

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PESACH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Pesach: Peh-Sach, the Mouth That Speaks”: why the first
liberation is that of language, why no one can say the Haggadah
in our place, why we do not drink for the land, and what Sarah's
laughter left to a whole people. Down to the Rav's advice for the
one who asks no questions: give yourself to him.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

Pe-Sach: the mouth that speaks; Paro: the evil mouth



PRESENTATION

Our sages break the name of the festival into peh sach: a mouth that speaks, a mouth in motion. But Pharaoh too had a language. Two mouths, then, face to face.

THE QUESTION

What distinguishes a free mouth from an evil one — and what is our language held prisoner by?

THE ANSWER

Pesach: peh sach, the mouth that speaks; Paro: peh ra, the evil mouth.

Since Adam's sin, language, that divine breath placed in man at his creation, has been in exile. A language in exile is a language conditioned by our daily life, by the culture we are subjected to, sometimes by problems within the family, not to mention the yoke of the authorities and regimes under which we live.

The hallmark of freedom is first of all that of language: being able to communicate freely, to clear out of oneself everything that diminishes it and keeps it from taking flight. That is why the Exodus from Egypt is first of all focused on communication: with oneself, with the family, with the children at the table, with the outside world.

Paro had his language, but it was a closed language. When language cannot evolve, when it cannot go beyond its limits, it is an evil mouth.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The hallmark of freedom is first of all that of language.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

How many of our sentences are real words, and how many are formulas to avoid a subject? Let us choose one thing that no one ever says clearly in our home — and let someone say it tonight, simply.

SUBJECT 02

Sharing knowledge before bread



PRESENTATION

On Seder night, the meal is put off. We speak first, at length, with the table set before us. For the Rav, this order is no accident: before sharing the meal, we share da'at, knowledge.

THE QUESTION

Why must knowledge be shared before the meal is shared?

THE ANSWER

Da'at, “which is precisely what led Adam into his sin”.

It was da'at that led Adam into his sin and brought about his expulsion from the Garden of Eden. He then lost the virtues of his language, its creative virtues. He kept only its sound, only its form. But form is not enough.

True language is the one that allows man to establish communication with the absolute, with the divine. It is this knowledge, repaired, that we first share around the table, before eating together.

And that is why, the Rav adds, the first message of the Exodus from Egypt was the liberation of language. Without it, we would not even have understood the words of the revelation: we would have been incapable of grasping them.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He kept only its sound, only its form. But that is not enough.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At the table, we often talk to fill the silence. What did we learn this week that deserves to be shared before the main course? Let each one bring an idea, and let us discuss it before serving.

SUBJECT 03

No one can say the Haggadah in your place



PRESENTATION

One who reads the Megillah or sounds the shofar can fulfil the obligation for a hundred people who are listening. On Pesach night, one might imagine the same thing: one person reads, the others follow along. The Rav says no.

THE QUESTION

Why can one person not “fulfil the obligation” of the Haggadah for the whole table?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “One cannot simply read the Haggadah for everyone.”

The Haggadah is a mitzvah: you shall instruct your son, recount to him, engage him. For the Megillah, for the shofar, a blessing is made, and through it others can fulfil their obligation: one can light a chanukiah for a hundred people who are there and following along.

The Haggadah, however, expresses a will to communicate that commits the two of us, the three of us, to one and the same journey of life. One cannot read it for everyone without some interaction, some discussion among the different members of the table.

In this it resembles tzedakah or the practice of kindness: a constant effort, which belongs to the nature of man living in society and cannot be limited in time.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One cannot read the Haggadah for everyone without some interaction.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are things one can delegate, and others one cannot. Who in our home always lets someone else speak for him? Tonight, the rule is that each one says at least one sentence of his own about the Exodus from Egypt.

SUBJECT 04

Four cups, four parts



PRESENTATION

The Haggadah comes in four parts, to which the four cups of wine correspond. Wine, the Rav specifies, not for intoxication, but because it gladdens the heart and makes a person communicative, with no screen or barrier.

THE QUESTION

What does each of the four cups celebrate — and why does the third pay tribute to an exodus we did not deserve?

THE ANSWER

Four cups for the four parts of the Haggadah.

The first celebrates our Exodus from Egypt. The second, our being torn away from the influence of Egyptian culture and from the idolatry that had tainted our way of life there — for accusers were saying: both are idolaters.

