

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PESACH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Pesach: Searching for the Chametz Within”: what we are truly
searching for by candlelight, why leaven is no intruder, what the
plague of the firstborn says about the spirit of possession, and
why no blessing is said over the Haggadah. Down to this sentence
of the Rav: we are not free; we are in the process of freeing
ourselves.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

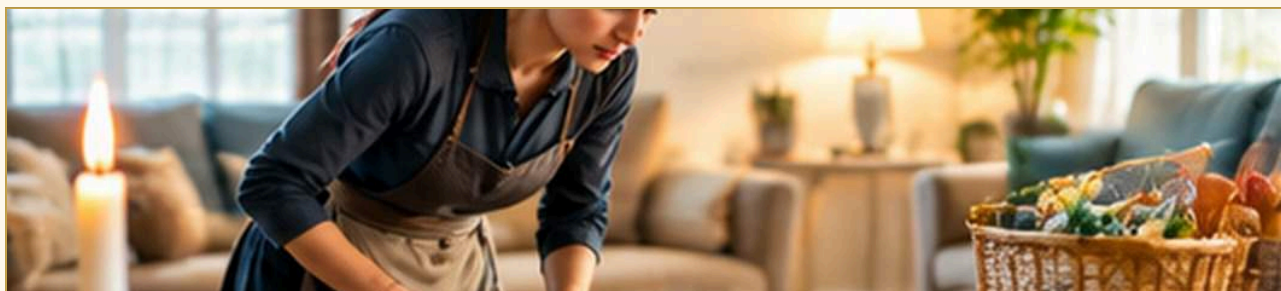
Table of Topics

Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Pesach table

-
- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 01 | We hide the chametz so that we can find it |
| <hr/> | |
| 02 | Leaven is not added to the dough, it is already inside |
| <hr/> | |
| 03 | The three faces of bread |
| <hr/> | |
| 04 | Selling one's freedom for a piece of bread |
| <hr/> | |
| 05 | Pesach, the leap beyond logic |
| <hr/> | |
| 06 | A child is not acquired |
| <hr/> | |
| 07 | Ask your father, and do not stop there |
| <hr/> | |
| 08 | We do not leave Mitzrayim, we tear it out of ourselves |
| <hr/> | |
| 09 | From “Master” to the Name |
| <hr/> | |
| 10 | Four ways of speaking, and song |
| <hr/> | |
| 11 | The mitzvah over which no blessing is said |
| <hr/> | |
| 12 | Fifty times the Exodus from Egypt |
| <hr/> | |

SUBJECT 01

We hide the chametz so that we can find it



PRESENTATION

On the eve of Pesach the house is already clean. So, lest the blessing be said in vain, someone places ten little packets of chametz around the rooms, and off we go to search for them by candlelight, in all seriousness.

THE QUESTION

Searching for what we have just hidden ourselves: is it a game, or does the blessing concern something other than those ten packets?

THE ANSWER

The two prohibitions: “bal yera'eh”, it must not be seen, and “bal yimatzei”, it must not be found in your home.

The chametz we remove from the house is mainly the chametz that dwells within us. It is not only in the home: the task is to remove it from ourselves. It is by the light of our soul, our neshamah, that we search for the particles of this chametz within ourselves — and for that reason the blessing is never superfluous, never a berachah levatalah. The task is to remove it from our thought, from our speech, from our daily actions.

For there is always, in what we do, some small amount of ego, a self-satisfaction bordering on arrogance. Even when we want to perform the mitzvot honestly, expecting nothing in return but the moral advancement of our conscience, renewal is called for.

Death lies in inertia, in growing old. With spring, nature's return to life, the spirit must return to a state of youth. That is what the removal of chametz consists of.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is by the light of our soul, our neshamah, that we search for the particles of this chametz within ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We search by candlelight for what we already know where to find. In what corner of our way of speaking or acting does a little self-satisfaction still hide? Let each one name one, in himself — before searching in others.

SUBJECT 02

Leaven is not added to the dough, it is already inside



PRESENTATION

We imagine chametz as a foreign body: you add yeast, the dough swells. But leave the dough alone, without putting anything in it, and it will rise by itself. Leaven does not come from outside: it is part of the dough.

