

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PESACH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Pesach: The Mystery of the Number Four”: why the Shabbat
before the festival is “great”, what the four emblems and the four
angels carry, what the four sons say about their parents. Up to this
certainty of the Rav: on the night of the Haggadah, no one is lost
for good.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Pesach table

-
- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 01 | The vav that links Exodus to Genesis |
| <hr/> | |
| 02 | Four hundred years and four rivers |
| <hr/> | |
| 03 | The One, borne by four |
| <hr/> | |
| 04 | Four angels we carry within us |
| <hr/> | |
| 05 | Each one saw his brother in the darkness |
| <hr/> | |
| 06 | Rachel at the crossroads |
| <hr/> | |
| 07 | Torn from chaos, not a spoiled child |
| <hr/> | |
| 08 | The ox, the pit, the grazing beast, the fire |
| <hr/> | |
| 09 | No honey, no leaven: G-d is within |
| <hr/> | |
| 10 | Four offerings, four failings |
| <hr/> | |
| 11 | My children are in my image |
| <hr/> | |
| 12 | Four survivors around the table |
| <hr/> | |

SUBJECT 01

The vav that links Exodus to Genesis



PRESENTATION

The book of Shemot begins with a vav, “and”. For the Rav, this small letter says that Exodus follows on from Genesis. From it he draws an explanation he says he has seen nowhere else: that of the name of the Shabbat before Pesach, Shabbat HaGadol, the great Shabbat.

THE QUESTION

Why is the Shabbat before Pesach called “the great Shabbat”?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “A quite particular explanation, which I have seen nowhere else.”

The creation of the world reaches its purpose with the birth of the Jewish people and the building of the Sanctuary. Bereshit deals with the creation of the world; Shemot, with the birth of a people called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, which asserts itself through its spiritual aspirations on a land given to it so that it may develop all its abilities. Hence this conjunctive vav.

The name is often explained by the rabbi who, on that day, keeps reviewing the meticulous laws of Pesach. For the Rav, Shabbat HaGadol is first of all the Shabbat that completes the Shabbat of creation. Our sages say that if Israel kept two Shabbatot, it would be redeemed: that of creation and that of the Exodus from Egypt — and the kiddush recalls precisely both. As the preamble to the birth of the people, this Shabbat is the great Shabbat.

Nothing else marks it but its haftarah: that of Malachi, the last of the prophets, who closes the book of prophecy and announces the messianic times.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Shabbat HaGadol is first and foremost the Shabbat that completes the Shabbat of creation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A family's story has meaning only if it “follows on” from something. What is our family the continuation of? And what is expected of us so that this beginning reaches its goal?

Four hundred years and four rivers



PRESENTATION

The decree of exile announced to Avraham carries a number: four hundred years. The Rav connects it to the four rivers that flow out of the Garden of Eden, and sees in Yaakov going down to Egypt a new Adam.

THE QUESTION

Why is the exile in Egypt placed under the sign of four, and what was it meant to give the people?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “If it were given, it would be worth absolutely nothing.”

Adam missed his trajectory from the very first day. The new Adam is Yaakov Avinu, the one for whom the angels went up and down to see whether this was indeed the same portrait, the same divine image. By going down to Egypt, he joins the promise made to Avraham to the exile: it is the akedah of the Jewish people. As Avraham carried his son onto the altar, Yaakov carries his children onto the altar of Egypt, with the same assurance that death will not prevail, because G-d does not want it.

The four hundred years of slavery answer to the four streams that flow out of the Garden of Eden and spread throughout the universe. The Jewish people must have, like Adam, a universal dimension.

But this dimension is not acquired overnight. It must be earned, acquired by listening to the whole created universe, and it passes through language: refining one's speech until it regains a power of creation. That, says the Rav, is what is asked of us on Pesach.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is restoring to language its reach, its value, its creativity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What is handed to us ready-made is often worth little in our eyes. Which quality of our family did we acquire through trial rather than receive? And what word, tonight, could “create” something between us?

