

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PURIM

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Purim: The Festival Born in Exile”: a festival without a revealed
miracle, a king who does not bear the title, a queen deposed for
refusing to appear, and an orphan with neither father nor mother
whom Mordechai makes into his home.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

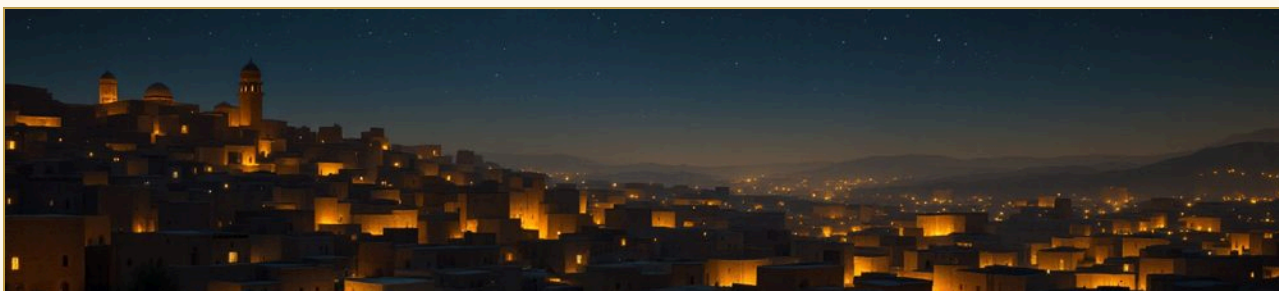
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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Purim table

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SUBJECT 01

A Festival Without a Revealed Miracle



PRESENTATION

Purim is the only festival whose founding event took place outside the borders of Israel. No great miracle, no voice from heaven: everything happens in the most natural way. And it is this story, says the Rav, that prepared the building of the Second Temple.

THE QUESTION

Why can the divine presence not reveal itself in exile as it would on its own land?

THE ANSWER

Esther, from the verb satar: to hide.

Everything takes place in an absence of divine revelation: G-d withdraws from view, there is no great revealed miracle. That is one of the first meanings of the name Esther. Everything unfolds in the most natural way, and it is a hidden hand that orchestrates the events.

In exile, the divine presence too is scattered and hidden within the communities of Israel. It cannot reveal itself dazzlingly as in Eretz Israel, which is its makom, its preferred place. The story of Esther is that of many Jewish communities in exile, and it prepares the future redemption.

The Rav places the story under Persian rule, in the fourth century before the common era, in the setting of the first exile. Chanukah, the last festival instituted by our sages, takes place in the time of the Second Temple; Purim, however, was born in exile.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is a hidden hand that does, in fact, orchestrate all the events.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The turning points of our lives rarely announce themselves with fanfare; they come through ordinary encounters, through chance. Let each one tell of a personal “Purim”: a quiet deliverance, with no visible miracle. What, looking back, revealed a hidden hand in it?

SUBJECT 02

A Wall That Oppresses and Protects



PRESENTATION

Exile, says the Rav, is a loss of identity. It encourages emancipation and assimilation, and there is a price to pay. The Rav then makes a statement that is hard to hear about the role of the hatred that surrounds the Jewish people in exile.

THE QUESTION

How can a wall that oppresses also protect?

THE ANSWER

Megillah: a scroll that is unrolled like an open letter to all the communities of Israel.

The cultures of the nations are attractive in some of their aspects, and the Jewish people absorbs them. Whether we like it or not, in exile antisemitism forms a wall around Jewish identity. As long as the Jewish people has not recovered the sound foundations of its existence, this wall both oppresses it and protects it.

It protects it because it contributes to the awakening of its identity and to halting this loss of substance through the various cultures. The Megillah shows it: beneath a happy assimilation a Haman rises up, and it is then that Jewish identity awakens.

