

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

# PESACH

*12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table*

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Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture  
“Pesach: Where Should the Haggadah Begin?”: slavery or  
idolatry, where Adam's sin begins, why G-d cast truth to the  
ground, what it means to be gerim at the source. Down to the  
Rav's conclusion: shirah is when speech becomes song and carries  
all of humanity with it.



*Rav Raphaël Benizri*

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*Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Pesach table*

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## SUBJECT 01

### With which beginning should we begin?

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#### PRESENTATION

On Seder night, two openings were possible. One could begin with “we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt”, or with “in the beginning our ancestors were idol worshippers”. A choice had to be made.

#### THE QUESTION

*Why open with the slavery we endured rather than with our fathers' idolatry — and do the two not say, at bottom, the same thing?*

#### THE ANSWER

**“Avadim hayinu le-Pharo be-Mitzrayim” and “Mi-techilah ovdei avodah zarah hayu avoteinu”.**

We opted for “we were slaves in Egypt”, and left “in the beginning our ancestors were idol worshippers” in second place. We sought nothing, asked for nothing: it was decided independently of us; we were thrown into Egypt. And rightly so: every time we agree to live in any kind of dependence, we are idol worshippers.

Egypt, following the Arizal, is the source of all impurities and all exiles. To leave it is to leave all self-conditioning — which is possible only if one believes that all creation is yesh me-ayin, being drawn from nothingness. To conceive, on the contrary, that this world would not exist without me, that my self is indispensable to it — that is truly idolatry: “I make myself”. One does not make oneself; that is absurd.

So our sages preferred to identify the people not by its abandonment of idolatry, but by its abandonment of fixed ideas, of the world we conceive for ourselves and by ourselves. That is the starting point of all idolatry.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Every time we agree to live in any kind of dependence, we are idol worshippers.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have a fixed idea about someone in this family, and it sometimes dates back twenty years. Which one? And if we agreed tonight to suspend it, what would we see that we no longer see?

## Sin begins in the gaze

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### PRESENTATION

What was Adam's sin? The usual answer: eating the forbidden fruit. For the Rambam, cited by the Rav, it begins earlier — at the moment the woman looks at the fruit.

### THE QUESTION

*If sin is first of all a way of looking, what does it change in our idea of good and evil?*

### THE ANSWER

***“The woman saw that the tree was good for food and a delight to the eyes” (Bereshit 3:6).***

Adam's sin is not only that he reduced knowledge to a consumer product. For Maimonides, it begins in the gaze the woman casts on the fruit of the tree, when she lets herself be seduced by its outward appearance, thinking that it was truly good to eat it. Sin lies in the conception of the world we have before us.

That is why the Rambam, when he speaks of the good and evil inclinations, speaks neither of impulse nor of tendency: he speaks of conception. Conceiving the good, or conceiving the evil.

Either we seek the truth in its essence and try to integrate it, or we judge all that is good from a single glance. The Rav returns to this later: *vater ha-ishah*, the woman saw — and one begins to judge everything from that single glance.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Sin lies in the conception of the world we have before us.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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We judge a person, an idea, a choice very quickly by appearance. Which judgment this year, based on a first glance, turned out to be wrong? And on whom should we cast a second glance tonight?

## Sown outside the garden



### PRESENTATION

Why did man not remain in the Garden of Eden, where he had everything? The Rav answers with a paradox: a garden where everything is given would be a hell.

### THE QUESTION

*Why would receiving everything have turned Gan Eden into Gehinnom?*

### THE ANSWER

***The Rav: “Man had to be sown outside the Garden of Eden.”***

To put everything into his hands, to make sure he could not decide for himself, would have been to turn his Gan Eden into Gehinnom. What would his merit be, what would he have to do? He would be excluded from the phenomenon of creation, and would no longer be in the image of G-d.

To be in the image of G-d is to take on His attributes. The Torah shows the Creator Himself sewing man's garments to cover his nakedness, visiting the sick — Avraham Avinu — burying Moshe Rabbeinu Himself. G-d wanted man too to dispense good, to visit the sick, to take care of the dead.