The One, borne by four



PRESENTATION

A poem attributed to Ibn Ezra, unsigned and dedicated to Pesach, served as the Rav's starting point. It speaks only of four: four letters, four emblems, four angels, four banners, four corners of the world, four seasons.

THE QUESTION

What do the four emblems that “carry” the One represent — and why is Israel saved when it was no better than Egypt?

THE ANSWER

The poem: the One in four letters, carried by four — the lion, the eagle, the ox and Adam.

The emblems are faculties given to the people. The lion is the royal scepter, the emblem of Yehudah. The eagle is flight: G-d bore us on eagles' wings. The shor, the ox, is both the capacity to gore and the economic strength of a whole people. And Adam is the one whom this strength from below supports and protects, while leaving him the possibility of taking flight and mastering everything without fear.

The poem also says that at the Exodus from Egypt, the people was no better than the others. The princes of the nations pleaded injustice: why is one condemned to perish and the other to survive? The answer comes down to one sentence: I save the one who bears My name, Israel.

That is why, the Rav notes, the names of the families of the tribes receive a yud and a hei, the first two letters of the Name, which have a sacred value.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I save the one who bears My name, Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Kingship, flight, economic strength, humanity: which of these four faculties is most lacking among us? And what does “bearing the Name” mean, for each one at this table, in everyday life?

Four angels we carry within us



PRESENTATION

Michael on the right, Gavriel on the left, Uriel in front, Refael behind: these names are familiar to us. Yet the Rav warns: we do not live in an angelic world. These four “emissaries” are carried by us.

THE QUESTION

If the angels are forces we carry within us, to what does each of them commit us?

THE ANSWER

Michael, Gavriel, Refael, Uriel; Avraham, Yitzchak, Yaakov — and Yosef.

Michael is the reference of chesed, kindness. Gavriel, strength — for kindness is not a surrender, the niceness of someone incapable who chose that path for lack of anything better. Refael is balance: when one loses one's hearing, one loses one's balance; from the verb azen, to balance, comes moznayim, scales. He is the one who remedies every imbalance between kindness and strength. And all this with a view to Uriel: advancing the light of G-d.

These contours were traced by the fathers. Avraham is chesed, Yitzchak gevurah, Yaakov the one who will bring balance, measure out the two attributes and correct them.

And Yosef, whom we forget to count: he belongs to the line of the fathers, because he is the father of the Jewish nation from Egypt onward, the yesod, the foundation of the people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Kindness is not simply a surrender.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Kindness, strength, balance, light: each one alone becomes distorted. Which dominates in each of us? Let us ask our neighbor at the table to answer in our place — and to say which one he would like to see us develop.

SUBJECT 05

Each one saw his brother in the darkness



PRESENTATION

The signal to leave is not given at the first plague, but at the ninth, the plague of darkness. And the four verbs of deliverance — I will bring you out, I will save you, I will redeem you, I will take you as a people — follow, according to the Rav, this same path.

THE QUESTION

What, in the darkness of the ninth plague, made the people ready to leave?

THE ANSWER

“Ve-hotzeti... ve-hitzalti... ve-ga’alti... ve-lakachti” (Shemot 6:6-7).

The people undertakes its departure only when it is able to grasp the light through the darkness. And the Rav reads the story this way: in that darkness, each one saw his brother. This vision of the other in the worst moments of life is what makes the unity of the Jewish people, and it is what decides the Exodus from Egypt — that is, the exodus from every exile.

The four verbs trace its stages. Ve-hotzeti: I will bring you out of Egypt, and I will bring Egypt out of you. Ve-hitzalti: a commitment of total kindness toward a people that had not even rebelled against its persecutor. Ve-ga’alti: the redemption tied to Yaakov, the one we invoke when we say “Ga’al Yisrael”.

