

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

# VAYISHLACH

*12 Questions for the Shabbat Table*

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Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture  
“Vayishlach: From Yaakov to Israel”: why Avraham is never again  
called Avram, while Yaakov remains Yaakov as he becomes  
Israel. Idols buried instead of broken, Rachel buried on the road, a  
house that remains twelve — and kingship, which begins with  
Yosef.



*Rav Raphaël Benizri*

# Table of Topics

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

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## SUBJECT 01

### The garments of exile

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#### PRESENTATION

Yaakov had promised to build an altar if he returned safe and sound. The text calls him to order: go up to Beit El. But before building, he asks his household to put away the foreign gods and change their garments.

#### THE QUESTION

*What must one leave behind in order to begin a new life in one's own land?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Put away the foreign gods that are among you, purify yourselves and change your garments” (Bereshit 35:2); “Who answered me on the day of my distress” (Bereshit 35:3).***

This altar is not only a sign of gratitude: it must make shine the kindnesses of the providence that accompanied Yaakov throughout his journey. But one always brings with one, whether one likes it or not, something of the ways, customs and cultures among which one has lived — certain principles, certain mores.

One must not come to Israel importing all this and closing oneself up in it. Then we would have done nothing: we would only have carried the galut into Israel. All these fashions, all these ways of behaving — one must try to change them in order to open oneself to a new art of living.

For the day of distress is the generator of a new liberation. This regeneration must be allowed to blossom — but for that, one must first shed the garments of exile.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Then we would have done nothing; we would have carried the galut into Israel.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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What habits have we brought from elsewhere — from a country, a milieu, an era — without ever asking whether they resemble us? Which one would we change in order to begin something new?

## SUBJECT 02

### Burying the idols instead of breaking them

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#### PRESENTATION

His household hands Yaakov the foreign gods. He does not burn them, he does not throw them into the sea: he buries them under the terebinth near Shechem.

#### THE QUESTION

*Why bury idols rather than destroy them — and what should be done with what one brings back from exile?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Yaakov buried them under the terebinth that is near Shechem” (Bereshit 35:4); the grape, the pomegranate and the fig (Bamidbar 13:23).***

These gods are principles, mores, ways of doing things. Can one really sweep everything away? No: they must be converted. In every culture, in every exile, there are sparks of holiness that must be recovered. That is why they are buried in the earth, which is a means of filtering, of cultivation and of new germination.

Let us remember what the spies brought back from Israel: three fruits. The grape, which has a seed one must get rid of — but careful not to destroy the germ: one rebuilds on the ruins. The pomegranate, where this time it is the seed one eats and the skin one throws away. And the fig, where there is no stone at all, where everything is eaten.

Such are the stages of life: first extract the substance of the fruit, then make its very seed into food, so as to arrive finally at the fruit in which everything is consumed.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Nothing is abolished, nothing is cancelled: in every culture, in every exile, there are sparks of holiness that must be recovered.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We have all brought back from elsewhere habits we dare neither keep nor name. What has each of us imported into his home without ever converting it? And which spark, in what we despise, deserves to be recovered?

## SUBJECT 03

### The respect of the nations

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#### PRESENTATION

After this decision, the text notes: a divine terror fell on the surrounding cities, and they did not pursue the sons of Yaakov. For the Rav, this detail carries a message for all generations.

#### THE QUESTION

*When do the nations respect Israel: when it resembles them, or when it is itself?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“A terror of Elokim was upon the cities around them, and they did not pursue the sons of Yaakov” (Bereshit 35:5).***

The children of Israel are pursued only when they try to imitate the other peoples, to live like the other nations, to copy their ways of life even in their new destination, the promised land.

The principle of the land of Israel is to escape this foreign life, other cultures, other models of civilization. The message is there, whether we like it or not: we will win the respect of the nations when we are ourselves, when we apply to the land of Israel the way of life that is proper to it.

It is then that Yaakov builds the altar and calls the place by the name of the Almighty, there where G-d had revealed Himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*We will win the respect of the nations when we are ourselves.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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In what situations do we try to resemble others in order to be accepted? And when have we been respected precisely because we remained ourselves?

