

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYISHLACH

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayishlach: The Tragedy of Dinah”: why the Torah exposes, at
the very moment of Yaakov's triumph, what stains his house. A
daughter hidden in a chest whom we never hear, an alliance that
looks like a promotion, two brothers who strike an entire city —
and truth as a crossroads.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

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

-
- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 01 | From cunning to face-to-face |
| <hr/> | |
| 02 | The day Yosef is born |
| <hr/> | |
| 03 | Why air the dirty laundry? |
| <hr/> | |
| 04 | Names meant to win him over |
| <hr/> | |
| 05 | A daughter instead of a son |
| <hr/> | |
| 06 | “Dinah, the daughter of Leah, went out” |
| <hr/> | |
| 07 | Dinah in the chest |
| <hr/> | |
| 08 | Dinah's silence |
| <hr/> | |
| 09 | Three reproaches to Yaakov |
| <hr/> | |
| 10 | Shechem, a promotion |
| <hr/> | |
| 11 | Two brothers, an entire city |
| <hr/> | |
| 12 | Truth is a crossroads |
| <hr/> | |

SUBJECT 01

From cunning to face-to-face



PRESENTATION

Until now, everything has been done through cunning: with Esav over the birthright and the blessing, then with Lavan. This time, Yaakov stops fleeing. He decides to face his brother face to face.

THE QUESTION

Why did Yaakov have to use cunning for so long, and what changes when he finally dares to face Esav?

THE ANSWER

“Your name shall no longer be called Yaakov, but Israel” (Bereshit 32:29).

From birth, Yaakov wants to stay on Esav's heels, because Esav is engaged in the world of reality, of daily life, and one must draw on those forces to face life's problems. Not everything is resolved within the four walls of the house of study: everything takes concrete form in public life. But Esav wants complete mastery and wants to strip him of his birthright; to defend it, Yaakov must use cunning. With Lavan, the same problem: a will to rule that does not let him impose his spiritual trajectory.

No more fleeing. Yaakov wants to be recognized and accepted as he is. At last he states his name: yes, he used cunning, he went around situations, he was not straightforward. But from now on he bears his title under the name Israel, yashar-El, upright with G-d.

He obtains what he always wanted: Esav's recognition, and through it the use of his potential.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

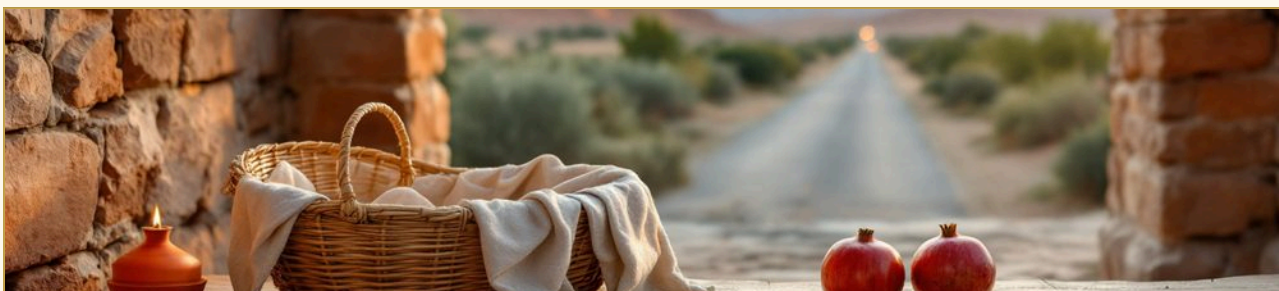
He has integrated it, he has mastered it, he no longer flees from it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Before whom do we still go around situations instead of presenting ourselves as we are? What are we missing to dare this face-to-face?

SUBJECT 02

The day Yosef is born



PRESENTATION

When does Yaakov decide to go home? Tradition answers: when Yosef was born, for Esav's adversary was born with him. The Rav connects this to an older division, between two sisters.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yosef's birth make the confrontation with Esav possible?

THE ANSWER

“When Rachel had given birth to Yosef” (Bereshit 30:25) — as soon as Esav's adversary was born, Rashi explains.

A division had been planned between Rivkah's children and Lavan's: Esav for Leah, Yaakov for Rachel. Leah did not accept this division. She did everything to bind Yaakov to herself — she too through cunning, as on Lavan's side.

But through his union with both sisters, Yaakov integrated both the potential that belonged to Esav, destined for Leah, and that of Rachel. It is perfect balance: now the house of Israel can be built.

And Yosef, Rachel's son, carries this power to face Esav. With his coming into the world, what was only flight becomes possible.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The power to face Esav takes shape with Yosef's coming into the world.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, what birth, what event gave us the courage to face what we had been fleeing? And what part of the other have we ended up integrating within ourselves?