And ve-lakachti, “I will adopt you as a people”: it comes when the unity of the people is attested in Egypt itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This vision of the other in the worst moments of life is what makes the unity of the Jewish people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easy to see one's brother when all is well. In what dark moment did someone in this family truly “see” us? And who around us is going through a darkness today, waiting to be seen?

Rachel at the crossroads



PRESENTATION

The birth of the people is tied to the four fathers, but also to the four mothers. Sarah, Rivkah, Leah and Rachel each pushed someone aside. And one of them is not buried with the others.

THE QUESTION

Why does Rachel rest apart, by the roadside — and whom did she place on her children's path?

THE ANSWER

Sarah sends away Yishmael, Rivkah sets aside Esav, Leah sets aside Lavan.

Each of the mothers set aside what had to be set aside: Sarah, Yishmael; Rivkah, Esav; Leah, Lavan. Rachel, however, is not buried in the Cave of Machpelah. She has a separate grave, at the crossroads. She weeps for her children, and she is the one charged with finding them again.

To do so, she placed her son Yosef on their path. Yosef is the political figure: he is the first stage of the messianic coming, the one that precedes the final spiritual coming. Yosef and Binyamin, the sons of Rachel, will determine the outcome.

Thus four appears on both sides of the people's birth: four fathers, and four mothers who distinguished themselves by setting aside what threatened their children's future.

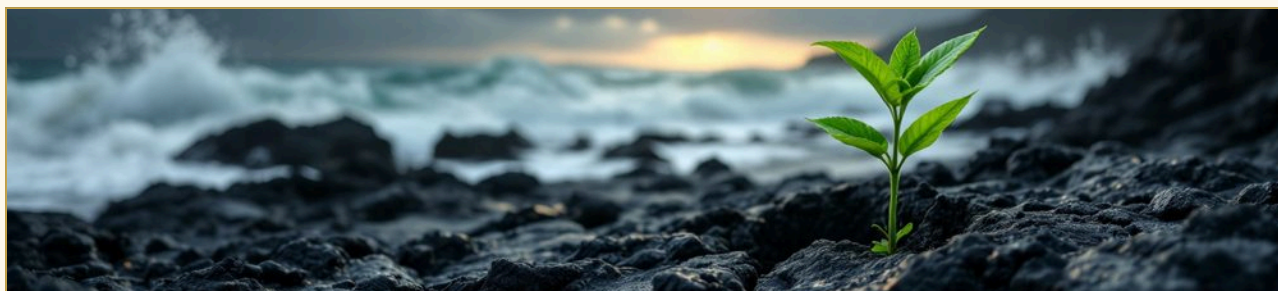
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She is at the crossroads, she weeps for her children, she is the one charged with finding them again.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family, someone sometimes has to set aside, and someone has to wait at the crossroads for those who have strayed. Who plays this role among us? And which of our loved ones is still waiting for someone to come and find him?

Torn from chaos, not a spoiled child



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, Mitzrayim is the matrix of the four exiles: Bavel, Madai, Yavan and Edom. The first three are over; the fourth is the one in which we live. And the hatred of these empires took the very form of the elements of creation.

THE QUESTION

What does it say about our birth as a people that we were fought with fire, water, earth and spirit?

THE ANSWER

“The earth was tohu and bohu, and darkness was upon the face of the deep” (Bereshit 1:2).

These empires sought to turn the four elements against us: esh, mayim, afar, ruach. To fight us with fire, with water, with labor on the land, to bury us in walls, to make us a museum people — and finally to make our spirit disappear entirely.

Their hatred operated on four levels: the mineral; the vegetable, by feeding us the bread of tears; the animal, the beast of the forest let loose against us; and the human, reduced to shame. Down to the four deaths of the court — and the Rav pauses on those who were stifled, who were never able to make their voices heard, who never even left their mother's womb.

But the people that carries all these virtues within it is not the Creator's spoiled child. It is a child torn from chaos, like creation itself, which suffers at its origin from four words: tohu, bohu, choshech, tehom.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not the spoiled child of the Creator-Father, but a child torn from chaos.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often tell our history as a string of misfortunes, or as a privilege. The Rav proposes a third reading: a birth torn from chaos. What did our parents and grandparents tear from chaos so that we could be here tonight?