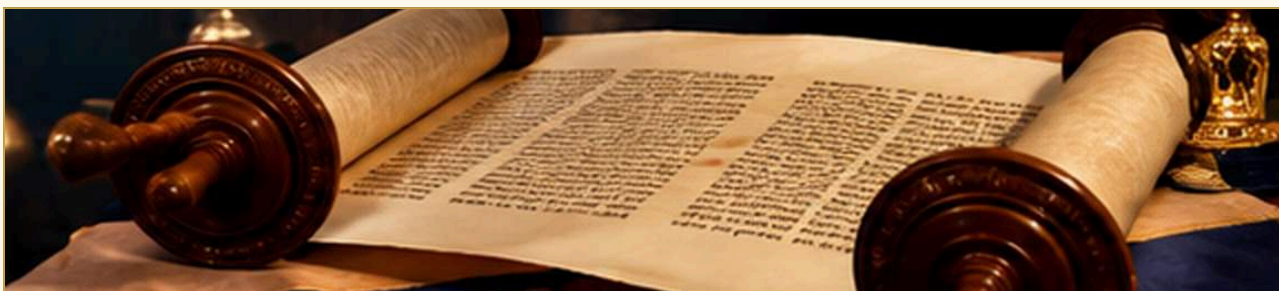
That is why the Megillah is unrolled as it is read, as one would read an open letter addressed to all the communities of Israel, to warn them of the seeds of antisemitism that can threaten their existence.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often recognize our identity when someone challenges it. What in our lives has “awakened” us to who we are: a wounding remark, an exclusion, a trial? How can we keep this awareness without needing an adversary?

SUBJECT 03

The Scroll Does Not Bear Mordechai's Name



PRESENTATION

Mordechai is the hero of the story: he uncovers the plot, alerts the people, stands up to Haman. Yet the book bears only Esther's seal. For the Rav, this is no detail: since the beginning of Jewish history, resistance starts with a woman.

THE QUESTION

Why does every great deliverance of Israel begin through the feminine?

THE ANSWER

“Whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her voice” (Bereshit 21:12).

The role of the feminine begins at the very origin of Avraham's journey: G-d tells him to listen to everything Sarah tells him. The liberation from Egypt is set in motion by the resistance of the midwives, and Miriam is a resistance fighter in her own way. Here too, resistance is set in motion by the feminine.

This scroll is not called Megillat Mordechai. Mordechai is a hero of the story, but the Megillah will bear only Esther's seal, because the completion of every fulfilled cycle is closed by Malchut, kingship, the attribute of the feminine.

Even in the tree of the sefirot, when one reviews the different attributes, one comes to the ninth, at the limit of what can be manifested. To close the loop of this chain, the feminine element is needed: it is what forms the link between the different stages of the chain.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, who “set in motion” the great turning points — a departure, an aliyah, a return to tradition, a reconciliation? Has that person's name remained attached to the story we tell? What would need to be said tonight for it to be?

“And It Came to Pass in the Days of Achashverosh”



PRESENTATION

The first verse of the Megillah holds a detail: Achashverosh does not bear the title of king there, though he bears it everywhere else. And the book opens with “vayehi”, a formula our sages read as the announcement of a time of distress.

THE QUESTION

What does the first verse teach us about the man who rules the empire — and why should this era worry us?

THE ANSWER

“And it came to pass in the days of Achashverosh — this is Achashverosh who reigned from India to Kush” (Esther 1:1).

Is Achashverosh truly an heir to the kingdom, or someone who seized power? Everything points to his not belonging to the dynasty of Nevuchadnetzar. Indeed, the first verse does not give him the title *hamelech*, the king, whereas in all the rest of the Megillah he bears it.

Our sages say that whenever we read *vayehi*, it is a time of distress, and a time that will repeat itself throughout history: it has not finished its course. And a past that repeats itself is a catastrophe. Like the new king of Egypt who did not know Yosef, Achashverosh holds no particular respect for the Jewish people.

On the contrary: he would like the Jewish people not to stand apart through its way of life, and to fall in with this attempt to make cultures uniform under the label of the universal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A power unsure of itself often seeks to erase differences in order to make itself legitimate. Where, around us, are we asked to “fall in line” at the cost of who we are? And where, on the contrary, is openness a true richness?

