

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PESACH

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Pesach: The Four Questions of Ma Nishtana”: why these
questions are not meant only for children, what each of the four
exiles asks of us, what the true opposite of the wise man is, and
why we bless the bitter herb. Down to a baker's question: at what
exact moment does dough become chametz?



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 four questions are not only for children



PRESENTATION

We entrust the Ma Nishtana to the youngest, he sings it, and that is very good — provided, says the Rav, that the adults do not stop there. For these four questions open four paths of reading.

THE QUESTION

If the four questions correspond to four ages we all pass through, in which direction do we travel them?

THE ANSWER

Peshat, the literal sense; derash, allegory; remez, analogy; sod, the hidden meaning.

When we open ourselves to these four modes of thought, the four questions take on an entirely different look. They correspond to the four levels of interpretation, to the four types of children we have before us, but even more to the four ages we pass through over time.

We can travel them in the direction of positive growth. Or, unfortunately, in that of total rejection: one starts out as the wise son and ends up as the one who does not know how to ask. And that is a sad thing: it means the question was not thought through enough.

For in the root of the word shanah there is first to repeat, then to study, to sharpen, to change. As we come back to our text and deepen it, we become imbued with this teaching, and a change necessarily takes place.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is very good to encourage a child to sing the four questions, provided that the adults do not stop there.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which question from our childhood have we never asked again as adults? Let each adult take up one of the four questions tonight and say what it asks of him today, at his age.

One question, four answers



PRESENTATION

We usually read the Ma Nishtana as four questions. The Rav proposes reading it differently: a single question — how is this night different? — followed by four answers.

THE QUESTION

What does the child truly discover when the Seder plate is moved instead of the meal being served?

THE ANSWER

“Mah nishtanah ha-laylah ha-zeh mi-kol ha-leilot?” — How is this night different from all other nights?

We moved the plate to catch the attention of the child, who expected us to sit straight down to eat. He will wonder why we moved it, why we began reading a text, reciting, expounding on the meaning of the matzah.

And what he discovers is that we are, and always remain, in exile. We are in exile at every moment of life: let us not delude ourselves. The four inquiries are so many answers to the single question, and each one says in its own way where we stand.

The night is therefore different, not because it makes us forget the exile, but because it compels us to question it — and to draw a lesson from it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

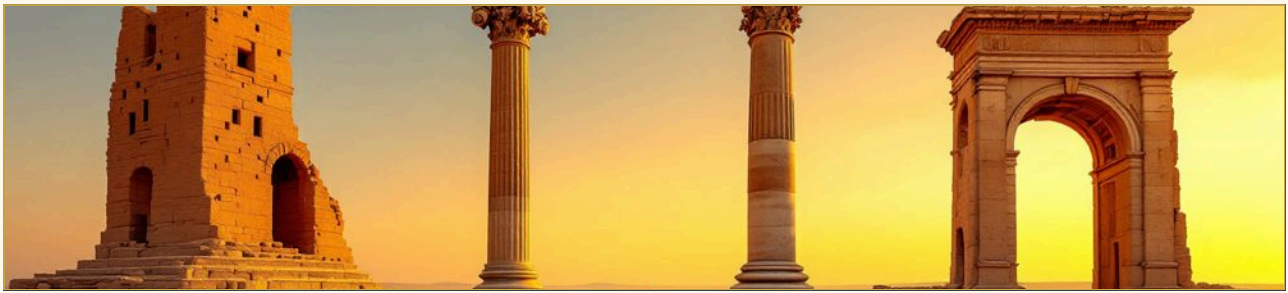
We are in exile at every moment of life. Let us not delude ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The moved plate interrupts a habit. Which habit in our home would have to be “moved” for a child finally to ask a real question? And which questions do our children no longer ask us?

SUBJECT 03

Bavel, Madai, Yavan, Edom: what each exile asks



PRESENTATION

According to the Rav, the four questions also concern the four exiles of being: Bavel, Madai, Yavan and Edom. Each poses a different question to the Jewish people, and one must know how to answer it.

THE QUESTION

What does each of the four exiles ask of us, and why is the last the most demanding?

THE ANSWER

“Know what to answer the epicurean” (Pirkei Avot 2:14).

Bavel questions the lesson one can draw from exile. Madai is *derech erez*: openness of mind to other cultures, other modes of thought, which we take in, provided we put in their place an answer drawn from the analogy we make with our own texts.

Yavan, Greece, is rationality: it obliges us to know how to answer the epicurean, pure logic. So be it.