SUBJECT 03

Why air the dirty laundry?



PRESENTATION

Yaakov's house is finally complete. And it is precisely then that everything goes wrong: the outrage done to Dinah, the brothers' revenge, the episode of Reuven, Rachel's death.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah, at the moment of triumph, lay out everything that stains the house of Yaakov?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: "Dirty laundry is washed within the family? Then better not to air it!"

One can conceive of the house of Israel, the house of Yaakov, as a structure with twelve edges, twelve pillars, closed on every side, allowing no foreign element to enter. But the center of gravity of this house is the feminine: Rachel and Leah.

Balance is reached, Yaakov triumphs, a new course can begin. That is when things do not go as one would have wished: sad events mark his path.

Why expose them? The lecture answers step by step: there is in them a criticism addressed to Yaakov, a reflection on the overprotection of children, and a warning about the condition of a minority people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family history, are there episodes we prefer to keep quiet? What would we lose by hiding them from our children — and what would we gain by telling them truthfully?

SUBJECT 04

Names meant to win him over



PRESENTATION

At each birth, Leah gives her son a name that speaks of her husband: now my husband will love me; this time my husband will be attached to me. As if these children served only to hold on to Yaakov.

THE QUESTION

What would Leah's sons feel if they asked their mother about the meaning of their names?

THE ANSWER

“Now my husband will love me” (Bereshit 29:32); “This time my husband will be attached to me” (Bereshit 29:34).

However much Leah seeks to give Yaakov descendants, the text says each time: for Yaakov. It is as if all her children were made only to please her husband, to win him over and hold on to him. Fortunately, says the Rav, they do not ask their mother about the meaning of their names: they would feel frustrated on every level.

Frustrated of their father's love, and frustrated at being only a fallback while waiting for the child to come: Yosef, who will be the object of Yaakov's love after Rachel's death.

One has to enter a little into the psychology of these children to understand that it is not easy to accept that Yosef is the chosen son of the whole family.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is a jealousy that is justified.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Do our children know why we gave them their names? Let each person tell the story of his own. And has one of them ever felt he was just “waiting in place” of another?

SUBJECT 05

A daughter instead of a son



PRESENTATION

After six sons, Leah gives birth to a daughter. The text says nothing more: no conception explained, no justification of the name. Only: she called her Dinah, from the word that speaks of justice. And the Midrash tells of an astonishing exchange.

THE QUESTION

What does Dinah's name say, and why does the Midrash link her birth to Yosef's?

THE ANSWER

“Afterward she bore a daughter and called her Dinah” (Bereshit 30:21); “May the L-rd add to me another son” (Bereshit 30:24).

Leah, in a sense, does herself justice: I did everything I had to do to impose myself on my husband — whereas at the start, it was I who was imposed on him. There is a form of coercion at the origin here. Dinah's fate will be of the same nature, with this difference: there, force will be used, whereas here cunning was used.

The Midrash says that Yosef was conceived by Leah and borne by Rachel, and Dinah conceived by Rachel and borne by Leah. Leah could not conceive of giving seven sons when her sister would have given only one, while Bilhah and Zilpah had had two each. She asks for a daughter and leaves her sister the privilege of this child.

Yosef, whose name means to add, is thus the joint product of the two mothers.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A child's conception is not without significance: it leaves its mark, in every way.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Leah gives up a son so that her sister will not be humiliated. What have we given up so that a brother or sister could keep his or her place? And what could we give up this week?

SUBJECT 06

“Dinah, the daughter of Leah, went out”



PRESENTATION

The text presents Dinah as “the daughter of Leah,” and later as “their sister.” This is not neutral. And her going out has often been made the cause of her misfortune.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah attach Dinah to her mother here — and what are we to think of her going out?

THE ANSWER

“Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Yaakov, went out to see the daughters of the land” (Bereshit 34:1); “Leah went out to meet him” (Bereshit 30:16).

She is Leah's daughter because there is in Leah a tendency to go out. When Yaakov comes back from the fields, Leah goes out to meet him before he comes in and says to him: I have hired you with my son's mandrakes. That is how she persuades him to come to her. Such approaches are not appreciated, and what discredits the mother would also discredit the daughter: she too went out.

But careful, says the Rav: our Sages did not settle the matter this way. Dinah does not go to see the young men of the city of Shechem. She looks at how the girls dress, at their way of life. There is no covetous gaze in this.

She was very beautiful, and it was her beauty that lay at the origin of her sad misadventure.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no covetous gaze: it is appreciating and drawing inspiration.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is it wrong to look at how others live in order to draw inspiration? What do our children look at in others, and do we know how to talk with them about it without suspecting them?

