

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PESACH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Pesach: Time Is Not Continuous”: what the ten plagues do to the
ten utterances of creation, to whom G-d spoke when there was no
one, why Shabbat has three prayers, and what we truly wish
someone when we say “until a hundred and twenty”. Down to the
Rav's decisive idea: every instant is a new creation.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Pesach table

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SUBJECT 01

The plagues, the reverse of the utterances



PRESENTATION

The world was created by ten utterances, and Egypt was struck by ten plagues. The Rav opens his lecture with this parallel — and with a question: what is so wondrous about these plagues?

THE QUESTION

What is “wondrous” about plagues that look like ordinary disasters — fouled water, vermin, epidemics?

THE ANSWER

The Rambam: on Pesach night, the miracles and wonders of Egypt are brought to the fore.

The ten plagues illustrate the manipulation of the utterances of creation, the way of emptying them of their purpose. They are plagues that attest to the malfunction of the rules of creation, of the laws of nature.

Water turned to blood, a swarm of lice, epidemics: taken one by one, these are events that are almost ordinary. What makes them wondrous is that they set in motion all the laws of the normal functioning of nature, together.

And there is, says the Rav, a close relationship between the last plague, that of the firstborn, and the first utterance of creation — the one that is not really an utterance.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The ten plagues of Egypt illustrate the manipulation of the utterances of creation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A word emptied of its purpose becomes a plague: a promise not kept, a self-serving compliment, a word said to wound. Which of our words this week was “emptied of its purpose”? And which one truly created something?

SUBJECT 02

To whom did He speak when there was no one?



PRESENTATION

The world was created by ten utterances. But when we count them, we find only nine: our sages complete the count by counting “Bereshit” as an utterance. Yet an utterance presupposes someone to whom one speaks.

THE QUESTION

How can “Bereshit” be an utterance if there is no one yet to hear it?

THE ANSWER

“Bereshit nami ma’amar hu” — Bereshit too is an utterance (Megillah 21b). Ani and ayin are written with the same letters.

If there is no one, I can speak only to myself. There is no relationship, no manifestation: it is always my ani, and this ani is an ayin, a nothingness — the letters of ani, “I am”, and of ayin, “there is nothing”, are the same.

It is in withdrawing my self that I can assert my self. I cannot assert it without first thinking that at a certain moment I did not exist. My own existence is like the creation of the world: from nothingness to being. One can never separate the ani from the ayin.

And yet Bereshit is indeed an utterance, because a leap into the world of creation took place there. That leap is the first point.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

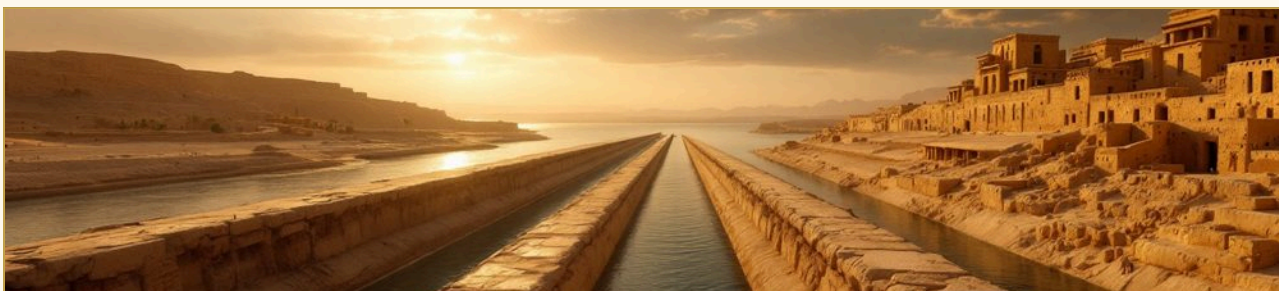
It is in withdrawing my self that I can assert my self.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Before every “I”, there was a time when we were not. Let each one tell of a moment when he had to keep silent, to step back a little, in order then to truly assert himself.

