

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYISHLACH

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayishlach: How to Avoid the Confrontation with Esav”: what to
do with the adversary when he is a brother — and when he also
dwells within us? The real angels, the gift, the prayer and the two
camps — and this lesson of the Ramban: the question is not how
to wage war, but how to avoid it.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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SUBJECT 01

The Esav who dwells within us



PRESENTATION

The lecture opens with an unsettling question: what should be done with the adversary when he is a brother — and when he also dwells within us? There are moments, says the Rav, when we hate ourselves, when we abuse our own person.

THE QUESTION

Must the adversary be destroyed, outside us as within us, or should we seek to tame him?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “There is an Esav who dwells within us.”

We are inhabited, intrinsically, by the world of technology. We seek to tame it, to keep it in check, but not to stifle or eliminate it. Our relationship with the outside world is of the same nature: we are not going to wage war on all unbelievers to the point of destroying them — far from it.

What we seek is to strip them of their preconceived ideas, their prejudices, their dubious and subjective beliefs, so as to recover the dimension of brother.

The struggle is therefore inward before it is outward. Our people itself displays all the cultural and philosophical tendencies proper to the other peoples: we are but the microcosm of the macrocosm. It is a matter of bringing ourselves into harmony with ourselves, with our family, with our people, and beyond that with all the nations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We will try to recover the dimension of brother, which is shared by all of humanity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which part of ourselves do we treat as an enemy? Let each person name a tendency he would like to eliminate — and ask himself how to tame it rather than stifle it.

SUBJECT 02

Three gifts that come at a high price



PRESENTATION

Before following Yaakov on the road home, the Rav recalls a teaching of our Sages: three gifts were given to Israel, and the people has never stopped paying their price.

THE QUESTION

Why are the Torah, the land of Israel and the World to Come acquired only through suffering?

THE ANSWER

“The Holy One, blessed be He, gave Israel three fine gifts, and all of them were given only through suffering: the Torah, the land of Israel and the World to Come” (Berachot 5a).

Whoever does not invest himself, who does not truly agree to devote himself to them even at the cost of suffering, will never be able to acquire them. For things acquired easily are lost the same way. But when one has toiled to obtain them, one does not part with them easily: one defends them, one fights to keep them.

These three gifts cover the whole of existence. The land of Israel is space. The Torah is time, since it is a matter of sanctifying time through it. And the World to Come we dream of is the one that guarantees the permanence of everything: of our life, of the family, of the entire universe.

How is this to be done? That is what Yaakov's movement of return will show us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When one has toiled to obtain them, one does not part with them easily, and one defends them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our family has cost us the most effort? Do we hold on to it more than to what was given us without toil? And what are we ready to endure for study, for the land, for our children's future?

When success disturbs



PRESENTATION

Yaakov is the prototype of exile: with Lavan, then back in Israel, then in Egypt. After twenty years — twenty-two, to be precise — he lacks nothing: a home, eleven children, a fortune. It is precisely then that he must leave.

THE QUESTION

Why is it at the moment of his success that Yaakov arouses hostility — and why must he then go home?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “From the moment he achieved himself, he aroused animosity within his own family.”

His brothers-in-law no longer look at him the same way: he exploited our parents' property, he exploited our land, he built up an enormous fortune, and he asserts himself in full independence. Nor does his father-in-law. It is the same mechanism in history: that we should have succeeded nonetheless, after the utter poverty to which persecutions, pogroms and plots had reduced us — this the nations cannot accept.

Sooner or later one must pack one's bags and return to one's anchorage, to one's sources, to one's roots, because that is where one can shine the most.

But there, Esav is waiting for him. Yaakov finds himself between two hostilities born of the same family, united by the same project of destroying the descendants of Avraham, each in its own way: one through assimilation, the other through permanent persecution. How is he to act between the two? That is the whole question of the parasha.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Sooner or later one must pack one's bags; one must return to one's anchorage, to one's sources, to one's roots.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have we ever felt that a success earned us more enemies than friends? Where are our roots, the ones from which we could shine the most?