THE QUESTION

If leaven is part of the dough, must it really be eliminated — or only brought back to its proper measure?

THE ANSWER

Kin'ah, ta'avah, kavod: the competitive spirit, desire, self-assertion.

Chametz is not a foreign element, as when yeast is brought into the dough. Left without leaven, after a certain time, the dough rises by itself. The leaven that gives it its flavor will spoil it if it goes beyond its time. Everything is therefore a matter of dosage over time.

Likewise, in man, the element of desire is not to be abolished: it is the stimulus of all action. But three elements, say our sages, cause the yetzer to stop being creative and spoil the dough: kin'ah, the competitive spirit; ta'avah, desire; kavod, self-assertion.

We cannot say that we part from them: they take part in our thought and our action, and can be positive. But for seven days a year, the task is to neutralize them, so as to take them up again afterward with new prospects for their use.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

For seven days a year, the task is to neutralize them, so as to take them up again afterward with new prospects for their use.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Competition, desire, the need for recognition: none of these is bad in itself. Which one “went beyond its time” in us this year? And what good could it serve once brought back to its proper measure, after the festival?

SUBJECT 03

The three faces of bread



PRESENTATION

Why does the prohibition of Pesach concern bread? The Rav recalls that in the Torah, lechem does not refer only to food. And the Torah itself knows three words for leaven.

THE QUESTION

What are the three relationships that chametz can spoil?

THE ANSWER

Chametz, machmetzet, se'or: three words for leaven.

Bread is the nourishing element of man. But lechem is also found in the sense of the feminine: of Yosef it is said that his master had kept nothing back for himself except the bread — and that bread was Potiphar's wife. There is, finally, a third bread: the korban, the offering; diverted from its course, it becomes avodah zarah, idolatry.

The removal of chametz thus covers three stages: the relationship with my own person, the relationship with others through the feminine, and the relationship with the absolute through the korban.

The three words for leaven say the same. Chametz is material leaven; machmetzet, in the feminine, points to the relationship with the other; se'or shares its root with she'erit, the remainder, what one regards as superfluous. Each is essential in its place, and becomes destructive when it overflows its measure.

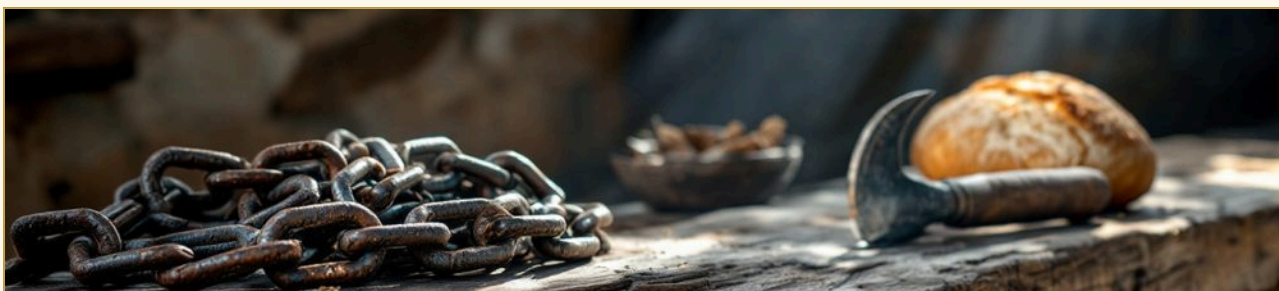
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When it is diverted, it becomes avodah zarah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

With ourselves, with those we love, with G-d: in which of these three relationships did something “rise” too much this year? Let each one choose his own, without commenting on the others'.

Selling one's freedom for a piece of bread



PRESENTATION

Mishlei says it plainly: for a piece of bread, a man may sell himself. Bread is the food for which he consents to sell his own freedom. The Rav extends this servitude far beyond work.

THE QUESTION

Which servitudes, in an ordinary life, resemble Egypt — and what does “giving chametz back its proper dose” mean?

THE ANSWER

“For a piece of bread a man will transgress” (Mishlei 28:21).

Because a curse accompanies bread, man must ask himself about the way he earns his living and about his approach to life, so as not to cross the limits of servitude: not to become a servant, an unconditional slave.