But resembling is an identity, and that is not enough. One must also take part in sustaining creation — not as a conservative who leaves the world as it is, but by creating it as G-d creates it: by discovering it, by revealing its nature.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Taking part in sustaining the creation of the world does not mean being a conservative.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Children who are given everything no longer choose anything. In our home, what do we truly let the youngest decide? And which act of G-d — clothing, visiting, accompanying — could we practice together this month?

## He cast truth to the ground



### PRESENTATION

Before man is created, the attributes argue. Truth opposes it: this being will be a liar, he will do harm, he will feed quarrels. Others defend him: he is capable of rising, of giving life. Then, says the midrash, He cast truth to the ground.

### THE QUESTION

*Why set truth aside in order to create man — and are the angels who protest not right?*

### THE ANSWER

***“He cast truth to the ground”; “Truth shall spring up from the earth” (Bereshit Rabbah 8:5).***

The ministering angels are indignant: how dare You cast truth to the ground, the royal seal of Your creation, of Your empire? And the answer is: from now on, I want truth to spring up from the soil. I do not want the world to be governed by an exclusively divine truth, out of man's reach. I want man himself to take part in the revelation.

For to cast truth to the ground is not to throw it away: it is to sow it. To sow it in the universe of creation and tell man: now bring it to light, discover it, teach it, share it. And just as the farmer scatters to the winds a tiny part of what he will harvest, what the Jewish people is called to sow must be accompanied by an enormous harvest.

The Torah itself was not given entirely from above: man discovered part of it, like the book of Devarim, the Mishneh Torah, countersigned and integrated. That is how he becomes a partner in the covenant.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*To cast truth to the ground is not to throw it away: it is to sow it.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We have been entrusted with a sown truth, not a delivered one. What have we truly searched for this year, rather than received ready-made? And to whom at this table do we leave too little room to search for himself?

## Avraham, the first ger



### PRESENTATION

“You are called Adam,” our sages say to the Jewish people: the prototype of man. Are the others not? They are, answers the Rav, to varying degrees — and he recalls where we ourselves come from.

### THE QUESTION

*What does it mean that we are gerim “at the source”?*

### THE ANSWER

**“Atem keruyim adam” — You are called Adam.**

There is a wide range of Jewish identities, some more demanding than others. But the essential thing is that this identity encompasses all of humanity. We are gerim at the source: Avraham is the first ger.

And a ger creates himself. He is not the continuation of a development: he is someone who broke with what he was and gave himself a new life. That is what we are, originally, in our essence. In Egypt too, we were an integral part of the country, having kept only a few rules of life from our ancestors; G-d tore us out of its depths: a new creation.

If it was later established that Jewish identity is transmitted through the mother, it is because a mode of functioning had to be adopted. But to one who wishes to take upon himself this creation of being in the image of the Creator, the doors are open, provided he is sincere in his approach.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*A ger is not the continuation of some development: he is someone who broke with what he was and gave himself a new life.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has known a moment when he had to choose anew what he had received. What was that moment? And how do we welcome those who chose Judaism without receiving it at birth?

## Exiled in order to sow

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### PRESENTATION

Why was the Jewish people scattered among the nations? The Rav takes up an answer of our sages and links it to the title given to Avraham: Av hamon goyim, the father of a multitude of nations.

### THE QUESTION

*What is the role of the Jewish people among the nations, and why will the doors of conversion one day close?*

### THE ANSWER

***“I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Bereshit 17:5).***

We remain, like Avraham Avinu, the father of universality. The Jewish people has no right to shut itself up in any structure, except to protect itself from its own weaknesses: its duty is to sow the truth. The L-rd exiled it among the nations only to increase the number of gerim. There is a potential there that must be discovered.

This is important, for in messianic times the doors of conversion will be closed. Why? Because then people would come only out of self-interest — as one sometimes sees today: a copied, aped Judaism, not lived from within but conditioned by an outside gaze.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Its duty is to sow the truth.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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What we live from within shows, and so does what we act out. What in our practice is truly lived, and what is done for others to see? Let each one answer for himself.