SUBJECT 04

Sending real angels



PRESENTATION

Yaakov returns after twenty-two years with Lavan. Even before seeing Esav, he sends messengers ahead of him. The text says *malakhim*, and Rashi specifies: real angels.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to send real angels rather than men — and what does a man give up when he behaves like an angel toward his brother?

THE ANSWER

“Yaakov sent messengers (*malachim*) ahead of him to Esav his brother” (Bereshit 32:4) — real angels, Rashi specifies.

A man has free will; an angel does not, for free will lies in the alternative between good and evil. Still, one must see where it comes into play: at the level of the concept — what should I do, which path should I take? Once the decision is made and the action under way, the question no longer arises.

By sending real angels, Yaakov sets his free will aside. Why? Because Esav is his brother, whether we like it or not. One then stops looking for who is wrong and who is right, since we are not going to kill each other, and one recovers the common ground of brotherhood so as to bring one's movements into accord.

Setting aside is already making oneself smaller before the other in order to seek common ground with him. But there is something beyond: placing oneself at the source of brotherhood, as it was before the problems arose. There, it was wonderful. With the peoples, with our family, with ourselves, we must recover these common points of agreement, setting aside all affiliation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is something beyond free will: it is when I place myself at the source of brotherhood, as it was before the problems arose.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has, in his family, a dispute in which he is sure he is in the right. Let each person name the one he refuses to close because he is waiting to be proven right. And what did this relationship look like before the problem arose?

Two inclinations in one womb



PRESENTATION

A participant objects: how can one say that at the source brotherhood was wonderful, when Yaakov and Esav were already fighting in their mother's womb? The Rav answers with what is at play in each of us.

THE QUESTION

If the two brothers were already struggling before they were born, can one still speak of an original brotherhood?

THE ANSWER

“The children struggled within her” (Bereshit 25:22).

In all our self-education, we are just as attracted by the house of study as by the world of technology. We would like to marry the yeshivah and the university, Torah and philosophy, to combine the two poles of this world. In the womb, at the origin, there are both inclinations together, the yetzer hatov and the yetzer hara, and we cannot separate ourselves from them.

The question, then, is how to manage them, how to administer them. For what drives us forward is not, in general, the good inclination: it is the inclination of impulses, instincts, passions, desires.

That one must be put at the service of the other — the good inclination, which begins to manifest itself only at thirteen for boys and at twelve for girls.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We cannot separate ourselves from them. The question is how we are going to manage them, how we are going to administer them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What desire, what ambition is driving us forward this year? In the service of what do we put it? And for those approaching their bar or bat mitzvah: what in them is beginning to want to take charge?

Should he have called him “my master”?



PRESENTATION

Yaakov instructs his messengers: thus shall you speak to my master Esav. The Midrash does not accept it. It quotes a verse from Proverbs: a muddied spring, a polluted fountain — such is the righteous man who gives way before the wicked.

THE QUESTION

Was it permitted to call Esav “my master” — or must one refuse to lower oneself before the one who comes armed?

THE ANSWER

“Thus shall you say to my master Esav” (Bereshit 32:5); “A muddied spring, a polluted fountain: the righteous man who gives way before the wicked” (Mishlei 25:26).

The Midrash disagrees: it is unthinkable to give way before the wicked and call him one's master. It also cites the image of one who seizes a dog by the ears — the passer-by who flies into a rage over someone else's quarrel. That man was going his way; it was not for you to go out to meet him. Let him come: you do not yet know what he wants of you; you are going to provoke him.

And yet it is good policy to make the other bigger, to remove the complex he has before you, to treat him with esteem. He is coming with four hundred men: there is no point in swaggering. One must use stratagem, and one way of being shrewd is to give him more self-assurance, for a moment will come when he will give in to his weaknesses and lose himself of his own accord.