A Hundred and Eighty Days of Festivity



PRESENTATION

After three years of reign, Achashverosh organizes a hundred and eighty days of festivities. Concessions, citizens' rights granted to minorities: the Jewish communities take part in the national celebrations as full citizens. Yet our sages see in it the origin of Haman's threat.

THE QUESTION

Where was the limit that the Jews of the empire failed to keep?

THE ANSWER

“For many days, a hundred and eighty days” (Esther 1:4).

Achashverosh pursues a policy of openness, of rapprochement. He wants to display the economic measures taken for the benefit of all and the laws granted to all the nations. The Jewish communities, which now regard themselves as citizens of this empire, take part in the celebrations: for them, it was a way of showing that they did not keep themselves walled off.

When our sages look for what caused a Haman to rise up, they answer: assimilation had not kept its limits; a secularizing movement was spreading throughout the country. They express it this way: all the plunder of the Temple vessels was used to serve the guests during the feast, to show that there was no holiness in these objects and that one must give up any thought of ever returning to them.

For our sages, Achashverosh was even very cunning: he imposed nothing, neither on the food nor on the wines. But what follows is the awakening of Jewish identity through the rise of a Haman.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Taking part in the life of society is a good thing — but certain objects, certain moments, certain words do not lend themselves to everything. What, in our home, is “Temple vessels”: something we would refuse to make commonplace, even to please others?

The Queen Deposed for Refusing to Appear



PRESENTATION

The king orders Vashti to appear before his assembled ministers so that they may see her beauty. She refuses. She is deposed on the spot — she who, as Nevuchadnetzar's niece, was the very one who legitimized her husband's throne.

THE QUESTION

The story opens with a woman punished for refusing to be looked at. What does this first chapter, in which the Jewish people does not yet appear, tell us?

THE ANSWER

“To show the peoples and the princes her beauty” (Esther 1:11).

Achashverosh uses Vashti to ensure the continuity of the dynasty, but he does not recognize her place: he has her called in to show that what counts in her is first of all her beauty, and that the rest is secondary. It is an assault on the personality of the feminine. To her credit, she resisted, even displaying contempt for this man who had previously been nothing but the keeper of her father's stables.

A search then begins for a new queen: a contest open to all the nations, in which each culture presents its assets. Today, this takes the form of the “Miss” this or that country — and it is always the feminine, never the masculine. The more highly the feminine is regarded in a culture, the more it commands respect; where there is contempt, it is already a primitive conception of society. And the empire falls into the opposite excess: man must remain the norm. The Megillah denounces this failing.

Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi warns: do not yield to the temptation of the beauty that other cultures display without looking at what lies within.

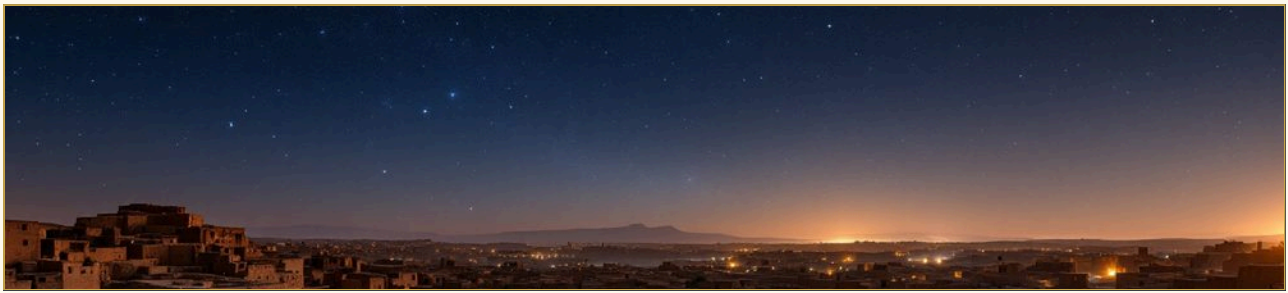
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What makes the strength of a culture is the place the feminine holds within that culture.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The king wanted his wife to be looked at; she preferred to lose everything. By what do we measure, at home, the real place of the women of the house — by what is said of them, or by what they are allowed to become? What would change if we measured it honestly?