## From the narrow place I called Yah

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### PRESENTATION

“Min ha-metzar karati Yah”: from the narrow place I called Yah. The name used is not the full Name, but only two letters. The Rav reads in it a way of signing one's own Exodus from Egypt.

### THE QUESTION

*What do these two letters of the Name say, and why recall the Exodus from Egypt every day?*

### THE ANSWER

**“Min ha-metzar karati Yah” (Tehillim 118:5).**

The hei is in the breath of the present, and the yud in the projection of the future. One who calls Yah from the depths of his distress has inscribed the present in the future. In so doing, he has signed his Exodus from Egypt, that is, his own creation in the image of his Creator.

This idea is very important, for the point is not to celebrate the Exodus from Egypt once a year: we recall it morning and evening in prayer. The Exodus from Egypt is our point of reference; it is in the Shema Yisrael.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

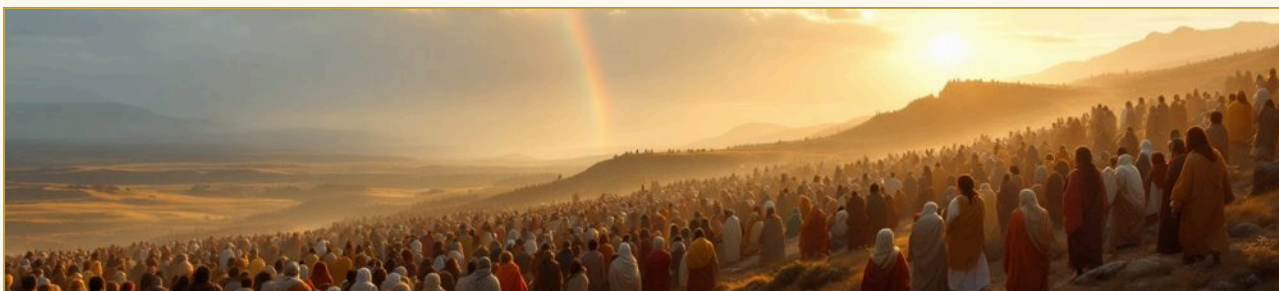
*I have inscribed the present in the future, and in so doing, I have signed my Exodus from Egypt.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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In a difficult period, it is tempting to live from day to day. Which plan for the future helped us through a narrow place this year? And which one could we inscribe right now, together, in our present?

## A clear language for all peoples



### PRESENTATION

The Shema proclaims the unity of G-d. And the prophet Tzefaniah announces that one day the peoples will receive “a clear language” with which to call upon Him. The Rav spells out what it contains.

### THE QUESTION

*Must all of humanity practice the whole Torah in order to acknowledge the unity of G-d?*

### THE ANSWER

**“Then I will give the peoples a clear language, that they may all call upon the name of the L-rd” (Tzefaniah 3:9).**

The project of the Shema Yisrael is this limpid, clear language that affirms the unity of G-d. Yet affirming the unity of G-d does not necessarily mean practicing the whole Torah in its smallest details. Some can do so; others will be content with the Noahide laws.

In messianic times, humanity will adopt the seven Noahide laws as rules of conduct — but on the basis of acknowledging G-d and the fact that these laws emanate from Him.

For there is always a tension between physical reality and spiritual reality. In the one, we belong to the reality of the angels; in the other, we are evolved animals endowed with speech.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Affirming the unity of G-d does not necessarily mean practicing the whole Torah in its smallest details.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know upright and generous non-Jews. What do we know of the seven laws of the children of Noach? And how can we speak to a non-Jewish friend about the unity of G-d without asking him to be what he is not?

## The ant's instinct



### PRESENTATION

“Had the Torah not been given,” say our sages, “we would have learned from the ant not to steal.” The Rav pauses on this small creature: he sees in it the model of an instinct the Mashiach will possess.

### THE QUESTION

*How will the Mashiach recognize the truth — and what does the ant teach us about “you shall not covet”?*

### THE ANSWER

**Eruvin 100b; “Lo tachmod” — You shall not covet.**

There is a language of birds, a language of animals, and there is an instinct that will be the hallmark of the Mashiach. How will he discern the truth? He will sense it, as the ant senses the grain of wheat.