Dinah in the chest



PRESENTATION

Before the encounter with Esav, Yaakov hides his daughter Dinah in a chest, for fear that Esav might take her. Later, the text says: Dinah, the daughter of Leah, went out to see the daughters of the land.

THE QUESTION

Yaakov protected his daughter from the danger he saw coming. Why is he blamed for it?

THE ANSWER

“And his eleven children” (Bereshit 32:23) — “And where was Dinah? He had put her in a chest” (Rashi).

Yaakov was so afraid for his daughter that, when meeting his brother, he put her in a chest, in a covering such that Esav could not see her. The Torah disapproves: had you not withheld her from Esav, she might perhaps have won him over to the cause of the house of Yaakov, and she would not have been the victim of Shechem's outrage.

A participant objects: must a parent not protect his child from immediate danger? That is right, answers the Rav: a daughter needs particular shemirah, protection. But she must not be shut away. She must be allowed to assert herself, to defend herself by her own means, and be helped to do so.

Otherwise the reaction is the opposite: she will want to leave home at any cost. Letting her grow up in a sterile environment, deciding everything for her, is to make sure that one day, when she goes out into the street, she will fall into the first trap — and others will take possession of the precious stone one had taken such care to hide.

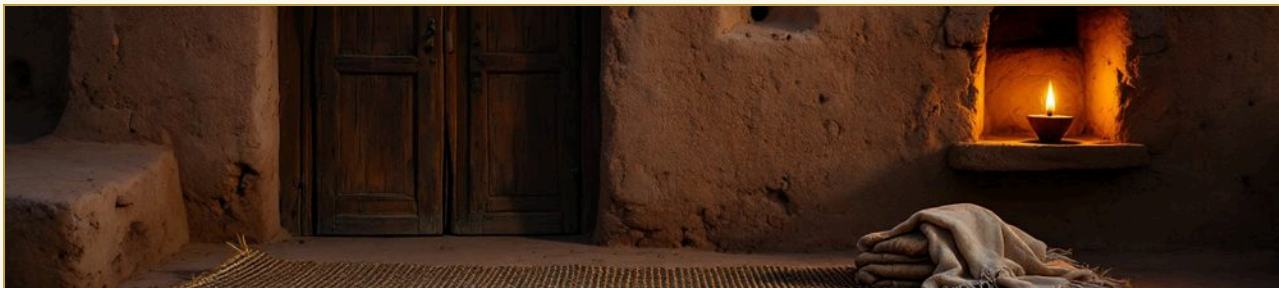
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Certainly, she needs protection, but she must not be shut away: she must be allowed to assert herself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We call protection what is sometimes putting someone under a glass dome. Who in our home has never had to decide alone because we decided in his place? What could we entrust to him starting this week?

Dinah's silence



PRESENTATION

Throughout this chapter, Dinah does not say a word. We do not know what she thinks of Shechem, or of her brothers, or of her father. She is designated only by others: Leah's daughter, then sister.

THE QUESTION

What does Dinah's silence tell us — and why is Yaakov not above criticism?

THE ANSWER

“Shaul, son of the Canaanite woman” (Bereshit 46:10) — Dinah's son, according to Rashi.

She would no doubt so much have wished to assert herself, to be that center of gravity of the family. She was not allowed to. That is why Yaakov is not above all criticism in what his daughter goes through.

Our Sages even say that Dinah left the house of Shechem only with difficulty. When they came to free her, she had to be forced: if I leave here, she said, no one will want me anymore. Shimon had to pledge to marry her for her to follow him, and a son was said to have been born of it, Shaul, “the son of the Canaanite woman.” Another midrash speaks of a daughter, adopted in Egypt by Potiphar's wife.

Did Dinah remain in the family, or did she die prematurely as a result of this tragedy? The text does not say.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She would so much have wished to assert herself and be that center of gravity of the family, but she was not allowed to.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Who in our family never speaks of himself and is designated only by others — “the son of,” “the sister of”? Have we asked him what he thinks?

Three reproaches to Yaakov



PRESENTATION

When Yaakov learns of the outrage done to his daughter, he keeps silent. This is the moment, says the Rav, to review all the education he has given. Our Sages have entered three points on the debit side of his account.

THE QUESTION

Why should a misfortune that strikes our children lead us to examine our own conduct?

THE ANSWER

“My righteousness will testify for me” (Bereshit 30:33); “If I return in peace to my father’s house” (Bereshit 28:21).

The first point is the word he addressed to Lavan: I am a righteous man; my deeds can bear witness to my uprightness. One does not boast of what one does; what is done must be done for the sake of Heaven.