That is what happened: Esav ended up leaving the land of his own accord, even though the birthright he claimed also concerned this land. So one must hold between these two ideas: honoring the other, and remaining on one's guard.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is good policy to make the other bigger and to remove the complex he has before you.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is a difference between giving in and making room. Where have we called someone “my master” out of fear — and where have we done so to defuse a war? And whom did we go out to meet when he was quietly going his way?

SUBJECT 07

How to avoid war



PRESENTATION

Yaakov prepares in three ways: with a gift, with a prayer, and with war. On this third means, says the Rav, the Ramban adds the essential point.

THE QUESTION

Is war the way to conquer a land and keep it?

THE ANSWER

“He prepared himself for three things: for a gift, for prayer and for war” (Rashi on Bereshit 32:9).

Waging war is not something to be done at any cost. The question is not how to wage war, but how to avoid it — especially against an enemy that is numerically stronger, and because war stirs up vengeance.

One must not seek at all costs to conquer the land by force: one must conquer it by one's faith, by the values one defends there. That is what justifies ownership of the land. Then one sees one's enemies gradually move away, give up, and recognize these values of their own accord.

For they already share these values, but at a lower level. What turns them into idols rather than a unifying faith is that they have remained in multiplicity: they have multiplied idols, philosophies, ways of life, ideologies. And that is why they wage wars of destruction among themselves.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not how to wage war; it is how to avoid war.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The one who is right often thinks himself exempt from caution. What war, this week, could we have avoided rather than won? And our values — do we defend them by the force of argument or by the example of our lives?

“I have sojourned with Lavan”



PRESENTATION

Yaakov has a tiny sentence conveyed to Esav: I have sojourned with Lavan. Rashi hears it as a warning, and our Sages read in garti the value of six hundred and thirteen. Yet no one can fulfill all the mitzvot alone.

THE QUESTION

How can Yaakov claim to have kept the 613 commandments in exile, when no single man is capable of it?

THE ANSWER

“I have sojourned with Lavan” (Bereshit 32:5) — garti, with a numerical value of 613, according to Rashi.

Although I lived with Lavan, I kept my identity: they tried by every means to turn me away from it; I remained on my guard. But the 613? Even a great tzaddik does not fulfill them all: he is not a Kohen; certain situations will never arise for him. The 613 are fulfilled only within a people.

So Yaakov tells his brother: what you accomplish on your side and what I accomplish on mine add up. During my absence, it was you who honored our parents. I do not deny your good deeds, and I credit you with everything I do. That is the meaning of “seventy soul,” in the singular: everything forms one soul, because everything completes everything else.

Exile itself is not without value. It is there that we were born, there that we forged our identity, learned to be sensitive to the misfortune of others and to share our joys with them. Our Sages would study this parasha before going before the Roman authorities.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Everything I do, I do not do for myself; I do it to spread the values of faith in the unity of G-d in the world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily count our own merits, rarely those of the one who took our place during our absence. Who in the family carried what we did not carry? Are we ready to say that what he did is added to our account?

Two camps and a prayer



PRESENTATION

Yaakov is greatly afraid. He divides his people into two camps: if Esav strikes one, the other will be able to escape. Then he prays to the G-d of his father Avraham and the G-d of his father Yitzchak, and spends the night reflecting.

THE QUESTION

When one has taken every possible precaution, what is prayer still for?

THE ANSWER

“With my staff I crossed this Jordan, and now I have become two camps” (Bereshit 32:11); “Save me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esav” (Bereshit 32:12).

Yaakov's struggle against Esav is a struggle for survival. He fears having to fight and kill him, and fears just as much that Esav will kill him. This struggle still exists. However sure of oneself one may be, however many precautions one takes, however much one relies on diplomacy and means of defense: none of it is enough. One needs tefillah.

Yaakov says it: today I am reduced to dividing my family in order to face my brother. He fears him because he is at once his brother and Esav. It is hard to fight a man who, in the name of brotherhood, wants to destroy you.