The third pays tribute to the L-rd: we did nothing to leave Egypt. We even rose up against Moshe when our conditions had grown worse because of his intervention. We did not decide on this exodus; we were compelled to it. It was planned even before our birth, because we had to pass through the filter of Egypt to realize our identity.

The fourth is song, which closes the whole discussion of the Exodus from Egypt and looks ahead to a messianic future.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We had to pass through this filter of Egypt to realize our identity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We like to believe we deserve what we have. What good in our lives came to us without our seeking it — even against our will? Let us raise the third cup and name it.

SUBJECT 05

A piece of celery in salt water



PRESENTATION

The Seder opens with Kadesh, sanctification, then the washing of the hands and karpas: a little celery dipped in salt water. The Rav reads in it the program of an entire life.

THE QUESTION

Why does holiness, the ultimate goal of the journey, pass first through so meager a sharing?

THE ANSWER

“You who cleave to the L-rd your G-d are all alive today” (Devarim 4:4).

Kadesh is kedushah, the ultimate goal of our journey: to reach the sublime heights of holiness. The road is long and strewn with obstacles. To get there, one must care about one's purity, and care about karpas: sharing with the other even in distress, even in want, when all one has is a piece of celery, dipped in salt water while the eye lets a few tears fall.

The Ramchal, in Mesillat Yesharim, makes holiness the end point of a development of the middot, the virtues, in ten degrees. At the level of the mind and of knowledge, we remain fundamentally different: some have faculties that others do not. But at the level of the virtues, there is neither weight nor measure: all men are equal.

And the Ramchal reads the verse this way: it is by the measure of your attachment to the virtues of G-d that your life is assessed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

At the level of man's virtues, there is neither weight nor measure: here, all men are equal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We do not wait to be rich in order to share, nor to be learned in order to be holy. What did we share this year when we ourselves were in want? And which virtue do we admire in someone who never pursued long studies?

The promise we do not drink for



PRESENTATION

Four cups for four expressions of deliverance: I will bring you out, I will save you, I will redeem you, I will take you as a people. But the Torah adds a fifth: I will bring you to the land. No one drinks for that one.

THE QUESTION

Why stop at four cups when there is a fifth promise — and what would we risk by drinking for the land?

THE ANSWER

“Ve-heveti etchem el ha-aretz” — I will bring you to the land (Shemot 6:8).

If there were a fifth cup, the Land of Israel would risk becoming the ultimate goal, instead of “I will take you as My people”, which is the most important: that HaKadosh Baruch Hu chose us from among all peoples, with a view to the day when His name will be one with His being. The land is only the means: I will bring you to the land sworn to your ancestors, to give you the means of fulfilling this mission.

This in no way diminishes the land, the Rav answers a question from the audience. Israel is called to expand; its borders are not definitively fixed, and its holiness is not the same everywhere: that of Yerushalayim is not that of Be'er Sheva. But this holiness radiates far, and Israel cannot live confined within its borders.

Eretz Israel is a tool placed at the people's disposal: to flourish, to regain its independence and to spread its teaching.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Eretz Israel is a tool placed at the people's disposal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often confuse the end and the means: the house, the career, the children's success. Let each one say which means has become the end in his life — and what that means was supposed to serve at the outset.

Why the Haggadah begins in Aramaic



PRESENTATION

The Haggadah does not open in Hebrew. “Ha lachma anya”, this is the bread of affliction: it is Aramaic, the language the people spoke at the time. And this passage ends with a wish, also expressed in that language.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Haggadah begin in the language of exile, and when will we stop speaking it?

THE ANSWER

“Hashata hacha, leshanah haba'ah be-ar'a de-Yisrael.”

To begin in Aramaic is to say that each person must be spoken to in his own language. Have we not yet absorbed the power of the Hebrew language? No matter: one can communicate in any language, especially when it is a matter of inviting someone to one's table and sharing an ideal of life with him.

Even our hope of return we express in the language of exile: ar'a, and not Eretz. For Eretz comes from ratzah, to want, to run toward: there is a will in Eretz Israel. As long as the land is peopled with the cultures brought back from all the exiles, and their idioms are still stammered there, we are still speaking the language of exile.

This text, we say, the angels do not understand: they know only the language of creation. And when Shlomo, in Kohelet, gathers all the currents of thought and the representatives of the nations, it is their language that he gathers.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Language is the secret of the ingathering.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To truly invite someone, one must speak his language. Whom could we invite to our table this year, and in what “language” — words, gestures, subjects — would we need to speak to him so that he feels at home?