The ox, the pit, the grazing beast, the fire



PRESENTATION

Parashat Mishpatim rules on four cases of damage: the ox that gores, the pit dug without precautions, the beast sent to graze in another's field, the fire allowed to spread. "Mind you," says the Rav, "all this is symbolic."

THE QUESTION

If these four kinds of damage dwell within man, what do they have to do with the descent into Egypt?

THE ANSWER

Shor, bor, maveh, hever: the four principal causes of damage.

A pit was dug, someone fell into it by accident: the necessary measures were not taken. A fire was allowed to spread. One sends one's beast into the fields because one wants to profit from others' property. All this dwells in man: he is born with his instincts, and he is capable of harming his neighbor.

And the descent into Egypt is tied to this passion that consumes a person, to this disregard and contempt for the other. It was the discord between the brothers that landed Yosef in a pit, then made him the victim of passions, then put him in a prison. These four scourges, which were at the origin of the exile, are put to the test during the stay in Egypt.

The Rav adds another distinction: there is the Torah of Moshe, the strict practice of the law, and the Torah of Aharon, in which love can go to excess so as not to let the people fall. Mishpatim, for its part, decides.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

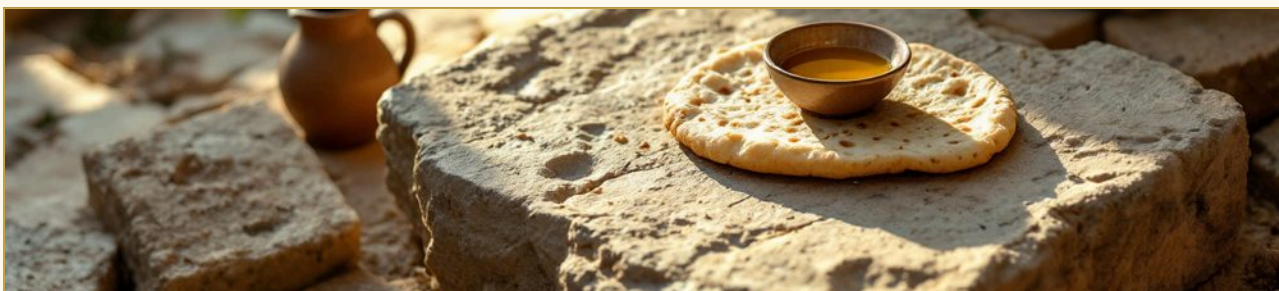
These four scourges that ravage our being are there, being put to the test, during our stay in Egypt.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The uncovered pit, the beast in the neighbor's field: these are often acts of negligence more than of malice. What negligence has already hurt someone in our home? And which "pit" should we cover this week?

SUBJECT 09

No honey, no leaven: G-d is within



PRESENTATION

In the offerings, it was forbidden to bring honey or leaven. The Rav sees in this a lesson about sincerity — and, from there, about where we place G-d.

THE QUESTION

Why are honey and leaven excluded from the altar, and what does it mean to “draw near” to G-d?

THE ANSWER

“No leaven and no honey shall be burned as an offering to the L-rd” (Vayikra 2:11).

Both distort the offering. If I shower you with praise, if I flatter you and puff you up with that leaven, I am not sincere with you: on the contrary, I lead you astray. Yet if one truly wants closeness to G-d, karov, it must be understood as bekerev, within: “in the midst of My people”. Our Judaism, the light, the presence of G-d, are within ourselves.

“Stop placing G-d outside yourselves,” says the Rav. “He dwells in us. He is in Egypt, in us, and we must be able to set Him free.” For that, one must climb the levels. Assiyah: the stage of the child, who is given representations of G-d — some keep them into old age. Yetzirah: that of the image, of which we were told to beware. Then Beriah: placing Him at the most sublime level one can conceive.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Stop placing G-d outside yourselves. He dwells in us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What image of G-d remains with us from childhood? Let each one honestly name an idea he had as a child and perhaps still holds. And where have we felt a presence “within” rather than above?