## Devorah, Rivkah's nurse



### PRESENTATION

In the middle of the story, a brief verse: Devorah, Rivkah's nurse, died, and she was buried beneath the oak. No one had spoken of her until then. Why pay her tribute here?

### THE QUESTION

*Why does the death of a nurse of whom we knew nothing find its place at the moment of Yaakov's return?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Devorah, Rivkah's nurse, died; she was buried below Beit El, beneath the oak” (Bereshit 35:8).***

She is the one who formed Rivkah, who raised her, who accompanied her all her life. Now these women were taught in the house of Nachor, that is, in the other possible path. Either one goes to Israel to build there a society that will be the focal point of the nations; or one considers that one needs neither a land nor a nation, that one is a light to the nations and must remain mingled with them the better to spread one's beliefs.

Avraham chose for his son a wife formed in that milieu. And just as the foreign ideas were buried, so the nurse who carried them is buried too.

Indeed, when we wish success to newlyweds, we mention neither Sarah nor Rivkah, but Rachel and Leah. And Bilhah and Zilpah, who accompanied them, were integrated into the house of Yaakov: their children are part of the tribes and complete them.

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who formed us without anyone ever speaking of him or her — a nurse, a grandmother, a teacher? What do we owe that person, and what do we choose to keep?

## A name given in the future tense



### PRESENTATION

The angel had already given Yaakov the name Israel. At Beit El, G-d Himself confirms it: Israel shall be your name. But the verb is in the future tense — and Yaakov never loses his first name.

### THE QUESTION

*Why do Avram and Sarai change their names permanently, whereas Yisrael never erases Yaakov?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Israel shall be your name” (Bereshit 35:10); whoever calls Avraham “Avram” transgresses (Berachot 13a).***

When G-d changed Avram’s name to Avraham and Sarai’s to Sarah, the change was final: they can never again be called otherwise, and this became a rule. Not so for Yaakov. Yaakov remains the earthly dimension; Israel is an entirely spiritual dimension.

That is why the promise is in the future tense. Of course you will have to fight, to use cunning to obtain what you want in your life, for you will be surrounded by people who will want to drain you of your substance. But the name you will aspire to is Israel: it is through it that you will be fruitful and multiply, through it that you will convince the other peoples, through it that you will be able to govern.

Immediately afterward, G-d, who until then had been walking with him — for Yaakov, like Avraham, is the chariot of the Shechinah — withdraws and leaves him to act. Yaakov sets up a pillar and calls the place Beit El: it is the first name of the land of Israel, as he inaugurates it.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*You will not lose the name Yaakov, but you will always aspire to fulfill yourself as Israel.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have a name others give us and a name we aspire to. Let each one say what his Yisrael would look like — what he would be if he no longer needed to use cunning. And what, concretely, separates him from it?

## Son of my sorrow, son of my right hand



### PRESENTATION

Rachel dies giving birth to her second son, at the edge of the land. She calls him Ben Oni, the son of my sorrow; his father calls him Binyamin, the son of my right hand.

### THE QUESTION

*Why does Binyamin, the only son born in the land of Israel, bear two opposite names?*

### THE ANSWER

***“She called him Ben Oni, and his father called him Binyamin” (Bereshit 35:18); “In the morning he devours the prey, and in the evening he divides the spoil” (Bereshit 49:27).***

When she had Yosef, Rachel had asked that this son be extended into another. That other is born at the edge of the land of Israel. That is why Binyamin is Yehudah's immediate neighbor and the support of his kingship: he is the one born in Israel, the one who can physically justify, by his birth, the identity of Israel, and it is in his portion that Jerusalem and the Temple are found.

Born at the edge, he stands on one side at the border of exile, on the other within the holiness of the land: on one side chol, on the other kodesh. Son of my sorrow, because he is motherless; son of my right hand, the one on whom his father will now lean.

