had a beauty as much inner as outer, and that beauty marked him throughout his life. Yet he would live with her for only fourteen years.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The only couple truly loved before marriage is that of Yaakov and Rachel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Yaakov never stopped giving priority to the one he loved: seven years of work, the first named, the best protected. How, in our home, do we show those we love that they come first?

“His mother's brother”



PRESENTATION

In a few verses, the text repeats three times that Lavan is “his mother's brother.” Rivkah had told her son: like me, you will find your wife beside a well. And that is just what happens.

THE QUESTION

Why does Rivkah's shadow hover over the meeting of Yaakov and Rachel?

THE ANSWER

“Rachel, daughter of Lavan, his mother's brother, and the flock of Lavan, his mother's brother [...] he watered the flock of Lavan, his mother's brother” (Bereshit 29:10).

Yaakov comes forward, rolls the stone off the mouth of the well, and waters the flock of Lavan, his mother's brother. This insistence is not neutral: his mother's presence hovers over this couple's love. For the moment, there is nothing wrong.

But the means his mother used to divert Esav's blessing to Yaakov will repeat itself, in another way, in the transfer from Rachel to Leah.

The midrash says that Yaakov was aware of the problem, and that this problem made the love impossible: custom required that the elder be married first, then the younger, and Rachel had told him that she had an older sister. The elder kept the house; it was the younger who went to draw water at the well.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

His mother's presence hovers over this couple's love.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What we do often comes back to us, sometimes through our children. Have we ever seen one of our “methods” turn against us? What did we learn from it?

SUBJECT 04

A beauty that brings tears



PRESENTATION

Yosef resembled his mother so closely that the text describes him, as it does her, as beautiful of form and beautiful to look at. This beauty, says the Rav, has a meaning, and he shows it through a story from the Talmud.

THE QUESTION

Why do two Sages weep over a beauty, and what beauty deserves to be wept over?

THE ANSWER

“I weep for this beauty that will wither in the earth” (Berachot 5b).

Rabbi Yochanan was at the bedside of Rabbi Elazar, and Rabbi Elazar began to weep. Do you weep for the Torah you did not study enough? But what counts is not the quantity, it is the intention. For your poverty? Not every man merits two tables, the material and the spiritual. For a lost child? I lost ten.

No, he answers: I weep for your beauty, destined to be buried in the earth. And they both wept. Why? Because this beauty was the radiance of a spiritual life. People of this kind are very rare. Rachel and Yaakov were of this fabric; so was Yosef, and so was Binyamin.

In them there was a harmony between the body and the Torah: two hundred and forty-eight positive commandments and three hundred and sixty-five prohibitions, corresponding to the limbs and sinews, in perfect connection. A single piece, with no sense of an assembly of various elements.

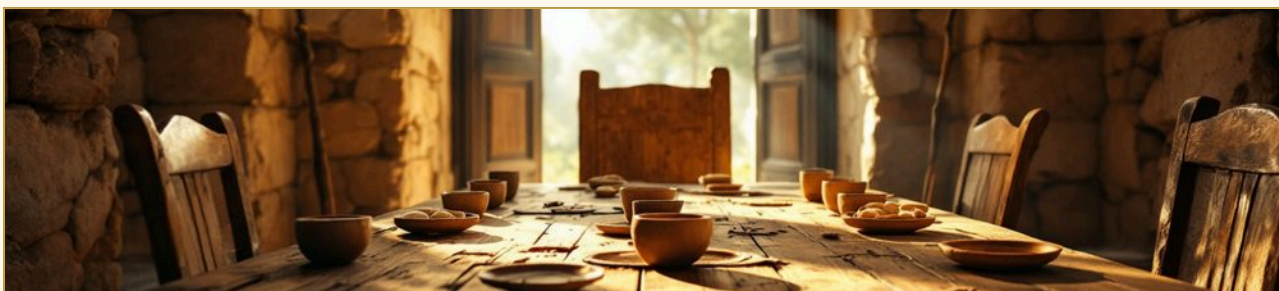
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This beauty was as much inner as outer.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are often taught to be wary of beauty. The Rav speaks of a beauty that radiates from within. Do we know someone whose face speaks of an inner life? And what in us would deserve to be “beautiful to look at”?

Why the perfect being does not rule



PRESENTATION

Yaakov grants Yosef the birthright: he gives him two portions, like the eldest who takes charge of the whole family. Yosef has his mother's beauty and perfection. Yet kingship will not be his.

THE QUESTION

Why can a perfect being not lead a community?

THE ANSWER

“Fortunate is the generation whose king brings an offering for his sin” (Horayot 10b).

A perfect being cannot govern and take charge of his society, his community. For that, there must be something to reproach him with; he must be an imperfect man.

Fortunate is the generation whose leader commits a sin and repents of it: in this way he gives his community, his people, an example of life. If he is a perfectly righteous man, that is a nature, a gift: G-d gave him the means to be so. Others take on their destiny as best they can, but they recognize themselves more in the one who earned this responsibility.