If her neighbor has already taken that grain, the ant will not touch it; she will not try to seize it; she will turn away from it. She has this instinct not to steal, not to covet what belongs to the other. And man observes these rules of nature, discovers them, lays them bare, integrates them.

When one knows that “lo tachmod” is its extreme point — not its opposite, its extreme point — one realizes that what I must realize is myself. What I must discover is my own person.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*What I must realize is myself. What I must discover is my own person.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Coveting often begins with a comparison. What did we envy in someone else this year? And what does that envy teach us about what we ourselves have to realize?

## SUBJECT 10

### “Thus says the L-rd”



#### PRESENTATION

What links the material world to the spiritual world? The Rav answers in a word: speech, nothing else. And he notes that the prophets never report exactly what the L-rd said.

#### THE QUESTION

*If speech is the only bridge between the two worlds, why does each prophet report it in his own way?*

#### THE ANSWER

**“By the word of the L-rd the heavens were made” (Tehillim 33:6).**

By speech the world was created, and speech can accomplish everything. Our sages point out that all the prophets prophesied with “Koh amar Hashem”, thus says the L-rd: they do not report exactly what the L-rd said, but its content, each in his own style, with different nuances.

Why? Because it is difficult to reach that higher truth, “Zeh ha-davar”, where the object is one with the word. That is not at our level; let speech at least reproduce something resembling it.

The prophets chose to cleave to His word, and this choice to cleave is malchut, kingship: man is king only through his speech. Moshe held this power to the highest degree: the Divine Presence spoke from his throat.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Man is king only through his speech, through what he expresses by means of his person.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all report other people's words “in our own way”. When did we distort, without meaning to, what someone had said? And which word in our family became a true “kingship” because it was kept?

## SUBJECT 11

### A kingdom of kohanim

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#### PRESENTATION

Kohen, says the Rav, comes from karov, closeness. And all Israel is called “a kingdom of kohanim”. But what does it bring close, and to what?

#### THE QUESTION

*What does it mean for an entire people to be “a kingdom of kohanim”?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“You shall be to Me a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation” (Shemot 19:6).***

The kohen is the educator of the people, the one who brings the material world and the spiritual world closer together. That is the meaning of the korban: korban is to bring close; keshet is to bind. The kohen binds this lower world to the upper world, creation to its source of emanation. That is what makes him a kohen: he has this ability to do it.

And the people of Israel, in relation to the nations, is also a kingdom of kohanim: we are bound to bring all the elements close, back to their source.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*We are bound to bring all the elements close, back to their source.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To be a kohen is to bring close. Whom did we bring closer this year — to his family, to his tradition, to a friend? And which moment of our daily life, work, meals, leisure, could we connect a little more to its source?

## SUBJECT 12

### The goal is not to convert

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#### PRESENTATION

The Rav ends his lecture with a question of method: how should we speak to those who do not share all our demands? His answer comes down to two gestures: adapting our language — and, if need be, singing.

#### THE QUESTION

*How can we remain faithful to our message without demanding that everyone adopt it entirely?*

#### THE ANSWER

***The Rav: “The goal is not to convert at any cost.”***

The secret of the Exodus from Egypt lies in speech, in the word in motion: rediscovering the true resonance of speech and making it resound on several levels. Just as there are several registers and their variants, we must adapt our language to the level of the one who is listening.

There will be gerim, like a newborn child, who will be able to claim Avraham as their father. But not all will perhaps be able to embrace this language. Let them at least be in unison with the Jewish people in proclaiming the unity of G-d.

That is why, at the Seder, we begin by setting things in order: in ourselves, in our ideas, in the dialogue with wife, children, friends, the poor. And let those who do not have the potential to meet our demands at least accompany us in song: song fuses all words into one.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Shirah is when speech becomes song: then it carries all of humanity along in its momentum.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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At our table, not everyone has the same level of practice or knowledge. How can we make sure no one feels judged? Let us choose together a song everyone can sing — and sing it before the meal ends.