His blessing says it: in the morning he builds the Sanctuary; in the evening he distributes its fruits. Yaakov sees in him the culmination of his descendants.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

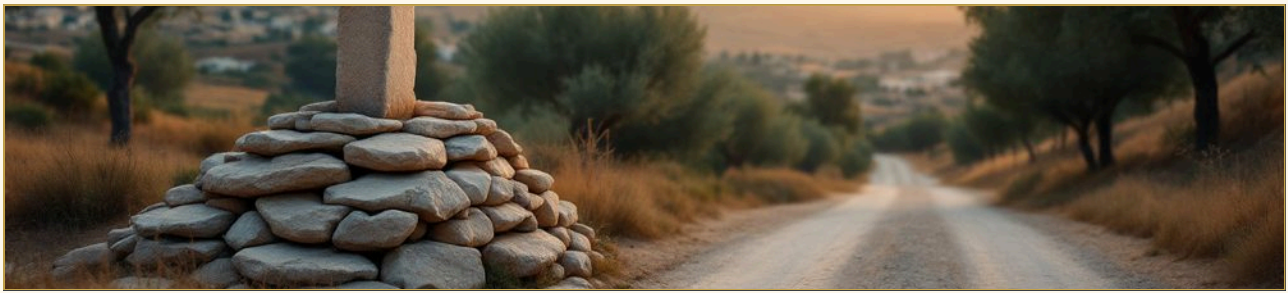
*Binyamin is the price of a death paid for this arrival; and he is also the starting point of a new life.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family, someone bears both the name of a misfortune and that of a new beginning. Who is it in our home, and has he ever been told so? From which side — sorrow or right hand — do we look at him?

## SUBJECT 07

### Buried on the road



#### PRESENTATION

Rachel, the beloved, is not buried beside Yaakov but on the road to Efrat. A participant asks: is her death at the entrance to the land not a form of sacrifice?

#### THE QUESTION

*Why does Rachel die at the threshold of the land, and what place remains for her sons?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Rachel died and was buried on the road to Efrat, which is Beit Lechem” (Bereshit 35:19).***

You are right to point it out, answers the Rav. Some commentators said that Rachel's death at the edge of Israel was necessary: Yaakov could no longer come into the land with two wives who were two sisters.

Rachel sacrificed herself throughout her life. She never put herself forward, except to ask for a child; she remained passive, her love remained inward, unexpressed — something our Sages somewhat reproached her for, while always naming her before Leah.

Yosef and Binyamin will therefore have a secondary role. Secondary does not mean minor: they are the support, the mainstay of the entity of Israel and of the Sanctuary. But at no point will they be the decisive elements in the history of the people, so as not to consecrate Yaakov's second marriage to a sister.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*It is she who watches over the future of all her children, over the return of all her children.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Rachel loved without saying so. Who around us loves in this way, in silence? And to whom should we say, this week, what we keep inside?

## SUBJECT 08

### Reuven and his father's bed



#### PRESENTATION

After Rachel's death, Yaakov places his bed in Bilhah's tent. Reuven, Leah's firstborn, takes up the defense of his mother's honor and moves his father's bed. The Torah uses very harsh words.

#### THE QUESTION

*Should one who has gravely wronged his father be excluded from the family?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Israel heard of it. And the sons of Yaakov were twelve” (Bereshit 35:22).***

The Torah condemns this intrusion into the father's intimate life, to the point of speaking of it as though Reuven had had relations with his father's concubine. Vayishma Yisrael: Israel heard. Here, to hear means to understand. He understood the message, and he does not react.

Above all, he does not exclude Reuven from among his children. That is why the Torah goes straight on: the sons of Yaakov were twelve. Nothing will shake or unbalance this house. It will remain what it is, with what troubles it from within, with these people who do not always go along with their parents.

But it is this whole that forms the structure of Israel, and its permanence.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*At no point is one right to exclude anyone at all from the house of Israel.*