Yehudah sinned with Tamar, Reuven sinned against his father; each of them acknowledged it and remained honest to the end, and that is what raised them up. Now Yehudah is not a son of Rachel: he is a son of Leah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He is imperfect, but his very imperfection is his advantage.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We admire irreproachable people and entrust them with nothing. To whom has an acknowledged fault given an authority that perfection would not have given? And what do we have to acknowledge that we have never admitted?

The code she gave her sister



PRESENTATION

Rachel warns Yaakov: I have an older sister, and my father will never agree to marry me off before her. So they agree on secret signs. And when morning comes, it is Leah.

THE QUESTION

Why did the beloved one herself hand her sister the secret that was meant to protect her?

THE ANSWER

“Yaakov told Rachel that he was her father's brother” (Bereshit 29:12): if he takes the path of deceit, I will get around him.

Lavan is not her father's brother, but his mother's. Our Sages read: if your father takes the path of honesty, I will be honest with him; if he takes the path of deceit, I will get around him. The code concerned the three conditions of their marriage: the portion taken from the dough, the lighting of the lamp, the purity of intimacy. That nothing fall into routine, that this love be beyond natural attraction.

But Rachel did not keep it to herself. When she saw that her father would not, at any price, give her first, she handed it to her sister: my sister will not be humiliated in front of everyone.

The Rav connects this scene with the wedding custom. The groom comes forward to the one he has chosen while her face is uncovered, and then he covers her face. He has chosen her; but is she his destiny? It is destiny that leads the bride under the chuppah, and it is destiny that the blessings salute.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She sacrificed her love for her sister's sake.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We protect our places, especially among siblings, and especially when we are the favourite. What did we once give up so that a brother or sister would not be humiliated? And what should we have given up and did not?

SUBJECT 07

The ewe and the weary woman



PRESENTATION

In the morning, behold, it is Leah. The two names, says the Rav, express two states. And the text adds that Leah's eyes were tender — that is, weary.

THE QUESTION

What do the names of the two sisters say, and why did Leah weep day and night?

THE ANSWER

“Leah's eyes were tender, and Rachel was beautiful of form and beautiful to look at” (Bereshit 29:17).

Rachel is the gentle, tender ewe, as her name indicates: the one you take in your arms, stroke, and love. Leah is a weary being: a woman who has given up.

She gave up because she was not sure of her destiny. People used to say: Yitzchak has two sons, Esav and Yaakov, and Lavan two daughters. The elder will go to the elder, Esav; the younger to the younger, Yaakov. That destiny Leah did not want.

So the one who kept the house carried, even in her eyes, the weight of a future that had been announced to her and that she refused.

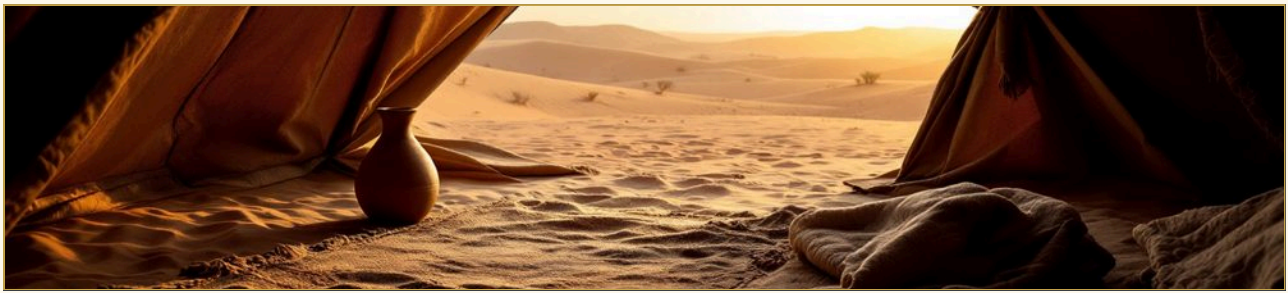
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She wept day and night.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are moments when we give up before what seems written in advance. What did we once believe to be our destiny, and refuse? Did we only weep over it, or did we act?

The next morning



PRESENTATION

Yaakov loved Rachel, he believed he was marrying Rachel, and in the morning, it is Leah. Anyone to whom such a thing happened, says the Rav, would immediately begin divorce proceedings.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yaakov turn not against Leah, but against his father-in-law?

THE ANSWER

“When morning came, behold, it was Leah. He said to Lavan: What have you done to me? [...] Why did you deceive me?” (Bereshit 29:25).

That is not what Yaakov does. He considers that there is probably destiny at work here: it is from G-d that a woman is destined for a man.

He does not turn against his wife; he reproaches her with nothing. It is against his father-in-law that he turns, because he had not told him beforehand that he could not give him Rachel until he had married off the elder.

