

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

YITRO

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Yitro: Who Was Yitro?”: the parasha of the revelation bears the
name of a foreign priest, a former adviser to Pharaoh, who brings
the people a lesson it could not give itself — and then returns
home.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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

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Three Advisers, Three Fates



PRESENTATION

The parasha of the revelation, the one that defines Jewish being, bears the name of a foreigner. To understand this honor, the Rav starts from Yitro's biography: he was one of Pharaoh's three close advisers when Pharaoh sought to subjugate the Jewish people.

THE QUESTION

Bilam, Yitro, Iyov: what does the fate of each say about taking a stand — and about silence?

THE ANSWER

“There were three in that council: Bilam, Iyov and Yitro” (Talmud, Sotah 11a).

Bilam was one of the proponents of the policy of repression: this people's capacity to expand and to assert itself on foreign soil had to be curbed. Yitro was much wiser. Given the services Yosef had rendered the nation in a time of crisis, over so many years, one should not respond with ingratitude toward his descendants, but treat this people with consideration and regard it as an integral part of the Egyptian population. This opinion displeased the king's new policy and forced Yitro into exile.

The third adviser was Iyov. He was content to keep silent; he did not want to take a position on either side.

And it is the one who spoke up for good, at the price of exile, who gives his name to the parasha of the giving of the Torah: an honor paid, says the Rav, to the prototype of the convert who joins the Jewish people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Since Iyov preferred silence, he received in return the silence of G-d in the face of his sufferings, his miseries.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are conversations in which we kept silent, telling ourselves it was none of our business. Let each person name one. What price have we paid since, without connecting it to that silence?

Seven and Six Hundred Thirteen: The Crown



PRESENTATION

Our Sages credit Yitro with having added a chapter to the Torah. Is it an addition or an extension? The Rav counts: seven laws for humanity, six hundred and thirteen for Israel. And the sum has a name.

THE QUESTION

Why are the seven laws of humanity added to the six hundred and thirteen commandments, instead of already being included in them?

THE ANSWER

613 + 7 = 620, the numerical value of keter, the crown; our Sages: if there is wisdom among the nations, believe it.

When a follower of the Noahide laws joins the Jewish people, he does not fold these laws into the six hundred and thirteen commandments: he adds them. Six hundred and thirteen plus seven make six hundred and twenty, the numerical value of keter, the crown. The crowning of the Jewish people is the moment it establishes harmonious communication between the wisdom of the nations — by which people discover for themselves the laws that govern their community — and the law revealed from above.

So there are two laws: the one that is revealed, and the one man discovers by himself. And one must fully believe that there is wisdom among the nations: every person, moved by a divine spirit in his own measure, is capable of discovering rules of life that partly coincide with those of the Creator.

The difference? As long as a law is not revealed, one can play with it, adapt it to one's own measure, according to circumstances and moods, like a garment. Laws dictated by the absolute cannot be bargained with: it is we who must measure ourselves against them. The revealed law therefore involves a constraint, since it imposes itself from outside; the one we discover ourselves expresses total freedom, a voluntary adherence.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The best formula is never to feel constrained from outside to practice a law, but to be carried by it, by an inner movement.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes obey a law we have never made our own. Which mitzvah do we perform out of pure outside constraint? And which have we adapted so much to our own measure that it has stopped measuring us?

A G-d of the Left, a G-d of the Right



PRESENTATION

Our sages make Yitro the prototype of every cult of his time: a man of universal thought, who knew what each idol, each current of thought, each passion represented. He had cultivated them all, put them all to the test.

THE QUESTION

What did he discover at the end of all these beliefs put to the test — and why does the Torah place him before the Ten Commandments?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Hashem is being. Being is beyond all these deities.”

All these forms of belief remained within the limits of the Creator G-d, whose presence the whole universe attests. It is found in the forms of nature as in the arts of living — what we would today call hobbies, which were then reasons for living pushed to the extreme. But this remains limited, as nature is. To get out of the limits, one would have to get out of the laws of creation, that is, no longer belong to this world: that is not possible.

So we tend to shape the divine according to our way of thinking, our philosophical outlooks. And this G-d can be of the left as well as of the right, or of the center. What the Jewish world brought, through the voice of the prophets, is that being is beyond all these deities, which remain limited.

By placing Yitro before the Ten Commandments, the Torah teaches that if we do not integrate the wisdom that emanates from the divine into our way of grasping His presence, we will, under cover of our faith, serve various forms of manifestation. That is what Yitro denounced.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We serve the same G-d under several labels.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has a G-d who thinks more or less as he does. On what point has the Torah contradicted our convictions this year? And if the answer is “none,” what should we conclude?