And this does not concern only one's profession. We are conditioned by our married life, by raising our children: there too, a state of servitude can creep over us. Everything wears out, everything rusts. One must stay on the alert.

So the task is not to eliminate chametz entirely, but to give it back its proper dose, its measure in all things: at the level of the nefesh, the essential needs of life; at the level of the ruach, the spirit; at the level of our divine service. When we have done that, then we can celebrate Pesach.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Everything wears out, everything rusts. One must stay on the alert.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Work, marriage, children: everything we love can become a routine that enslaves us. Where did we slip this year from commitment into servitude? What would have to change, concretely, to find the right dose again?

SUBJECT 05

Pesach, the leap beyond logic



PRESENTATION

Pesach means to leap. The Rav starts from a naturalist's observation: no logic leads from the inert to the living. And from it he draws a way of life.

THE QUESTION

Can one really go from slave to free man “in the blink of an eye”?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Making the leap obeys no logic.”

There is no logic of passage from the inert to the living, from earth to plant, from plant to animal, from animal to human. There is always a mutation, a going beyond. That is called Pesach: not pure rationality, but a total mutation.

We always want things to be logical. Yet being amazed before a painting, listening to beautiful music, feeling an emotion, a joy: these obey no logic. It is a transport of one's being from one world to another, and that is what makes for beauty and joy.

The word appears only at the Exodus from Egypt, where the task is to pass instantly from a conditioned being to a free being. Believing in this immediate change, which can take place at any moment, changes the way we see things and live through events.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It happens here and now, in the blink of an eye.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often wait for change to come step by step, “when the conditions are right”. Which change have we been putting off this way for a long time? And if, as on Pesach, it were a matter of an instant: what would we have to do first thing tomorrow morning?

SUBJECT 06

A child is not acquired



PRESENTATION

The name Pesach comes from the passing over the death of Israel's firstborn, who should have suffered the same fate as those of Egypt. Why, precisely, the firstborn?

THE QUESTION

What was the plague of the firstborn aimed at, and what Pesach takes place between a parent and a child?

THE ANSWER

Chavah names her first son Kayin: “I have acquired a man” (Bereshit 4:1).

We were no different from the Egyptians: all the firstborn were to die. Because they were the first fruits, the ones that gave parents a certain satisfaction of being, that changed their state from husband to father — and in which a notion of possession took root.

Chavah named her first child Kayin, from the verb kanah, to possess. But a child is not acquired. He is a beyond-myself: neither my photocopy nor necessarily the prototype of my life. I raise him so that he may be the beyond of my own life.

Putting an end to this notion of possession in all things is what brings man out of his ego, out of his servitude to clichés of life, so that he may see what lies beyond and make the leap.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is always a Pesach taking place in the passage from parent to child.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Parents, what do we secretly expect of our children: that they resemble us, or that they surpass us? Children, in what way would you like to be your parents' “beyond” rather than their copy? Let each one answer for himself.

Ask your father, and do not stop there



PRESENTATION

What distinguishes Pesach from all other festivals, says the Rav, is this family table at which the children take part. But what is to be done when there is no child at the table?

THE QUESTION

With whom must one hold a dialogue on Pesach night, and in what time must this dialogue take place?

THE ANSWER

“Ask your father and he will tell you; your elders, and they will say it to you” (Devarim 32:7).

The festival rests on a dialogue between father and child. When there is no child, between husband and wife, or the friend who is with him; failing anyone at all, between a man and himself. On the level of the future, it is the children; on the level of the present, the wife or the friend; and failing that, it is I alone.

Ask your fathers, your elders: question yourself about your past, about your roots, try to find them again. But do not remain in the past, because that is death. Nor should you build castles in the air in your spiritual world: that is another form of death.