SUBJECT 03

Mitzrayim, the boundary of the sea



PRESENTATION

The Rav breaks Mitzrayim into metzar yam: the boundary of the sea. Why would Egypt be defined by a border set upon water?

THE QUESTION

What was Egypt refusing by trying to hold water within limits?

THE ANSWER

Mitzrayim: metzar yam, the boundary of the sea.

Water expresses the movement of the infinite. As long as it has no border, it tends to spread, to flood the world, the entire universe. But that world did not belong to Egypt's categories of thought: for Egypt, the world was limited, its forces had to be mastered, channeled.

That is where the first rupture took place between the ayin, the infinite, and the ani, the self and reality. Yet one cannot separate the ani from the ayin: evil was born of this separation.

Wisdom itself, science itself, discover the world through this subtraction of oneself from the reality of things. For the world is to be discovered, just as the presence of the Creator is to be discovered.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One cannot separate the ani from the ayin.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We like to channel everything, foresee everything, master everything. In what area of our lives have we shut the door on the unexpected? And what would happen if we let generosity, curiosity, time given “overflow” a little?

SUBJECT 04

The invisible point that holds everything



PRESENTATION

Every figure has its faces; one can look at it from all four sides, from above, from below. But what holds it together is not visible: it is its center of gravity. The Rav looks for this point in time.

THE QUESTION

What, in time, is the invisible point that holds the whole together?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit is written with the same letters as yarei Shabbat.

The reshit, the beginning, is that invisible point, that center of gravity that holds everything together. In space, the point is infinitely small; it is when it grows that it begins to trace the line, then the plane, then the volume. But at the beginning, there is this point.

In time, this point is Shabbat. It is invisible like the center of gravity, and it is what gives the rest its stability. The very letters of Bereshit say so: yarei Shabbat.

That is why the number seven keeps returning, with its starting point: the weight, the center of gravity of all existence, of all reality.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The center of gravity, what matters, is Shabbat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What holds a home together is not always visible. What is the “invisible point” of our week, the moment that holds it together? And if we have none, which one could we create together?

Three Shabbatot in one



PRESENTATION

The festivals share one and the same prayer. Shabbat, however, has three different ones: evening, morning, afternoon. The Rav sees in them three Shabbatot in one.

THE QUESTION

What does each of the three Shabbat prayers celebrate, and what is a “day that is entirely Shabbat”?

THE ANSWER

“Atah kidashta”, “Yismach Moshe”, “Atah echad ve-shimcha echad”; and “yom she-kulo Shabbat”.

In the evening, Atah kidashta celebrates creation: one who probes creation deeply discovers the Creator at the end of his quest. In the morning, Yismach Moshe celebrates another revelation: no longer through creation, but through the Exodus from Egypt, the prelude to the giving of the Torah. In the afternoon, Atah echad: You are One, Your name is One, Your people is one. This is no longer the origin: it is a projection toward the ultimate end.

That ultimate end is the day that is entirely Shabbat. Not one more rest: the day when the Shabbat of creation will have been integrated into the Shabbat of revelation, and the Shabbat of revelation into that of creation.

Then, says the Rav, if someone picks a fig from the tree, the fig itself will say: it is Shabbat. The world of creation will protest against the harm done to its own makeup.