Amalek, or the Value of Doubt



PRESENTATION

The previous parasha ends with the command to blot out the memory of Amalek. This one opens with the arrival of a man from outside. And the Rav recalls that Amalek has the numerical value of safek, doubt.

THE QUESTION

What doubt is this — and why is a man from outside needed to blot it out?

THE ANSWER

Amalek = 240 = safek, doubt; “Is the L-rd among us, or not?” (Shemot 17:7).

The doubt is the question: is it the L-rd who dwells in our midst; are we still acting in His name? We then doubt ourselves, and this doubt must be uprooted at all costs. The nations also nurture it toward us; hence those who persecute and reject us.

But one must not lump all the nations together. There are the righteous among the nations, sensitive to what we represent and to the message we bring to the world. Careful: these are not peoples. They are individuals scattered within each people.

Now, says the Rav, what separates us from the nations is not knowing how to bring all beliefs and all arts of living together under a single banner, that of being. We then live in two separate worlds, and remaining on the margins sustains a permanent antisemitism. The aim of the revelation is to fuse humanity into one movement of thought with many branches, converging on a single point. Only a man from outside can open this: that is why Yitro goes out to meet the revelation — and thus blots out Amalek.

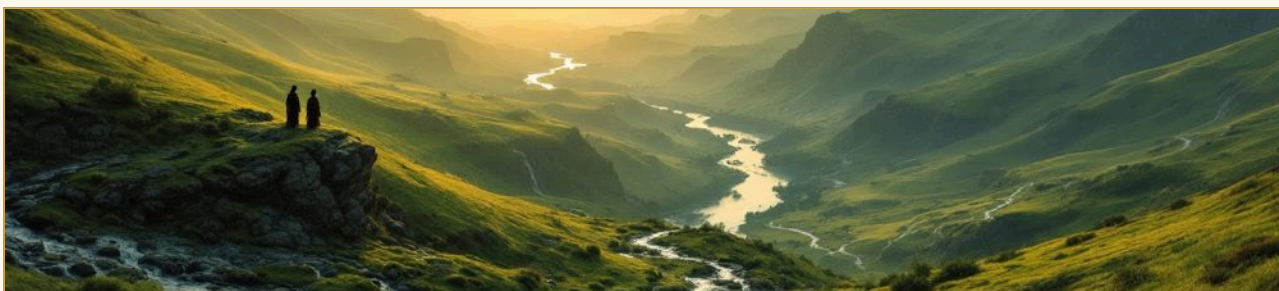
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This forms the messianic link between the people of Israel and the rest of humanity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily judge the nations as a bloc and reassure ourselves among ourselves. Who, outside our world, said or did something this year that gave us back to ourselves? Did we acknowledge it, or file it away as an exception?

Moshe and Yitro: From the One to the Many



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, Yitro is, among the nations, the equivalent of Moshe. Both grew up in Pharaoh's palace; both know Egyptian culture and its limits well. But they do not bring the same thing.

THE QUESTION

Should one start from all things and work back up to the One, or start from the One and integrate all things into it?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: Yitro is “the equivalent of Moshe among the other nations.”

What Moshe brings to the people of Israel is faith in Hashem, in being. What Yitro brings is that all the deities people believe in find their purpose in this single being.

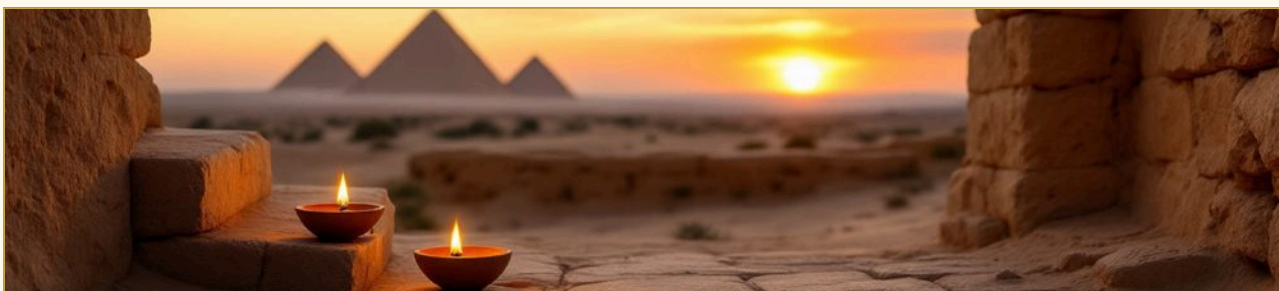
Everything then depends on one's way of seeing things. Either, through the detail of all the elements, once mastered, one arrives at the One; or, starting from the One, one integrates all the other details of life. That, if you like, is the dialogue between Yitro and Moshe.