Try to live in a permanent present, between past and future, that allows you to free yourself from all the chains of conditioning.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

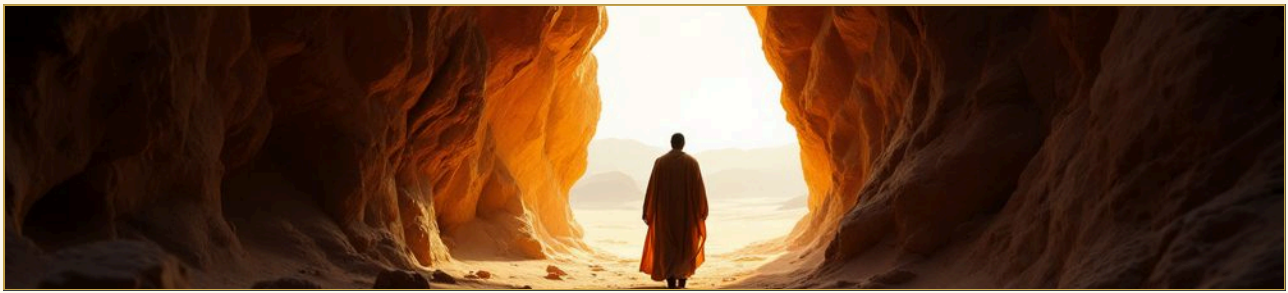
Do not remain in the past, because that is death.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What question would we like to ask a grandparent, living or departed? Let the youngest ask one tonight of the oldest — and let the oldest ask one in return, about the future.

SUBJECT 08

We do not leave Mitzrayim, we tear it out of ourselves



PRESENTATION

Mitzrayim comes from metzar, the limit. And the word is a dual, as though there were two limits. The Rav names them: the limit of where we come from, and the limit of what we are able to do.

THE QUESTION

If we are limited by our past and by our means, what is left of freedom?

THE ANSWER

Mitzrayim, from metzar: two limits.

We are limited by our past: we did not choose it, we came into the world with specific givens, and the inheritance is sometimes heavy — one must struggle, overcome it, or take it on. And we are limited in our plans: however much we may want, we need the material, intellectual, spiritual means.

What counts is not the work accomplished, but the effort undertaken within the limits that were assigned to us. If we have deployed all our means, and wisely, we are deserving; if we have squandered the strengths invested in us, we are not.

Freedom in itself is an abstract notion. We are not free: we are in the process of freeing ourselves. We do not leave Mitzrayim: we tear Mitzrayim out, we tear the limits out of our own person.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are not free: we are in the process of freeing ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us received an inheritance he did not choose and means that are not infinite. Rather than comparing our results, let us talk about our efforts: what good did we do this year with exactly what we had?

SUBJECT 09

From “Master” to the Name



PRESENTATION

Our sages link the Exodus from Egypt to four other liberations: from Babylon, from Persia, from Greece, from Rome. The Rav reads in this a passage, down to the very way we pronounce the name of G-d.

THE QUESTION

Why, as long as we have not passed through these four cultures, do we say “Master” instead of the Name?

THE ANSWER

The Name is written Yud-Hei-Vav-Hei and pronounced Adonai, the Master.

When we pronounce the name of G-d, what is written is the four letters of the Name, from the root of the verb to be. But what we say is Adnut, the Master. In other words, our very perception of the spiritual remains a state of subjection: we regard ourselves as the servants of a master.

There are four stages of liberation before reaching the level at which things become transparent. These four stages match the four letters of the Name as well as the four letters of Adonai. As long as we have not gone beyond what these four cultures convey, we remain in dependence: we harbor complexes toward them.

But, the Rav specifies, to be able to go beyond them, one must first be able to integrate them completely.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

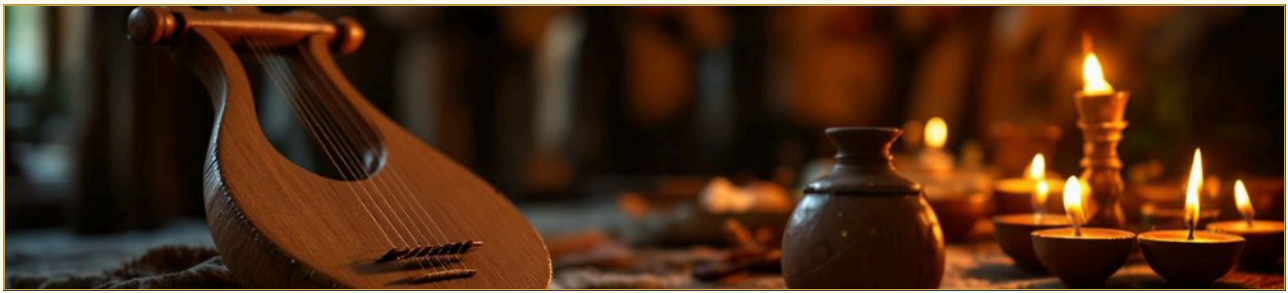
To be able to go beyond them, one must also be able to integrate them completely.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Toward which culture — scientific, artistic, economic — do we feel inferior? Do we know it well enough to go beyond it? And does our relationship with G-d resemble rather that of a servant who fears, or that of a child who seeks?