Not a Single Jewish Name in the Story



PRESENTATION

Esther, Mordechai: looked at closely, these are names borrowed from the culture of the country. Esther evokes the star; Mordechai recalls Marduk, a deity of the time. In the whole story, not one Jewish name appears.

THE QUESTION

What does it say about these Jews that they bear the names of foreign deities — and what did they keep in spite of everything?

THE ANSWER

“He was raising Hadassah, that is, Esther” (Esther 2:7).

There is no Jewish name in this story: we are dealing with names of Persian deities. It is to show how far the Jews had opened themselves to the culture of their country, to the point of adopting foreign names. Hadassah is Esther's Jewish name, but the name under which she lives is Esther, the star.

If they allowed themselves to share the banquets and national celebrations with the local authorities, it was for them a way of being part of society, of showing that they did not remain walled off. The openness was real.

As for Mordechai, before being presented as a great sage, he is first of all someone who kept his roots present in the way he defined himself, defined his Judaism. He had not cut his moorings with his ancestors.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

They kept the concern for an inner Jewish identity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often bear two names: the one on our papers and the one by which we are called up to the Torah. What does each one's Hebrew name mean to him? In which situations do we use it — and in which do we hide it?

Who Is Amalek Today?



PRESENTATION

Haman descends from Amalek, himself a grandson of Esav through Eliphaz. Before reading the Megillah, we read Shabbat Zachor, to remember Amalek and blot out his memory. But where are we to find him today, now that the peoples have intermingled?

THE QUESTION

If Amalek is no longer an identifiable people, against whom is this battle still being fought?

THE ANSWER

“Haman, son of Hamedata, the Agagite” (Esther 3:1).

When Yaakov fled from his brother, Esav sent his son Eliphaz to kill him. Eliphaz did not finish him off: he stripped him of all his possessions, thinking to condemn him to die on the roads. His descendant, Amalek, reappears right after the Exodus from Egypt: he is the first enemy who dares to take up arms against the people on its way to the promised land. And it is he whom we describe through Haman.

Who is Amalek today? Some go looking for him in this or that hostile movement. But our masters say that the peoples have intermingled, and that it has become very difficult to identify who Amalek is. He can be identified only through his deeds.

The first Amalek is the yetzer hara, the evil inclination, which rises up in our path and breaks our momentum. It is never subdued once and for all: it keeps taking on new faces. To bring it into the service of the heavenly kingdom is what is asked of each person on a personal level.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The first Amalek dwells somewhere within ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to point to an Amalek outside than to recognize the one who breaks our own momentum. What impulse did we let fall away this year? What inner voice told us it was not worth the effort?

Neither Father Nor Mother



PRESENTATION

The Megillah presents Esther as an orphan: “she had neither father nor mother”. The Rav reads this first of all as a portrait of Jewish identity itself — the identity that will be torn from its guardian to be presented at the empire’s contest.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean for an identity to have “neither father nor mother” — and why did the people not want an angel to lead it?

THE ANSWER

“If Your presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here” (Shemot 33:15).

Among the cultures put into the contest is this Jewish identity that has neither father nor mother: it is the fruit of a development, of a personal creation. Avraham gave the world monotheistic faith, but that is not the Jewish way of life.

There is even a rejection of those who would embody Judaism as the perfect expression of their own lives. In the desert, when an angel was to accompany the people, the answer was: if it is not You who walk before us, delegate no one. Moshe himself was only the liaison of the revelation, because the whole people could not raise itself to that level.

And Judaism does not impose itself in the public square: it does not seek to convert other peoples. It asserts itself through its own life; the doors are open to whoever wishes to knock. That is why Esther, hidden away, must be torn from her guardian.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not have one man who founded Judaism.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our way of living Judaism — from whom do we hold it: from a parent, a teacher, a book — or from a personal path? Do we tend to follow a person we imitate rather than seek the face of G-d ourselves?