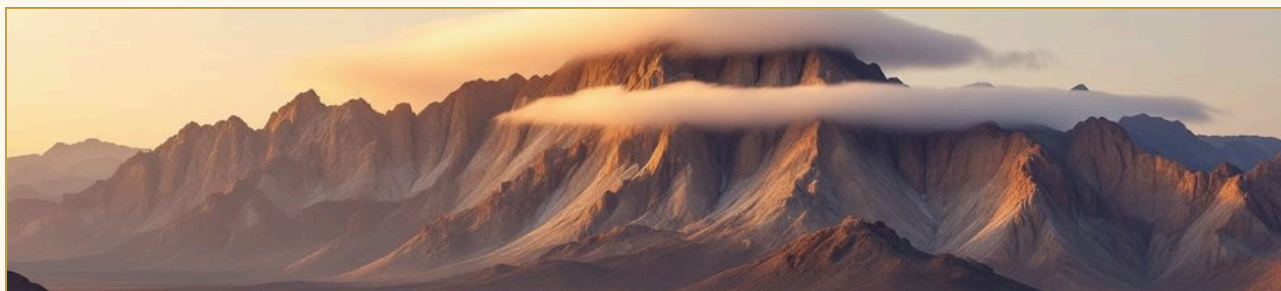
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When someone picks a fig from a tree, the fig will tell us: it is Shabbat.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Evening for creation, morning for the Torah, afternoon for unity: which of the three prayers do we live most, and which least? And what in the nature around us could remind us that there are limits to respect?

“I am” is not a commandment



PRESENTATION

We speak of the Ten Commandments. But the first, “I am the L-rd your G-d”, commands nothing. And in the middle of the story of the Exodus from Egypt, a chapter appears that seems off topic: “Sanctify to Me every firstborn.”

THE QUESTION

Why does everything begin with an “I am” that commands nothing — and why sanctify the firstborn at the moment of leaving Egypt?

THE ANSWER

“Anochi Hashem Elokecha”; “Kadesh li chol bechor” (Shemot 13:2).

At Sinai, the same phenomenon occurs as at creation: nine commandments, and one given. “I am the L-rd your G-d” is not a commandment: it is a given we must learn, without which there is nothing. I cannot speak of a commandment if there is no commander; otherwise I accept no hierarchy. Anochi precedes the nine commandments as Bereshit precedes the nine utterances.

Likewise, the chapter on the firstborn is no digression: the whole secret lies in the beginning. Either we have sanctified the starting point, or nothing holds. And the same parasha joins to it tefillin and the sanctification of the month: a perpetual beginning.

That is why firstborn sons fast on the eve of Pesach: the bechorah must be sanctified, and when one cannot do it through speech, one does it through the study of Torah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I cannot speak of a commandment if there is no commander.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family too, nothing holds if the starting point is not clear. What are the two or three “givens” of our home, the ones not up for debate because everything else flows from them? Have we ever told them to our children?

Time is not a continuous line



PRESENTATION

We live by making plans: tomorrow, next year, in three years. We believe in the continuity of things. Yet in Hebrew, the notion of continuous time does not exist.

THE QUESTION

If each instant is a creation of its own, what gives us the illusion that time flows without interruption?

THE ANSWER

“In His goodness He renews each day, continually, the work of creation” (morning prayer).

Just as a straight line is only an uninterrupted succession of points, time is an uninterrupted succession of moments. No moment is identical to another, and every moment is a creation. There is no continuous energy that sustains the world: it is renewed like the drop that feeds a lamp. It is never the same drop, and this gives us the impression of continuity.

This continuous movement of creation is in reality a series of discrete creations: nissim and nifla'ot, miracles and wonders. Every moment of life is in itself a wonder. Between the Exodus from Egypt and what follows, there is no continuous movement: there is a break.

That is why the festival is called Chag HaMatzot. What lies between a matzah and a loaf of bread? The time to let the dough rise, to give it another flavor, our own. For seven days, we must neutralize in our minds this time that distorts the original flavor, and not give our spiritual impulse the time to rationalize itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Every moment of life is in itself a wonder.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We put off important things to a moment that does not yet exist. If nothing guarantees continuity, what must be said or done this week, and not “someday”? Let each of us name one thing, and a date.

Amalek, the falsified beginning



PRESENTATION

“Amalek is the first of the nations,” says Bilam. The Rav reads this verse as the portrait of the one who falsifies the beginning — and from it he draws the meaning of the last plague of Egypt.

THE QUESTION

What happens when a manufactured starting point is substituted for the true beginning?

THE ANSWER

“Reshit goyim Amalek” (Bamidbar 24:20).