SUBJECT 10

Four offerings, four failings



PRESENTATION

The ox, the sheep, the bird, the flour offering: the Torah knows several kinds of korbanot. The Rav reads them as four ways, all a little lame, of serving G-d.

THE QUESTION

What does the way we bring our “offering” reveal about us?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “This korban does indeed attest to a certain failing in you.”

There is the one who brings an ox: let's go for an ox, that is how I will express my love for G-d. No: one has not won one's wife by giving her royal gifts. One does not play the big shot with an offering; one does not serve G-d by telling oneself: I am the best, I am the closest.

There is the one who brings a sheep: he goes with the flow, he does as the others do. There is the one who brings a bird, flitting from one branch to another: one day I am this, one day that, I do not want to define myself — as one changes hats in politics, from left to right. And there is the one who has made the service of G-d his livelihood: the minchah, the flour offering.

Each korban thus signals a failing, on four levels — just as it exists at my table, with my four children.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must not play the big shot with an offering.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The spectacular gesture, the gesture everyone makes, the gesture that shifts with the wind, the self-interested gesture: which most resembles our practice? And what would be, for each of us, a simple gesture made without any of these four failings?

SUBJECT 11

My children are in my image



PRESENTATION

On Seder night, we speak of four sons: the wise one, the rasha, the simple one, the one who does not know how to ask. It is easy to assign them around the table. The Rav turns the mirror back toward the parents.

THE QUESTION

If I have at my table a wise one, a rebel, a simple one and a silent one, what does that say about me — and how should I speak to them?

THE ANSWER

Four languages: haged, amirah, dibbur, and the persuasion of “at petach lo”.

I have no reason to blame my children if I have at my table a chacham, a rasha, a tam: it is because I am like that. My children are in my image. They represent what I am, but with a sharper stroke, highlighted. That is no reason to hate them or reject them.

On the contrary, I must find the right language for each one. And the Haggadah contains four. Haged, an authoritative language. Amirah, a gentle language. Dibbur, an adult dialogue. And for the one who sulks, who wants neither to speak nor to listen, the language of persuasion: I will coax him, “at petach lo”.

There are nuances between them, the Rav specifies, but they are templates, found throughout the whole structure of the evening.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

My children are in my image.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us can look within himself for the wise one, the rebel, the simple one and the silent one. Which one spoke loudest in me this year? And for each of our loved ones, which of the four languages truly opens the conversation?

SUBJECT 12

Four survivors around the table



PRESENTATION

The night of Pesach is leil shimurim, a night of watching. And the Rav concludes with the psalm proper to the festival, which calls on four people to give thanks: the prisoner, the shipwrecked, the sick, and the one still wandering in the desert.

THE QUESTION

Why, on Seder night, are we a little of all four survivors at once?

THE ANSWER

“It is a night of watching for the L-rd... for all the children of Israel, throughout their generations” (Shemot 12:42).

Leil shimurim: a vigil of guards. We are sentinels, says the Rav, and we remain the sentinels of humanity. The evening indeed has its movements of song, up to the Hallel.

The psalm names those who are bound to glorify the name of G-d: the one who was in prison and came out; the one who escaped shipwreck and crossed the seas; the one who was sick, in bed, in danger; and the fourth, the one who remained lost in the desert, who has not yet found his way.

On the night of the Haggadah, we are a little of all these people gathered together. We find there our unanimity, our heart in song — because at no moment can we consider ourselves lost for good.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

At no moment can we consider ourselves lost for good.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Prisoner, shipwrecked, sick, lost: each of us has been one of them at some point. Which of these states have we come out of, and which are we still living? For the one who has not yet found his way, what can we do before the festival ends?