And he invokes the promise: your offspring will be like the sand of the sea. We are crushed, trampled like the dust of the earth; but from this earth we have made new things sprout. And this sand that cannot be counted is what stops the breaking of the waves that threaten to submerge the world.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is prayer that can carry us through, beyond all the assurances we take by ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we rely on first when we are afraid: our connections, our insurance, our precautions? For what, this year, have we prayed when we thought we had already settled it ourselves?

SUBJECT 10

The ox and the donkey



PRESENTATION

Yaakov has Esav told: I have oxen and donkeys, flocks, servants and maidservants — then he prepares a gift for him. Esav has no use for it; it is worth nothing to him. So one must hear in it a coded language.

THE QUESTION

Why offer a man who has everything animals he cares nothing about — and what exactly do the ox and the donkey say?

THE ANSWER

“I have oxen and donkeys, flocks, servants and maidservants” (Bereshit 32:6); “humble, and riding on a donkey” (Zechariah 9:9).

The shor, the bull, is combat: the one who, in the arena, measures himself against the uprightness that man opposes to him, and seeks to unsettle him with its horns. The chamor, the donkey, is the messianic image, the one who comes riding on a donkey. We have two Mashiachs. The shor is Mashiach ben Yosef: the fighting element in the war that shakes the whole universe, and who will lose his life in it.

We are counting on Mashiach ben David: the man of the Psalms, the man of prayer, the one who has this strength within him but who questions himself all the time.

And the offering itself is counted: four times the word minchah, offering; four times the word machaneh, camp. Four stages — Egypt, the destruction of the First Temple, that of the Second, with a view to a building yet to come. I present you with an offering projected onto these stages of the history of the house of Yaakov; but know that it is conditional on the survival of my camp.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not on him that we are counting. We are counting on Mashiach ben David.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily admire the one who goes into battle, less the one who questions himself. Which of the two, at this table, would we choose as leader? And from which battle do we expect the resolution of a question that can only be resolved through prayer?

SUBJECT 11

Assured, and yet anxious



PRESENTATION

G-d had told Yaakov to fear nothing and to return to his land. When one is truly called to a mission, one can go forward. Yet he keeps a question that pursues him.

THE QUESTION

Why does a man assured of divine protection still wonder whether he has measured up?

THE ANSWER

“I served you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flock” (Bereshit 31:41).

After fourteen years, Yaakov should have packed his bags: what he had left for was accomplished; he had married Rachel and Leah; he had built a family. But he also wanted to build a fortune, and he added six years, with a clause on his wages, before going home.

These are considerations one sometimes takes into account. But he reproaches himself for them. It came at the price of parents he did not see again, at the price of a return that came too late, at the price of an unsettled upbringing for the children: for them to become a united family, crises will have to be gone through. This is also what feeds his fear before Esav, who, for his part, stayed with the parents.

And let us not forget, says the Rav, that what happened to Dinah rests to some extent on the bill for this prolonged stay with Lavan.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Perhaps I did not measure up. Perhaps I sinned here and there.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What years have we “added” somewhere — for money, career, comfort? At what price? And who in the family paid the bill?

SUBJECT 12

Three sendings that did not succeed



PRESENTATION

To finish, the Rav brings together three parashiyot built on the same verb of sending: Vayishlach, Beshalach and Shelach Lecha. Three missions, and one and the same observation.

THE QUESTION

What do three missions in the Torah that did not succeed teach us?

THE ANSWER

Vayishlach (Bereshit 32:4); Beshalach (Shemot 13:17); Shelach Lecha (Bamidbar 13:2).

Vayishlach is Yaakov's relationship with Esav. Beshalach is the Jewish people's departure from Egypt and its setting out toward Israel. Shelach Lecha is the sending of the spies. Now none of these missions succeeded.

Yet they are necessary passages, through which we must go while awaiting the fulfillment. The Rav says it as he closes the lecture: one must not imagine that the story of Yaakov and Esav belongs to the past. It accompanies us today.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must not imagine that the story of Yaakov and Esav belongs to the past. It accompanies us today.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “mission” of our family has remained unfinished? Is it a failure, or a necessary passage toward what is coming? And where, today, are we reliving the encounter of Yaakov and Esav?