For lack of having pierced the mystery of the true beginning, one assumes another starting point: that is reshit goyim Amalek. And when the principle of the reshit is flouted, nothing remains, for its failure includes all the others.

Conversely, the first already contains the last: our sages said that when G-d revealed Himself to Moshe, He was already announcing the last plague to him. The plague of the firstborn is the collapse of all the premises of thought accepted in Egypt.

That is why, for this plague, neither Moshe nor Aharon intervenes. It is I who go forth, it is I who manifest Myself — and this manifestation alone is enough to defeat death. The Exodus from Egypt sets off a new beginning.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When the principle of the reshit is flouted, nothing remains.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have a “beginning” we tell to justify our choices: my childhood, my character, what was done to me. Which of these starting points is true, and which is manufactured? Let each one dare to question one.

SUBJECT 09

It is not the dead who are impure



PRESENTATION

We think that death is impurity. The Rav turns the idea around: the dead person is not impure. It is we, who approach him without knowing what death is, who are.

THE QUESTION

Where does impurity come from, if not from the dead person himself — and why does water purify?

THE ANSWER

Tumah, from atum: blocked. Mayim, a word that has no singular.

Tumah comes from the word atum, blocked. When we are blocked, when we have no answer to give, we are in a state of tumah. It is our lack of an answer in the face of death that makes us impure, not the dead person.

What opposes tumah is water, taharah: it purifies, replenishes, spreads blessing. It is life, and this life belongs to the infinite: it has no limits. That is why the word mayim has no singular.

Revelation is there, within reach: either one grasps it, or the phenomenon of death triumphs over everything man has built.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

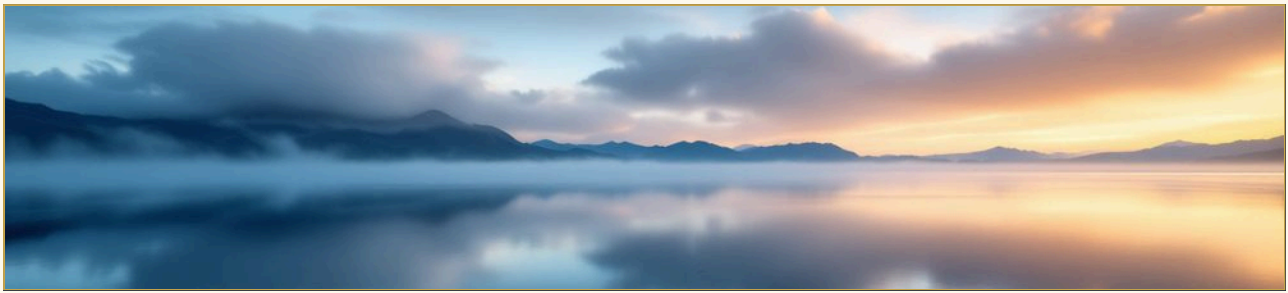
The dead person is not impure; but we, who are in contact with the dead and do not know what death is, are in a state of impurity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Faced with a bereavement, an illness, a failure, we often “block up”: we do not know what to say, so we say nothing. Which situation left us without an answer this year? What could have been said or done, even clumsily?

SUBJECT 10

The upper waters and the lower waters



PRESENTATION

The plagues begin with water turned to blood. The Rav recalls that at creation, what separates the upper waters from the lower waters is an utterance.

THE QUESTION

Why does the first plague strike the waters, and what does it say about Pharaoh?

THE ANSWER

Paro, from paru'a: unruly, obeying no rule any longer.

The lower waters are the heart, the whole system by which blood irrigates the body. The upper waters are the sechel, reason, the brain. We need two tefillin: a prayer for reason, a prayer for the heart. Can the two be separated? One who separates them has understood nothing of life: it is then falsified, distorted.

They must be balanced, and what creates the balance is the breath of the mouth, speech: the scale between reason and heart. The fouling of the waters attests to a closing off of speech.