SUBJECT 10

Four ways of speaking, and song



PRESENTATION

The Rav distinguishes four modes of speech, which give the evening its shape. The first three are dialogues; the fourth no longer is.

THE QUESTION

Why does the evening of speech end in song?

THE ANSWER

“Man became a living being”: “a speaking spirit”, translates the Targum (Bereshit 2:7).

There is saying; I speak to myself. There is speech addressed to the other. There is the dialogue in which I have won the interest of the person facing me, or he mine: we have formed a bundle of ideas, of thought — haged, Haggadah, higgud. That is what we want to achieve on Pesach night.

And the fourth is shir, song. At every level of dialogue there can be a few false notes: when I speak to myself, when I speak to the other, when we have smoothed the edges to end up understanding each other. Song, however, accepts no false note.

For the divine part in man is the breath that carries speech. To leave Egypt is to free language from its artifices and restore its original breath — and for that, a Haggadah, an education, is needed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Song accepts no false note.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sing together words we would not always know how to say to each other. Which family song truly unites us? And which conversation, still full of false notes, would we like one day to be able to “sing” together?

SUBJECT 11

The mitzvah over which no blessing is said



PRESENTATION

We say a blessing before reading the Megillah, before sounding the shofar, before lighting the chanukiah. Telling the story of the Exodus from Egypt is also a mitzvah. And yet no blessing was instituted for the Haggadah.

THE QUESTION

Why is the one mitzvah of the evening that gives the book its name the one we do not bless?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “If a blessing is made, it is for the completion of a mitzvah.”

First answer: if we are in the midst of being liberated and the mitzvah has no end, how can a blessing be made over what has not yet been completed? When we bless, it is for the completion of a mitzvah — and here, it has not reached completion.

Second answer: the Haggadah is only an instrument we use to reach our goal, this movement of dialogue that leads to liberation. And we never make a blessing over the instruments that allow a mitzvah to be performed.

Third answer: the Haggadah is itself a form of blessing, a tribute paid to G-d's liberating movement in four stages — I brought you out, I delivered you, I redeemed you, I took you as a people. What we celebrate tonight is this recovered identity as a people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If a blessing is made, it is for the completion of a mitzvah. Here, it has not reached completion.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some things are not “blessed” because they are never finished: raising children, a marriage, a friendship. Which of these unfinished works is dearest to us? And which step could we help it take before the festival ends?

Fifty times the Exodus from Egypt



PRESENTATION

Where is the model for the Haggadah to be found? The Rav answers: in the declaration made by the one who brought his first fruits to the Temple. And he counts how many times the Torah mentions the Exodus from Egypt.

THE QUESTION

Why must the farmer who brings his first fruits recount the Exodus from Egypt — and what does the number fifty signify?

THE ANSWER

“Arami oved avi...” — the declaration of the first fruits (Devarim 26:5).

The essence of the Haggadah is found in mikra bikkurim, the declaration the worshipper made as he presented the first fruits of his garden to the Kohen. In it he recapitulated what the Exodus from Egypt had been for him — in the present tense.

The Rav reads this recapitulation, with the Aramaic version of the Targum, as praise: I praise the L-rd for having freed me from the conditioning of Egypt. And since Egypt is the prototype of every exile, in any situation man finds himself within this permanent remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.

According to the Rav, the Torah mentions it fifty times: the number of the jubilee, which frees the slaves — even the one who had consented to sell himself — and returns the lands to their former owner. To praise the L-rd is also to praise Him for having instituted laws that impose this liberation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Exodus from Egypt is the premise of the history of the Jewish people. The Jewish people was born at the Exodus from Egypt.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The farmer told the story of his people as he brought his own fruits. What are the “first fruits” of our year — a success, a birth, a project? And which part of our family history should be told as we present them?