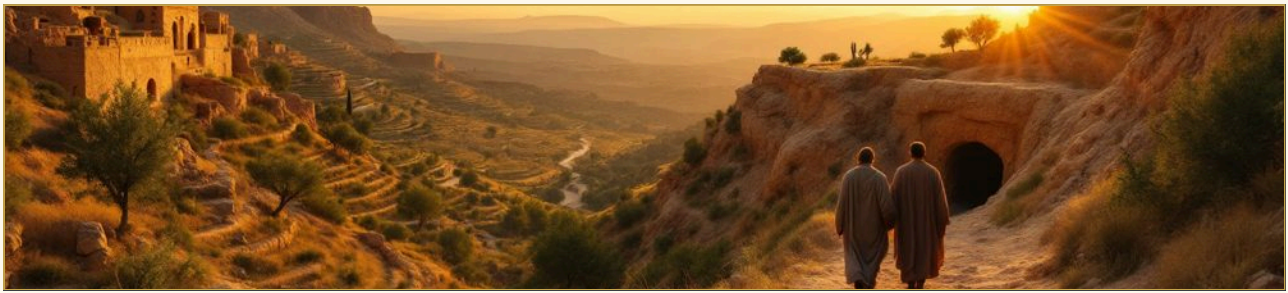
#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there someone our family has set aside after a wrongdoing? What would it take for him to be counted again among the “twelve”?

## SUBJECT 09

### Hevron, the city of four

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#### PRESENTATION

Yaakov finally reaches his father, at Mamre, Kiryat Arba — the city of four — which is Hevron. Yitzchak ends his life there, and his two sons, Esav and Yaakov, bury him together.

#### THE QUESTION

*What does Yaakov present to his father on arriving in the “city of four”?*

#### THE ANSWER

**“Yaakov came to Yitzchak his father, at Mamre, Kiryat Arba, which is Hevron” (Bereshit 35:27); “Esav and Yaakov, his sons, buried him” (Bereshit 35:29).**

Yitzchak was rigor. It is a different structure that his son presents to him today: the new order of Yaakov's heritage, the new structure of the Jewish people.

Who are these four? There are several explanations. The Rav retains the allusion to the four components of being, of the divine essence, to the four letters of the Name. Hevron is what unites these four.

And Esav is there, at the funeral. For Esav too remained a son attached to his father: the respect he had for him, he kept.

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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When we return to our parents after years away, what new thing do we present to them? And that brother with whom we disagree on everything — could we stand beside him before them?

## Esav's heel



### PRESENTATION

After Yitzchak's death, the Torah gives the genealogy of Esav, who is Edom. For the Rav, this is not a foreign page: Esav has never become a stranger to us.

### THE QUESTION

*Why does Esav's story remain our own, and what is the antagonism between Edom and Israel about?*

### THE ANSWER

***“His hand was holding Esav's heel” (Bereshit 25:26); “These are the generations of Esav, who is Edom” (Bereshit 36:1).***

Yaakov held Esav's heel: he wanted to follow him in his march, but not entirely. That heel, those traces of Esav, he wanted to keep for himself, and we keep them still. Until messianic times there will be a final confrontation, of the same nature as that of Yaakov and Esav, between the people of Israel and the peoples of Edom.

Our Sages placed Yishmael in the continuation of Edom rather than of Israel: it is Edom, in short, that gives him his reality. The exile of Yishmael was not counted separately; that of Edom is still in place, because that is where there is a true antithesis.

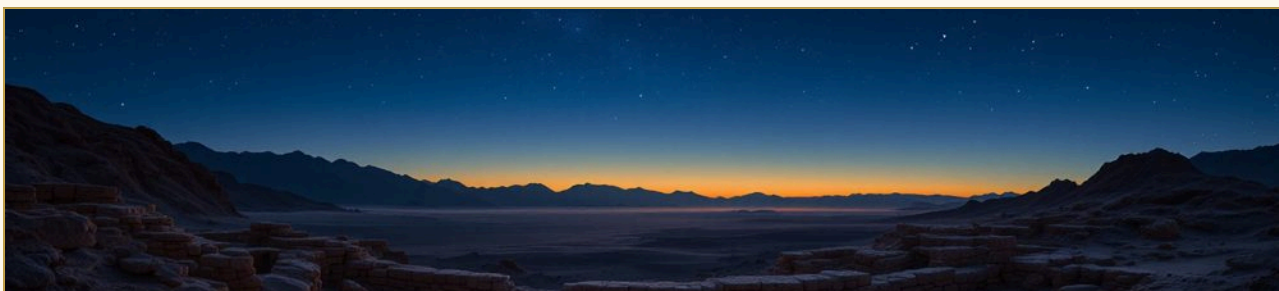
This antagonism sets what one understands and accepts without integrating or applying it against what one applies. It exists even within the people of Israel. Israel, for its part, is first of all the founder of a new world, one that is applied in the reality of this world.