Pharaoh maintained this separation. That is why, under him, the world departed from its original functioning: it became paru'a, unruly, obeying no rule any longer. When one has not understood this, one shuts oneself up in endless obstinacy.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

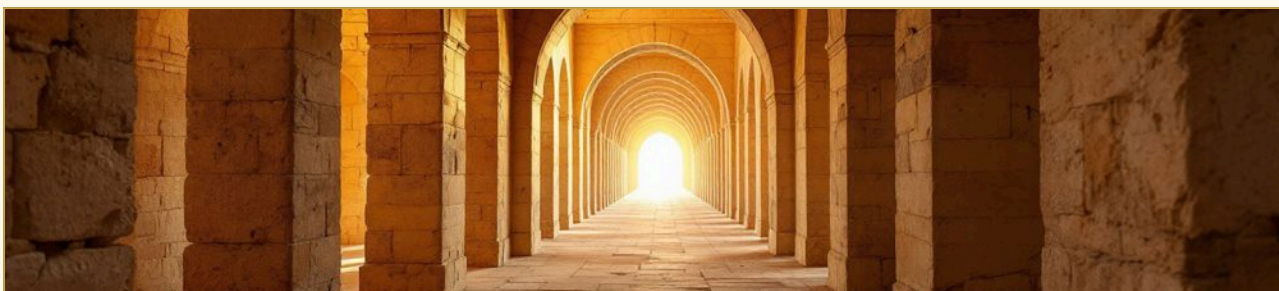
Speech is the scale between reason and heart.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some decide with the head, others with the heart. Which dominates in each of us? And when head and heart quarrel over a family decision, do we let speech make the connection, or do we decide in silence?

SUBJECT 11

Until a hundred and twenty



PRESENTATION

There are forty-nine gates of purity and forty-nine gates of impurity, and they almost touch. The Rav draws from this a surprising reading of a wish we make without thinking: “until a hundred and twenty”.

THE QUESTION

What are we truly wishing someone when we tell him “until a hundred and twenty”?

THE ANSWER

Seventy ways of approaching the Torah, fifty gates of understanding.

The whole art is to keep to the right path, since the gates of purity and those of impurity almost touch. To reach the fiftieth point without access is total collapse. Let us remember that Haman, a descendant of Amalek, who also regarded himself as a reshut, was hanged on a tree fifty cubits high.

But those who know how to grow in the right direction open the gates one after another, throughout their lives. To wish someone a hundred and twenty years is to wish him to integrate into his life the seventy approaches to the Torah through the fifty paths of access to understanding.

Moshe achieved it: he had discovered the seventy languages and reached the fiftieth degree. To this day no one knows where he is buried: his grave is in his Torah, in his way of life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

His grave no longer exists for us. It is in his Torah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The next time we wish someone “until a hundred and twenty”, let us think of what it contains. Which “gate” of understanding did we open this year? And which approach to the Torah, different from ours, could we discover?

SUBJECT 12

Knowing about is not knowing



PRESENTATION

At the end of the lecture, the Rav distinguishes two closely related words: *haskalah* and *sechel* — let us say instruction, and integrated knowledge. *Matzah*, he says, is the primary food of the second.

THE QUESTION

What is the difference between understanding a thing and truly knowing it?

THE ANSWER

“And the man knew Chavah his wife” (Bereshit 4:1).

Haskalah is the world of reasoning, of ratio. What I understand, I can study the way I studied mathematics — even the Talmud: it opens my mind, like science or biology.

Sechel, *da'at*, is something else: integrating what I learn, realizing it within myself. When the Torah says that Adam “knew” Chavah, it teaches that true knowledge lies in love, and that true love is the one that reveals us.

Matzah is the primary food of this kind of knowledge. It reminds us that life has its rhythm, that it proceeds by discrete movements.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

True knowledge lies in love, and true love is the one that reveals us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We know many things that we do not live. Which idea learned one day have we truly integrated, to the point that it changed the way we act? And which person have we come to know by loving them?