But beyond that there is Edom, the equivalent of Rome. Edom claims to integrate all these cultures, openness to science, openness to logic, and to serve us the whole lot, so that with it one can consider oneself to have a truly vast general culture. We must answer all of that.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are bound to answer all of that.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Much of our general culture comes from the West. What have we learned from another culture that has enriched us? And which question of our time do we not yet know how to answer from our own sources?

The leprosy of self-satisfaction



PRESENTATION

That week, the parasha of tzara'at, usually translated as leprosy, was being read. From it the Rav draws the afflictions that lie in wait for the one who wants to answer the exiles: thinking oneself above others, dissolving into everything, believing everything to be crystal clear.

THE QUESTION

What excesses make a man “leprous” in the face of knowledge, and what does the kippah have to do with it?

THE ANSWER

“Se’et, o sappachat, o baheret” — a swelling, a scab or a bright spot (Vayikra 13:2).

Se’et, elevation: thinking oneself better than others, having nothing more to learn. Sappachat: knowing that one does not know everything, but opening oneself to any current at all, taking the secondary for the essential and becoming an appendage of some other knowledge. Baheret: believing that everything is crystal clear. Yet no knowledge comes without a shadow, however thin a film it may be.

Hence the head covering worn with humility: in place of the vault of heaven, I set a small vault on my head, which puts me in a state of listening. For transparency does not exist. The sky is blue only through the accumulation of transparent layers of air. White is the mixture of all colors in motion; at rest, the same mixture gives black. Hence the black-and-white or blue-and-white tallit: the dividing line between transparency, which belongs to the heavenly, and all the shades of thought.

And what awaits the one who sins in this way? The netek, the break: he is no longer connected, and he suffers.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

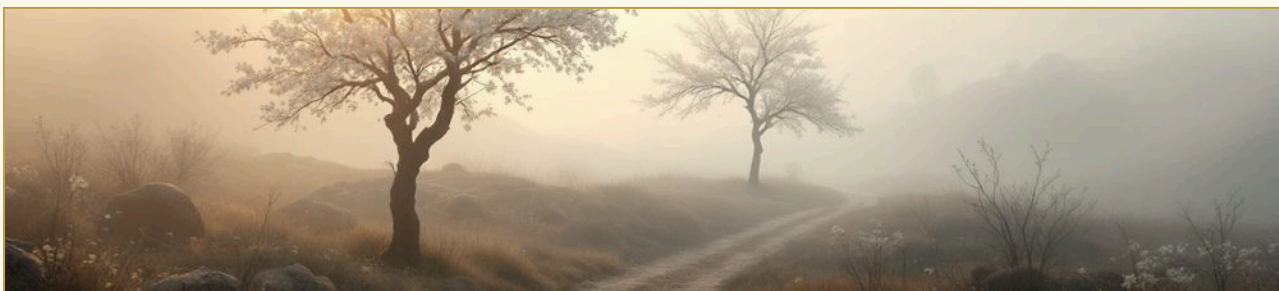
Transparency belongs to the heavenly; it is not at my level.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which of the three threatens us most: knowing everything better than others, adopting any passing fashion in ideas, or believing a question to be simple? Let each one give a recent example — in himself, not in others.

SUBJECT 05

Should we despair of exile?



PRESENTATION

Physical exile, when one is nonetheless happy where one lives; intellectual exile, when one no longer finds anyone to talk to; spiritual exile, when one loses one's bearings. When it all comes at once, says the Rav, we are in Egypt — and the longed-for spring does not shine as we would have wished.

THE QUESTION

If we remain conditioned on every side, should we sink into gloom — and what remains of our freedom?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “No — that is the main answer to all our questioning.”

Intellectual exile is being misunderstood: it happens in society, with children, in marriage. Spiritual exile is being disoriented, no longer finding one's bearings. All this disconnects us from reality and from our expectations.

Should we sink into despair? No. From the moment we have taken in that the transparency of being belongs to another world, my task is, day by day, to reduce the opacity around me, and to plant a future in the labor, in the effort I make. That is my freedom, my movement of liberation.

For we remain conditioned: by the day of our birth and the term of our life, by the society in which we move, by a knowledge too vast to be stored, by our feelings. But this conditioning is overcome through the Torah, through a spiritual ascent: that verticality of man who aspires to the heights.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This conditioning is overcome through the Torah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In what area do we feel misunderstood right now: at work, in our marriage, with our children? Rather than waiting for total clarity, what small part of the opacity could we reduce this week?

The true opposite of the wise man



PRESENTATION

In the Haggadah, the wise son is readily set against the rasha, the faithful against the protester. The Rav poses a riddle to his audience: what is the real opposite of the chacham?