SUBJECT 08

The bread of poverty calls for a guest



PRESENTATION

The evening begins by showing the matzah, at once bread of affliction and bread of freedom. Then comes the invitation: let all who are hungry come and eat. The Rav links the two gestures.

THE QUESTION

Why is it precisely the bread of poverty that opens the door to the other?

THE ANSWER

“Kol dichfin yeitei ve-yeichol” — Let all who are hungry come and eat.

The bread of poverty, say our sages, is the one that prompts dialogue. When a person reflects on his life and realizes his own shortcomings, he feels the need to find what completes him outside, in the other.

That is why, aware of this, he says: let all who are hungry come and eat; and let all who long for freedom, who want to make a leap, come too — for Pesach means to leap.

The Rav adds that as soon as we have shown this need to share with the other what is most precious to us, freedom can begin.

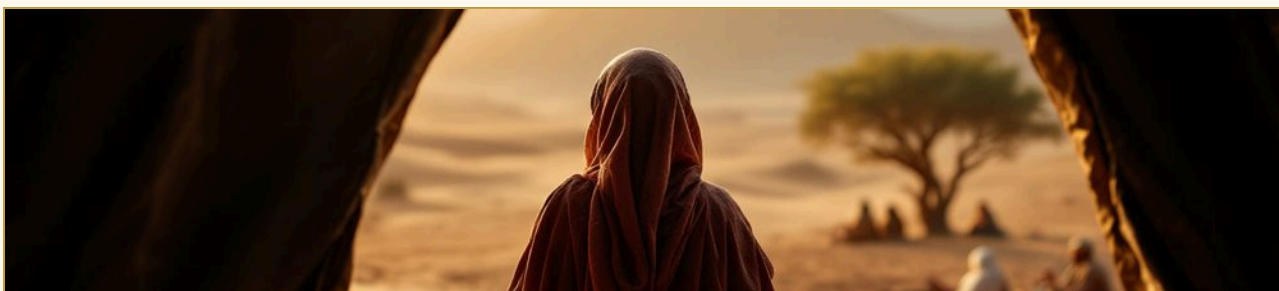
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The bread of poverty is the one that prompts dialogue.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is when we measure what we lack that we go toward others. What lack in our family could become an invitation? Who knows someone who is hungry — for bread, for company, for conversation — whom we could call before the festival ends?

Sasson, simchah and Sarah's laughter



PRESENTATION

The Jewish world knows three expressions of joy. Two are to be expected; the third appears for the first time in a woman of ninety who is told she will have a son.

THE QUESTION

How does laughter differ from the other two joys, and why does the Jewish people carry it within itself?

THE ANSWER

“You shall draw water with joy” (Yeshayahu 12:3); “Sarah laughed within herself” (Bereshit 18:12).

Sasson is a joy not yet fulfilled, but on its way to being so: we believe it is going to happen. The messianic times are not here, but our faith keeps us optimistic and serene. Simchah is the joy of an expectation satisfied: we toiled, we prayed, and the moment came.

Laughter, however, belongs to the unexpected event. Who would have believed one could have a child at ninety? This child will be called Yitzchak, and the Jewish people will perpetuate that name by laughing at all events, because situations can change overnight, from one minute to the next. People laugh at us today; tomorrow our mouths will be filled with laughter. This laughter we carry in the very makeup of our being.

That is why the Haggadah says hashata: not “this year”, but now. The change can come about in the minutes ahead.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We will defy events, we will rise above them, because this laughter is within us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What joy are we still awaiting, what joy have we already received, and what surprise made us laugh this year? Let each one give one of each kind.

SUBJECT 10

Why firstborn daughters do not fast



PRESENTATION

On the eve of Pesach, firstborn sons fast. Yet the last plague had not spared the firstborn daughters of Egypt, and the firstborn daughters of Israel were saved like their brothers. They, however, do not fast.

THE QUESTION

If firstborn sons fast because they were spared without having deserved it, what did the firstborn daughters have that stood in for merit?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “The daughters had their merit.”

The firstborn sons fast because they were spared, and spared not on account of their merit: G-d had decided so, bound by the commitment He had made to the ancestors. That is all.

The daughters, however, had their merit. The resistance in Egypt was carried out by the women, and this merit of resistance covered them: they are not obliged to fast.