SUBJECT 10

Grace, Not Beauty



PRESENTATION

All the candidates of the empire file past the king, and it is Esther who is chosen. The Rav points out that the text does not first stress her beauty: it says that she found grace and favor, more than all the others.

THE QUESTION

What is chen, the grace that singled Esther out from all the others?

THE ANSWER

“She found grace and favor before him more than all the maidens” (Esther 2:17); “the angel of His presence saved them” (Yeshayahu 63:9).

Note well: we are not told that Esther was beautiful; according to some, she was no longer very young. What emanated from this representative of Jewish culture was first of all grace. All her beauty, both outer and inner, lay in that grace.

If the king preferred her to all the others, this means that in reality, what counted among all these candidates was not outer beauty, but inner beauty.

It is like the malach panav, the angel of His presence, of whom the prophet speaks. The angel in whom we place our trust is the one who expresses everything through his inwardness, through his will to serve, through his will to give. He is the one who brings salvation, and he is the one who carries the people to the heights.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often judge others — and judge ourselves — by appearance, degrees, success. Who around us has this grace of a person who wants to serve and to give? Have we ever told them so?

SUBJECT 11

Shaul Took Pity on King Agag



PRESENTATION

The Megillah takes care to give Mordechai's genealogy: son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Kish. Kish is the father of Shaul. Yet Shaul's name is not spoken.

THE QUESTION

Why leave King Shaul's name unspoken in Mordechai's ancestry, at the very moment we confront Haman the Agagite?

THE ANSWER

“Mordechai, son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Kish, a Benjamite” (Esther 2:5).

Shaul had an impulse of mercy toward Agag, the king of Amalek, and Haman the Agagite descends from him. When one wants to nurture mercy toward an enemy, one ends up suffering the forceful return of the antisemitism that was left in a latent state, because one judged that this king should not be condemned and should still be given his chance.

Mordechai is presented first as Yehudi, of Yehudah, then as a man of Binyamin. Our sages say that the Mishkan stood on the border of the two tribes, and that his father was of Yehudah, his mother of Binyamin. The kingdom of Israel, open to every culture, had asserted itself to the point of setting up two idolatrous centers, and it was destroyed first; the kingdom of Yehudah remained faithful to the teaching centered on the Mishkan. It is being both at once that makes this man's strength.

A man himself carried by the exile of Yerushalayim, who saved Jewish identity through his devotion to Hadassah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

By dint of nurturing mercy for an enemy, that mercy ends up turning against us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are indulgences our children will pay for: something left unsaid, behavior let slide to avoid a fuss. Which one, in our family, has been dragging on too long? And who is going to take it up?

SUBJECT 12

“He Made Her His Home”



PRESENTATION

Mordechai takes the orphan into his home: “he took her as a daughter”, *lekachah lo levat*. Our sages suggest reading it differently: not bat, the daughter, but bayit, the home. And why does the verse say twice that she had neither father nor mother?

THE QUESTION

What does Mordechai do with the potential of an orphan left to herself — and what does it mean to “make her a home”?

THE ANSWER

“When her father and mother died, Mordechai took her as a daughter” (Esther 2:7); “a man shall leave his father and his mother” (Bereshit 2:24).

The text says that she has neither father nor mother, then that her father and mother died: there was no need to point it out twice. This absence must therefore be placed on another level, that of the verse in Bereshit: a man shall leave his father and his mother. Yet the first man had neither father nor mother! This father and this mother are the intelligence received at birth and the middot, the virtues innate in us.

We have an innate intellectual capacity and an inheritance of virtues; but they must be given a *tzurah*, a form, they must be shaped, mastered. That is what we do throughout our lives. Esther was left to herself, with no way of giving form to her potential: Mordechai took charge of her.

He made her a bayit, his dwelling. At first, she was the “daughter”, elements still foreign; once he had integrated them, she became his home.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has received a capital: talents, a character. Who helped us give it form — a parent, a teacher, a friend? And for whom, today, could we play this role of Mordechai: take charge of a potential left to itself?