THE QUESTION

Why does the Haggadah not give the fool a voice, when it gives one to the rasha?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: *“The opposite of chacham is tipesh.”*

The opposite of the wise man is not the rasha, the unbeliever. It is the tipesh, the fool. So why was it not written: “the fool, what does he say?” Because with the fool, there is no talking: dialogue is impossible.

The rasha is better than he is. He has a well-developed critical sense — so much so that one can turn things around and find him beside the wise man, in his service.

And we should not, the Rav adds, start drawing borders between these and those. Each one, at his own level, has his degrees of ascent, from the pampered child, king of the house, up to the high sphere where only a veil — what we call the keter, the crown — separates us from the absolute.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

With a fool, dialogue is impossible. The rasha is still better than he is.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Criticism, even harsh, is still a form of dialogue; indifference is not. Who in our home protests — and do we listen to him? And about what have we ourselves become so indifferent that we no longer ask anything?

We also bless the bitter herb



PRESENTATION

On Seder night, we recite a blessing over the matzah, and another over the maror. We bless the bread of freedom, fair enough; but we also bless the bitter herb.

THE QUESTION

Why make a blessing over bitterness — and at what point does the maror become dangerous?

THE ANSWER

Maror and mavet, death, have the same numerical value: 446.

We consider that the pains we take are worth a blessing. They carry a message, provided one knows how to draw out all its meaning, all its richness.

But sometimes we lack the tools, the inspiration, the intuition. Then we let ourselves be swept away, and maror becomes synonymous with mavet, death: the two words have the same numerical value.

Yet we are a people that does not die: that has been verified. We have passed through every crisis of humanity, we have lost some feathers along the way, it is true, but we are here — just as we were in our moments of glory, able to hear the word of G-d and to bring forth prophets from our ranks.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We have lost some feathers, it is true, but we are here.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which pain this year ended up carrying a message? And which one is still a meaningless bitterness? Let each one say what he would need — a tool, an idea, some help — to turn his maror into a blessing.

Eating bread, giving back a world



PRESENTATION

The only commandment given to Adam concerned neither prayer nor morality: it concerned food. And the only blessing the Torah itself requires, Birkat HaMazon, applies only to a meal with bread.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah link the life of the spirit so closely to what we eat?

THE ANSWER

“You shall eat and be satisfied, and you shall bless the L-rd your G-d” (Devarim 8:10).

Being fruitful and multiplying is a blessing; but the command given to Adam concerns eating fruit: of every tree of the garden you may eat, except the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Is that the first commandment we would have expected from the Creator? Not the first, says the Rav: the only one. And our sages say that a child begins to speak only after having tasted wheat.

One who eats bread integrates the elements that presided over the formation of the universe: the earth produced the plant, the plant fed the animal, the animal fed man, and man gives all this back through his spirit to the absolute source of creation. It is the giving back of a world, of an enriched microcosm.

That is why the wise son's question concerns the matzah: it releases the energy of matter, not for our lowest instincts, but to raise it to its original creation. For every bread we prepare is first of all a matzah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the giving back of a world, of an enriched microcosm, that man carries within him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our table, says the Rav, is worthy of blessing, like an altar. What in our ordinary meals resembles a giving back, and what is mere consumption? What could we change at the next Shabbat meal?

SUBJECT 09

Wheat, fig, vine, etrog



PRESENTATION

Which fruit did Adam eat? Our sages proposed several answers: wheat, the fig, the grape, the etrog. For the Rav, these are not a botanist's hypotheses, but four ways of falling.

THE QUESTION

What does each of the four fruits say about Adam's sin — and about ours?

THE ANSWER

The opinions of our sages on the tree of knowledge: wheat, the fig, the vine, the etrog.

For some, it was wheat, which was still a tree at the time and was reduced to a plant after the sin. For others, Adam gave in to the temptation of the sweet fruit of the fig, the te'elah: a way of asserting oneself — and we, unfortunately, relish what is forbidden.

For others again, it was the vine: intoxication, which makes one lose one's mind and awareness, but which also opens a door to repentance. And others finally say: the etrog, the citron, considered a perfect fruit. Adam fell into the trap of that perfection he attributed to himself, which made him a creator equal to G-d.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He fell into the trap of that perfection he attributed to himself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The sweetness of the forbidden, the intoxication that makes us forget, the perfection that makes us judges of everything: which of these temptations is strongest at our age? Let each generation around the table answer for itself.

SUBJECT 10

The serpent on the brow of kings



PRESENTATION

The kings of Egypt wore on their brow, on their crown, the head of a serpent: for them, the symbol of knowledge. The Rav links this image to the serpent of the Garden of Eden — and to tefillin.

THE QUESTION

Who really is the serpent that speaks to Adam, and what has the Torah put in its place?