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What have we understood and accepted without ever applying it? And what do we apply without seeking to understand it? Let each person choose one example of each.

## SUBJECT 11

### A night before every dawn



#### PRESENTATION

Just before the story of Yosef, the Torah lists the kings who reigned in Edom before a king reigned in Israel. The commentators have wondered what this list is doing here.

#### THE QUESTION

*Why is each new stage of history preceded by a period of darkness?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the children of Israel” (Bereshit 36:31).***

Just as chaos preceded the creation of the world, exile preceded the birth of the Jewish people. Each segment of history will be ushered in by darkness that invades the world and diminishes it, so as to bring forth a new segment, until the final phase.

The Zohar says this passage is full of secrets: it carries light, but we do not know how to draw it out. One would have to imagine a world built on all the measures — chesed, gevurah, tiferet, netzach, hod, yesod, malchut — crowned by da'at. Yet we sometimes emphasize chesed while ignoring gevurah, or the reverse; the structure of life then loses its balance and passes through phases of shadow and light.

Worlds were built and destroyed because they did not obey this harmony. The world has the stature of man: time, space and man must all have integrated these measures.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*We will proceed from filtering to filtering until the end, but each time it will be preceded by a night of darkness, of suffering.*

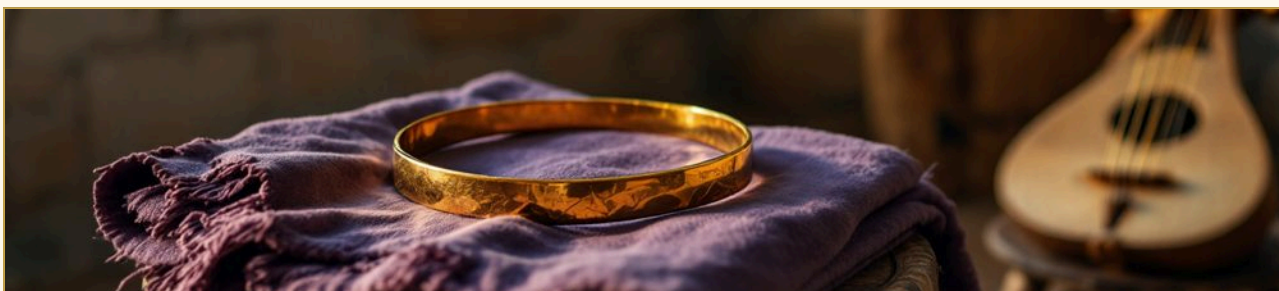
#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family life, do we put too much emphasis on boundless kindness, or on rigor? What “night” that we went through together opened a new stage for us?

## SUBJECT 12

### A king from among your brothers

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#### PRESENTATION

The list of the kings of Edom comes to an end, and the story of Yosef begins. For the Rav, this is no coincidence: it is with Yosef that the word “reign” appears in the house of Israel.

#### THE QUESTION

*Where does the kingship of Israel begin, where does it end, and why can one not depend on a foreign king?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Will you indeed reign over us?” (Bereshit 37:8); “From among your brothers you shall set a king over you” (Devarim 17:15).***

It is with Yosef that the word “reign” appears, when his brothers ask him whether he intends to reign over them. The notion of kingship carried by the framework of Israel therefore begins with Yosef. But it does not end with him: it culminates with David and the Mashiach son of David.

This kingship passes through that of the kings of the other nations — kings who do not know one another, who exclude one another, who wage merciless wars against one another. And the Torah commands it: you must set a king from among your brothers. You cannot remain dependent on a foreign king, a foreign government; you must be your own master.

It is on this demand that the chapter ends, and that Yaakov's journey comes to a close.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*You cannot allow yourself to remain dependent on a foreign king, a foreign government.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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On whom do we still depend in deciding our life: someone's opinion, a fashion, an authority that is not our own? Where could we become a little more our own master?