Both grew up in Pharaoh's palace; both know Egyptian culture well — and its limits. So Yitro can be for the nations what Moshe is for Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some move forward through details — one practice, then another; others start from a great idea and bring life into it. Which of these paths is ours? What could we learn from someone who follows the other?

A Time Not Furnished by Nature



PRESENTATION

When we speak of Mitzrayim, says the Rav, we are always speaking of metzarim, limits: the limits of a way of thinking, of a civilization. Moshe and Yitro both know them. This is where the figure of the ger, the convert, takes shape.

THE QUESTION

What could Egypt, with all its science, not live — and what does the one who joins Israel bring?

THE ANSWER

Mitzrayim and metzarim: Egypt and limits.

It is the great empire, the great science; there are great scholars in Egypt. But their science remains bound by the laws of creation, unable to go beyond them. They cannot embrace a time that is not furnished by the elements of nature. We were made to live that time in its pure abstraction, through Shabbat.

Likewise, it is we who integrate the elements of morality into the law, to give it the stamp of the absolute. But it matters that morality take precedence over the act. Faith must not blind us to the point of granting acts an intrinsic value, without voluntary adherence, because we have understood and integrated what we are doing.

That is the ger: the one who has brought all the elements he discovered by himself, and who has put them to the test of the absolute, that is, of the revelation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not time that is furnished by the elements of nature; it is we who integrate the elements of nature into our time.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our weeks are furnished by the schedule, the screens, work. Is Shabbat in our home a liberated time, or only a day filled differently? And what gesture do we still perform without ever having understood why?

He Began by Bringing Back a Wife and Two Children



PRESENTATION

Yitro came just after the Exodus from Egypt. Before any speech, before any advice, his first act is a domestic one: he brings back to Moshe his wife and his two sons, from whom Moshe had separated in order to carry out his mission.

THE QUESTION

Why does the first lesson brought to Israel's liberator concern his own home?

THE ANSWER

“Yitro, Moshe's father-in-law, took Tzipporah, Moshe's wife... and her two sons” (Shemot 18:2-3).

Moshe had separated from his wife and his two children in fulfilling his mission. Yitro comes to tell him: one does not sacrifice one's family life by devoting oneself to the cause of the people, or even to the cause of G-d.

On the contrary: family life is itself part of one's obligations toward G-d. That was his first lesson, and it precedes all the others.

For Yitro's particular gift, says the Rav, is to understand, to listen, to see things in their entirety.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One's family life falls under the heading of this service, of these obligations one has toward G-d.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily put our dedication above everything, and our loved ones wait behind the door. From whom have we taken time this year in order to give it to a cause? What needs to be brought back home?

What Did Yitro Hear?



PRESENTATION

The text is clear: Yitro heard all that G-d had done for Moshe and for Israel, in bringing them out of Egypt. That should be enough. Our Sages are not satisfied and ask: what did he hear?

THE QUESTION

Many peoples heard the same news. Why did only one man come because of it?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Shemot 18:1: “What news did he hear that made him come? The splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the war with Amalek.”

Many peoples heard of these feats. It caused a shock for two days, three days, a week; then it was filed away among the phenomena of history or of nature. Yitro's particularity is that he probes the event.

According to one answer, he heard of the crossing of the sea: this leap beyond death, the miracle of this people's survival, and an immanent justice — the Egyptians sought to drown the people, and it was they who were drowned. According to another, he saw the victory over Amalek: the people that let itself be crushed in Egypt now joins battle, and its victory is moral as much as physical.

But not all the Sages agree. The convert who joins the people is not always the one who marvels at providence or at feats. He is amazed by the Torah: at first it presented itself as a constraint; then, once integrated, it became the expression of this people's total freedom of action.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In him we find the man who probes the event.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Every week we receive news that should move us, and within three days it is filed away among the minor news items. What did we hear this year without listening to it? What should we still know how to marvel at?

A Law G-d Gives, a Law the People Gives Back



PRESENTATION

What impressed Yitro, some Sages say, was neither the miracle nor the victory: it was what takes place between G-d and this people around the text. Something he had found in none of the wisdoms he had tested.

THE QUESTION

What is a law whose interpretation belongs in part to man — and what becomes of a people that studies with its Creator?

THE ANSWER

The Written Torah and the Oral Torah; the Jewish people, G-d's chavruta.

There is the written law, which G-d gives to the Jewish people; and there is the oral law, which the Jewish people gives back to G-d. There is an interpretation of the law proper to man, and it is not foreign to G-d's thought. Man is the privileged interlocutor: the one with whom G-d, so to speak, studies His law.