THE ANSWER

“The serpent was more cunning than all the beasts of the field” (Bereshit 3:1).

The nachash that speaks to Adam is none other than man. It is not an animal rising up before him from outside: the most cunning, the most learned, the wisest, is man. He carries this nachash within him — and with it the gift of going forward, intuition, imagination.

The Egyptians wore the serpent on their brow. The Torah replaced it with parchments: the proclamation of the unity of G-d, the sanctification of every firstborn, the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, the necessity of redemption. Four elements, worn on the head.

And it is said that the first leper was the serpent, that is, man at the moment of his sin. For leprosy is not an internal disease: it attacks only the skin, the envelope. It strikes when man steps out of his envelope and ceases to regard it as a limit.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

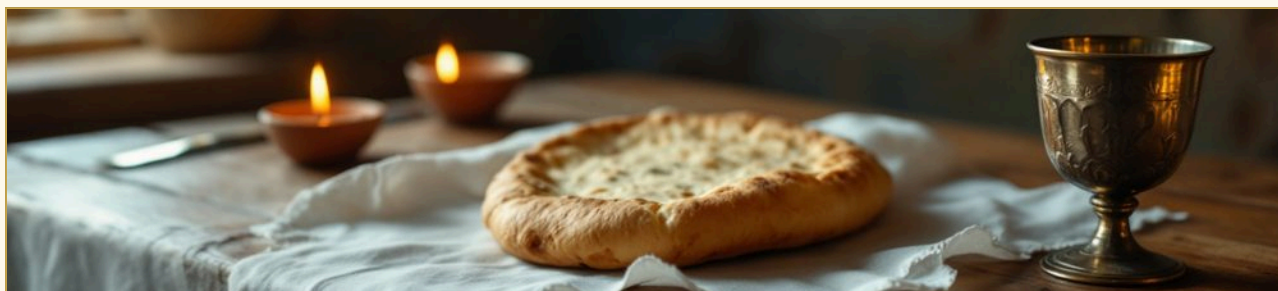
This serpent is man.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Intelligence can crown cunning or crown unity. What do we have “on our brow”, that is, in mind, when we make our decisions? And which limit in our lives are we tempted to stop respecting?

SUBJECT 11

The wise son's question and the taste of the afikoman



PRESENTATION

The wise son asks: “What are the testimonies, the statutes and the laws that the L-rd our G-d has commanded you?” And he is given a surprising rule in answer: after the paschal lamb, one does not finish with dessert.

THE QUESTION

Why answer a question about the meaning of the laws with a rule about the end of the meal?

THE ANSWER

“Mah ha-edot ve-ha-chukim ve-ha-mishpatim” (Devarim 6:20); “One does not conclude after the Pesach offering with afikoman” (Mishnah Pesachim 10:8).

These laws, which at first seem to us chukim, decrees, and are taught as such, are in reality edot: witnesses, beacons, signs that attest to the word we exchanged with the Creator and that is held in trust by us. We do not shield them from all logic: they become mishpat, law and jurisprudence that can be discussed, since there are seventy ways of approaching the Torah.

And the answer: one does not conclude with afikoman. Once the paschal lamb has been stripped of its idolatrous side, of its materiality, made into a sign bearing witness to our freedom and restored to its essence, there are no more provisions, no more sweetness. One does not go beyond that: it is finished.

It is the savor of the act accomplished that must remain: our liberation through the law.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is the savor of this act we accomplished on the festival of Pesach that must remain.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are moments whose taste we spoil by moving on too quickly. After which powerful moment this year should we have “added nothing”? And which law that we found absurd has become a witness for us?

SUBJECT 12

Chametz is born of idleness



PRESENTATION

The Rav ends his lecture with the first of the four questions: on this night, everything is matzah. And he poses a baker's question: at what exact moment does dough become chametz?

THE QUESTION

If dough does not rise as long as it is kneaded, what is chametz truly a sign of?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Chametz arises in the idleness of being.”

As long as we keep kneading the dough, there is no chametz. Chametz comes in when we have stopped kneading, when we have left the dough to rest. It arises in the idleness of being: when one is bored, when one finds nothing to do.

Yet this chametz has a flavor: it is what gives bread its taste. And on Shavuot, leavened bread is precisely what is brought. But to bring leavened bread, one must first have gone through matzah: one must work on oneself constantly, so as not to get bogged down in problems of every kind.

We have been given Shabbat and the festivals, on which we rest. It is precisely at those moments that we can check where our chametz stands.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

One must work on oneself constantly so as not to get bogged down.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is not effort that damages us, but what we leave to sit too long. What have we stopped “kneading” — a friendship, a course of study, a conversation? What could we set in motion again during the festival days?