The second is the unfulfilled vow. Yaakov had promised, if he returned safe and sound to his father’s house, to build an altar to his Creator. He did not do so. That is why, between his return and his arrival at his father’s house, a series of sad events takes place. When one makes a vow, one must fulfill it.

The third is that he did not know how to balance his relationship toward Leah’s children.

THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

Sometimes we are so righteous that we believe no misfortune can befall us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What promise did we make at a difficult moment and never keep? What “uprightness” do we boast of a little too much? And does one of our children feel less noticed than the others?

SUBJECT 10

Shechem, a promotion



PRESENTATION

Shechem is not just anyone: he is the son of Chamor, the ruler of the land. Such a union was a promotion. And Chamor offers more: your daughters for us, our daughters for you; we will even be circumcised.

THE QUESTION

What is dangerous in an offer of alliance that seems to grant everything?

THE ANSWER

“Intermarry with us: give us your daughters and take our daughters for yourselves” (Bereshit 34:9).

Such a union conferred full citizenship of the land. The chapter thus highlights the phenomenon of assimilation: the condition of a minority people, poorly settled, poorly recognized, tempted to take advantage of this favor to gain recognition and emancipation among the nations. There had already been attempts to take hold of the matrix of the people, with Sarah and with Rivkah; and with Lavan, this claim: the daughters are my daughters, the sons are my sons.

Chamor wants to adopt the customs of Yaakov's family and, in the name of this understanding, have his subjects circumcised — a gesture that, at bottom, commits them to nothing else. He opens the floodgates of a separation the family wanted to be airtight: to live together universally, without religious values standing in the way.

On the third day, the people of Shechem are in pain — not only from the operation, says the Rav, but from having given in to this temptation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “promotion” have we been offered in exchange for a little of our identity? What did we accept that, at bottom, committed us to nothing — and what did we lose in it?

SUBJECT 11

Two brothers, an entire city



PRESENTATION

Shimon and Levi put the city of Shechem to the sword to avenge their sister. Yaakov says nothing at the time. He waits until the end of his days to say: let my honor not be joined to their assembly.

THE QUESTION

Two brothers avenge their sister's honor. Why does their father, instead of approving, disavow them even in his last words?

THE ANSWER

“Shimon and Levi are brothers; their weapons are instruments of violence” (Bereshit 49:5); “You have troubled me... I am few in number” (Bereshit 34:30).

It is Leah's sons, Dinah's true brothers, who intervene. They feared that if they killed only Shechem, the population would take up their ruler's defense: they preferred to silence the whole city. When Yaakov raises his voice, it is to say: you have exposed me to extermination; we are few and they are a multitude.

The real disavowal comes at the end of his days: let my honor not be joined to their plot. Levi will have no portion and will be scattered within the people; Shimon's lot will be an enclave within Yehudah's, somewhat swallowed up by it.

What followed gives this condemnation its sharpest meaning. Shimon, who had so violently defended his sister's honor, will give in to the daughters of Moav, and one of his leaders, Zimri ben Salu, will go so far as to set an example for the other tribes. Pinchas, a descendant of Levi, will remain faithful to his line of conduct.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Because Levi had no property, he became the property of Hashem, and it is he who is destined to be the educator of the people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The anger that defends an honor always believes itself justified. What have we broken, this year, in the name of a just cause? And did we remain faithful, afterward, to the standard we invoked at the time?

SUBJECT 12

Truth is a crossroads



PRESENTATION

A participant is surprised: Yaakov is said to be the man of truth, and yet his whole life is spent in cunning. Is that not contradictory? The Rav answers with the very letters of the word emet.

THE QUESTION

How can the man of truth also be the man of cunning?

THE ANSWER

“You will grant truth to Yaakov” (Michah 7:20); “He crossed his hands” (Bereshit 48:14).

Emet is written with the first letter of the alphabet, the last, and the one in the middle. Truth, then, is not a line with a special status to the exclusion of all other paths: it is at the crossroads of all things, the meeting point of all the lines that make up our life.

It is the crossing of Yaakov's arms as he blesses Yosef's sons: I know that this one is the elder and that one the younger, but Menashe and Ephraim form a single entity at the point where they cross. The Torah is truth revealed from above; but it is also the truth we are called to discover.

That is why the notion of waste must be avoided: Yishmael and Esav are not husks to be thrown away. The husk, insofar as it protects the fruit, has a meaning and a virtue.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Truth is at the crossroads of all things; it is the meeting point of all the paths that make up our life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

On what subject, in the family, does each of us believe he alone holds the truth? Could we find together the crossing point where our paths meet?