Is the Mishkan to be built? G-d can sketch its broad lines; but the one who makes it is the people itself, and it does so not under constraint, but because it feels the need to make it. That is what impressed Yitro: this permanent dialogue, this movement of extension and interpretation that brings the law out of its husk and gives it an extraordinary breadth. But this requires applying oneself to study.

For when we approach the revealed word, we are in the opening of being onto the infinite, to the point that our own word can become the cement of a new creation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Jewish people is G-d's chavruta, and G-d is the chavruta of the Jewish people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One can practice for a whole lifetime without ever opening a discussion with the text. What have we studied this year, and not merely performed? With whom at this table could we form a chavruta?

SUBJECT 10

Judging, or Learning to Judge Oneself



PRESENTATION

Yitro sees Moshe judging the people from morning to evening, and warns him. One may wonder what Moshe did not know: that judges, clerks and stewards are needed, he had seen in the administration of the Egyptian empire. For the Rav, the advice concerns something else entirely.

THE QUESTION

What does Yitro reproach Moshe for, when he gives himself entirely to his people?

THE ANSWER

“What you are doing is not good. You will surely wear yourself out” (Shemot 18:17-18).

Careful, Yitro tells him, you will diminish yourself, you will restrict your abilities. Let the people deal with its internal problems, and devote yourself to revealing to it, from above, the possibilities of moving forward. By staying at the people's level, discussing daily problems, one gets nowhere: one needs a source of inspiration, a new breath.

This holds for anyone who takes charge of a community or a family. It is not enough to give oneself entirely to the cause: one must know how to keep time for oneself, to replenish oneself, to learn, to recharge — because as the person grows, those around him grow with him.

What is at stake is a person's fulfillment. To remain always within the limits of one art or one way of thinking, however sublime, without being able to air it out with another flight: then life becomes repetitive, it ages, it loses its reach.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not a matter of judging others; it is a matter of teaching them to judge themselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When did we last keep an hour to replenish ourselves rather than to serve? And on what subject at home should we stop deciding, so that the others can learn to judge?

SUBJECT 11

Why Did Yitro Go Back?



PRESENTATION

He came, he brought his message, he gave his name to the parasha of the revelation — and he returned home. The model convert does not stay.

THE QUESTION

Why does the one who opened the way return to his starting point, and what does he take with him as he leaves?

THE ANSWER

“Moshe let his father-in-law depart, and he went to his own land” (Shemot 18:27); “Yitro said: Blessed be the L-rd” (Shemot 18:10).

Our Sages distinguish several attitudes of Yitro: the one who comes before the giving of the Torah, the one who comes after, and the one who leaves. Likewise, some people join us before the founding of the State of Israel, others after, and others leave us and return to where they started.

Why does he leave? Because, in what he is, he too has his word to say. He joined the people, brought his message, inscribed his parasha, gave his push to the way of perceiving the dialogue between G-d and humanity. He is the high priest of his people, and he will go and adapt his way of thinking there.

And he leaves us a word: until him, no one had said “Baruch Hashem.” It took Yitro for us to learn from his mouth to say that the source of the kindnesses G-d lavishes on man should never run dry — and it is up to us to bring them about. That is why converts are said to be “hard” for Israel: they sometimes carry lessons we have not sufficiently integrated, for the comfort of living within the limits of our faith is stronger than the test.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He did not return as he came: he is enriched by something; he carries it within him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to welcome someone than to accept the lesson he brings. Who told us something true this year that we dismissed because he was not one of us? What do we ourselves have to bring back to those waiting for us beyond this table?

SUBJECT 12

Halachah, a Garment One Lends?



PRESENTATION

A participant asks the Rav: if the Torah thus opens itself to the nations, is halachah inclusive too? And is the Jewish people, in its concrete life, as inclusive as the Torah would wish?

THE QUESTION

Why are the practical laws of Judaism not passed on like a garment anyone could slip on?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: halachah is “the instruments through which you will put your own aspirations into practice.”

Halachah, answers the Rav, is your instruments: those through which you put into practice your own aspirations, your ideal of life. You cannot hand them over to another person who does not have the same needs. Keeping Shabbat is not wearing a garment: it is keeping its spirit, from within.

Of the other nations, only the seven Noahide laws are asked, and that is enough. Whoever wishes to go further takes it upon himself and goes through a period of gerut, conversion, which obliges him to study things from within and to adhere to them from inside — not to study halachah for an exam, then set it aside once the exam is passed.

Everything one has studied, the Rav adds, one does not necessarily use at the time: it is there, in reserve, and when the moment comes, one brings it out.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The ger is the one who, from within, spins his own path, because no one obliges him to.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are practices we wear like a garment, because they were put on us. Which one in our home has truly become an instrument serving what we want to live? And which is still waiting to be understood from within?