The Rav offers this “small detail” in answer to a question from the audience: why a liberation we neither deserved nor even wanted? The firstborn sons are the image of a salvation received out of faithfulness to a promise; the firstborn daughters, that of a salvation carried by what they had done.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

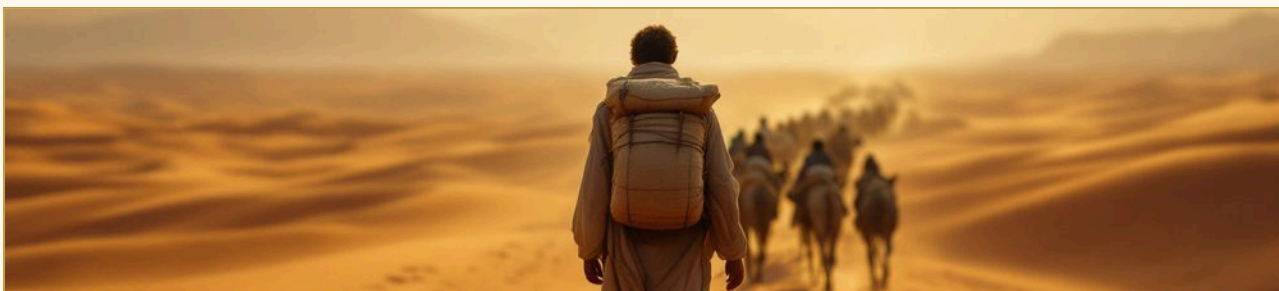
The daughters had their merit. The resistance in Egypt was carried out by the women.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

An entire generation came out of Egypt by the merit of women whose names are not recorded. Who in our family has held the house together without being counted? Let us name them tonight, one by one, and say what they really did.

SUBJECT 11

Chosen: a burden rather than an honor



PRESENTATION

Why was the Jewish people chosen? Answering a question, the Rav cites the Maharal of Prague: the choice is unearned. But then, where is Israel's merit?

THE QUESTION

If being chosen rewards nothing, what does Israel's merit consist of?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: "If I am chosen as head of the family at a young age, it is rather a burden."

According to the Maharal, the choice of the Jewish people is unearned: it is G-d who decided; it is a principle from the outset. It is not only because there was an exceptional ancestor like Avraham, through his kindness: Avraham is also the father of Yishmael, Yitzchak that of Esav. Yaakov, for his part, kept his family whole; but is that enough to justify such a commitment?

Israel is called bechor, firstborn. But this choice carries a heavy responsibility: if I am made head of the family very young, I am not being done a favor.

What makes Israel's merit is that it embraced this choice, that it agreed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. For by nature it would be inclined to reject it: why me? why be criticized, envied, persecuted? I want to live like everyone else. And this tendency, the Rav acknowledges, exists among us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What makes Israel's merit is that it embraced this choice.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A responsibility received without asking for it can become a burden or an honor. Which one in our family was not chosen — the eldest, the caregiver, the keeper of tradition? How can we thank that person tonight for having accepted it?

SUBJECT 12

Open for him, in the feminine



PRESENTATION

After the wise son, the rasha and the simple son comes the one who does not know how to ask. A listener remarks to the Rav that this is the greatest void. And the Haggadah, to address him, uses an unexpected grammatical form.

THE QUESTION

What is to be done with the one to whom questions do not even occur — and why does the Haggadah say “at” instead of “atah”?

THE ANSWER

“At petach lo” — You, open for him.

The rasha is no fool: he is a brilliant scientific mind, and that is why he sits beside the wise son. He cannot be excluded; it is simply that he wants no wisdom; he wants everything to conform to the laws of nature and to natural morality. The tam has a somewhat elementary faith: he turns more to the saints than to HaKadosh Baruch Hu. Let us respect the tzaddikim, says the Rav, but keep in touch with the Master of creation.

There remains the one who does not know how to ask. He must not be ignored: he must be stirred. It says “at petach lo”. Addressing a man, one should have said atah. But he is being told: take the woman as your example. A woman does not simply give; she gives herself entirely. You too, open for him: give yourself to him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They must be stirred; they must not be ignored.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The one who asks for nothing is not necessarily satisfied: often he is waiting for someone to come. Who at this table, or in the family, no longer asks questions? Who will take this on before the end of the meal — by giving himself, not just by giving?