So there are two aspects to a marriage, the Rav reminds us: being loved, and what one discovers on waking.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He does not turn against his wife.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When life gives us something other than what we had chosen, whom do we turn against? Is there someone we have held responsible for a situation he did not cause?

SUBJECT 09

Leah, called hated



PRESENTATION

As much as Yaakov loves Rachel, the text says a very harsh word about Leah: she was hated. The Rav does not soften it; he looks for the reason.

THE QUESTION

Why is Leah called hated, and what strength is there in what she did?

THE ANSWER

“The L-rd saw that Leah was hated, and He opened her womb” (Bereshit 29:31).

She is hated because she joined in the game. She was not honest, and she took her example from Yaakov himself: he had fought to wrest the blessing and the birthright from his brother; she told herself she would do the same.

The dialogue reported is clear. All night long, he tells her, I spoke to you as to Rachel, and you answered. She replies: you too, before your father, said “I am Esav, your firstborn.” I did nothing but take what you yourself declared.

To weep over one's destiny, but not let oneself be crushed by it, and to seize the first opportunity to fight and obtain what one desires: that is what Leah does.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is the strength of defiance.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Leah did not wait for destiny to change: she seized the opportunity, at the price of reproach. Do we admire or condemn this act? And we, in the face of what has been denied us, do we only weep, or do we fight?

SUBJECT 10

Four sons, four names



PRESENTATION

Leah has children, and she names them. In the names of the first four sons the Rav reads the story of a recognition that comes little by little.

THE QUESTION

What do the names of Leah's first sons tell, and why does kingship come from the fourth?

THE ANSWER

“This time I will praise the L-rd; therefore she called him Yehudah” (Bereshit 29:35).

The first, Reuven: G-d has seen my misery. The second, Shimon: G-d has heard that I was not wanted. The third, Levi: this time my husband will be attached to me. And it is Yaakov who names this third child, whereas the first two had been named by her. It is as if, at the third, he begins to adopt Leah, to join himself to her, to accept her as his wife.

At the fourth, she no longer asks for anything: now I will praise the L-rd, for He has given me what I desired. That is Yehudah.

Certainly, Yosef and Binyamin have a fine role. But it is Yehudah who holds the center of kingship, and it is from Leah that the priesthood, kingship and the Torah come: all the qualities required to secure the future of a family.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The names we give often tell what we were living through at that moment. What do our children's names say in our home? And if each of us had to name the stage he has reached today — seen, heard, joined, or grateful — which would he choose?

SUBJECT 11

The accomplished righteous and the one who returns



PRESENTATION

At the end of the story, the Rav sums up: we are in the presence of two personalities. Rachel is the perfect righteous one; Leah is the one of repentance. And the participants' questions go as far as the Mashiach.

THE QUESTION

Who leads the world to its completion: the one who is already accomplished, or the one who must rebuild himself?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “The perfect righteous man is not of this world.”

Leah is incomplete, but she fights to reach her goal and turn the situation to her advantage, and it is she whom G-d rewards. For the perfect righteous man settles into what he is; he is somewhat passive; he is not the one who will lead this world to its completion. The other, on the contrary, has a goal: he must rebuild himself, question himself, redefine what he is aiming for.

But the Mashiach? asks a participant: we never hear of his faults. The Mashiach, answers the Rav, has never been defined as a perfect being; to believe so is a mistake. He is the one who manages to bring about a perfection within humanity, the one who gathers under a single banner units that remain independent, autonomous. The one who must restore justice comes from Leah, not from Rachel.

Yet we need a point of reference, and that reference is Rachel. Yaakov spends his life beside Leah and asks to be buried where she is buried; but he never forgets Rachel; he speaks of her, she remains present.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Rachel is the model, but it is Leah who determines what follows.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have models we admire, and loved ones who move forward stumbling. In our life, who is our “Rachel,” and who is our “Leah”? Can we be both for our children?

SUBJECT 12

“Am I in G-d's place?”



PRESENTATION

Rachel sees her sister having children, and she has none. She turns to her husband: give me children. Yaakov's answer seems harsh.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yaakov answer Rachel this way, and why does prayer have more power than study?

THE ANSWER

“Am I in G-d's place, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” (Bereshit 30:2).

It is not a way of getting angry. It is telling a woman who feels diminished, lessened, by not having a child: you yourself are able to pray. One prays only when one feels the need, when one becomes aware of one's imperfections, of what is lacking and of what one would like to obtain in order to overcome one's weaknesses.

This love of Yaakov and Rachel had at first been barren, because they were two whole beings who felt no need to project themselves into a future: love was sufficient unto itself. Rachel obtains her son through prayer, and she calls him Yosef: G-d will add another to me.

She understood that she must not remain only a woman fulfilled by her husband's love, but must project this love onto a future, instead of living it entirely in the present. That is true love: otherwise, it dies in the present.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Prayer has greater power than study.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We pray mostly when something is lacking. What is lacking for us today, and have we even asked for it? And our love — toward what future do we project it?