

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PURIM

11 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Purim: The War against Amalek”: how Amalek is born of a
closed door and strikes the one whose hands grow slack, what our
disguises conceal, and why two entertainers in a market are
already living in the World to Come.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Purim table

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SUBJECT 01

Amalek Was Born of a Closed Door



PRESENTATION

Before reading the Megillah, we read Shabbat Zachor, the remembrance of Amalek. Yet Amalek is no stranger fallen from the sky: he is Esav's grandson, and his mother is a woman who knocked at the door of the Patriarchs and was not let in.

THE QUESTION

Timna wanted to enter Avraham's family and was turned away. Is Israel's worst enemy, then, born of a refusal on our part?

THE ANSWER

“Timna was a concubine of Eliphaz, son of Esav, and she bore Amalek to him” (Bereshit 36:12).

Timna wanted to join the Jewish people: she turned to Sarah, then to Rivkah, then to Rachel and Leah. Since she found no place and was pushed aside, she entered the family of Esav, and from her Amalek was born. Know this well, says the Rav: every time we set aside someone who shows the will to enter the path of Judaism, we risk producing through him a sworn antisemite.

Why did the Patriarchs judge this way? Because they did not want the worm to get inside the fruit: they preferred to leave it outside, where one can still fight it. Her intentions were not sincere, and she risked corrupting the Torat avot, the teaching of the Patriarchs.

But ma'aseh avot siman labanim: what the fathers went through, we live to a certain extent, from within as from without. It is up to us, along our path, to know how to clear away the negative aspects of our will to identify.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Protecting one's own sometimes means saying no, and that no can breed grudges that last for generations. Whom have we shut out — from a table, a decision, a family? Was the refusal just, and was the manner just as well?

A Jew Never Is: He Becomes



PRESENTATION

Amalek strikes at a precise moment: between the Exodus from Egypt and Sinai. There is no land yet, no Torah yet. For the Rav, this is the portrait of the Jew of every age: a being on the way, always in the process of becoming.

THE QUESTION

Why is the people most vulnerable at the very moment it is still seeking its way?

THE ANSWER

“He who happened upon you on the way” (Devarim 25:18).

A Jew is always in the process of becoming. It is in this becoming that we show certain weaknesses, and that we risk falling victim to an attack by Amalek. The verse says it: Amalek surprised you, he cooled you while you were seeking your way.

Let us not forget that he appears when we do not yet have the land. We have left Egypt, we can steer our destiny with full responsibility, but we have neither land nor Torah. It is the crossroads of bewildered man, who does not know where to be, either in place or in time.

At this junction of two quests — identity through the nation and identity through the spiritual path — those who do not hold firm and do not withstand Amalek's pressure quickly become Haman's prey.

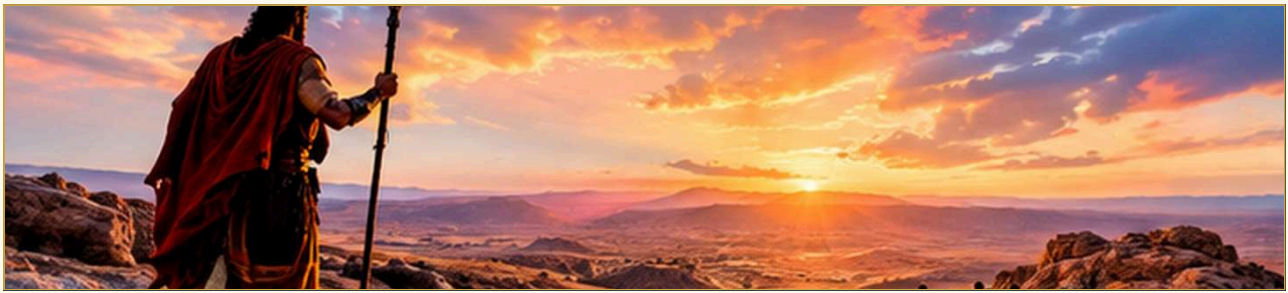
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A Jew is always in the process of becoming. He is not one; he becomes one a little more each day.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all have “in-between” periods: a move, a change of school, a bereavement, an inner search. What is ours right now? What, in this passage, makes us fragile — and who can walk with us?

The Hands That Grow Slack



PRESENTATION

Amalek attacks at Refidim. Our sages read a whole program in this name: rifyon yadayim, the slackening of the hands. And during the battle, Moshe keeps his arms raised only if he is supported on each side.

THE QUESTION

What gives Amalek his hold — and what does it take to weaken him?

THE ANSWER

“Amalek came and fought with Israel at Refidim” (Shemot 17:8).

Amalek is the slackening of the hands. It is when we let ourselves go, when we give up, when we abdicate, when we despair, and live in exile from ourselves: we no longer know where to go, we are disoriented, problems assail us and we lack the strength to face them. Amalek is there to exploit our weaknesses and try to tear us down.

Moshe considers that if the people still longs for Egypt and its exile, it is very serious: Amalek has a hold on it. He needs support on each side. The Rav names Yehoshua, who committed himself to the conquest of the land, and Chur, who fought to the point of sacrificing his life so that the people would not embrace the golden calf.

They are the ones who hold up Moshe's hands: commitment to the future and faithfulness to the very end.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is how one manages to weaken Amalek without triumphing over him.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has somewhere a march he has broken off — a project, a course of study, a reconciliation. Let each one name his. And let us ask who, at this table, could hold up his hands.

The Book of the Hidden Face



PRESENTATION

We read the Megillah taking care not to miss a single word. And in all those words, never the name of G-d. Yet our sages look for where Esther is announced in the Torah, and they find a verse about a face that hides.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean for a book to bear the name of the “hidden face” — and why must we hear every one of its words?

THE ANSWER

“And I will surely hide My face on that day” (Devarim 31:18): haster astir, from which the name Esther comes.

There are times of eclipse of G-d. Our destinies do not always run together; sometimes we do not walk before Him, facing Him, but turn our backs on Him. At the moment of this eclipse, we live in exile from ourselves. That is the whole Megillah.

Everything happens through this seter, this hidden meaning of things. What we see is not the true reality: we have a black-and-white negative that would have to be developed differently to obtain the real image. And this hidden side of the divine that is in each of us, we do not perceive; yet it is what we go in search of throughout our lives, stage by stage.

Hence the obligation to hear every word. When you read a letter addressed to you personally, on which all your joy depends, on which your future depends, and a word is missing from it — you understand. Above all when it comes from a beloved.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What we see is not the true reality. Things must be turned over to be seen as they should be.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We call chance whatever we hold no key to. Let each one tell of an event in his year that he first read as a misfortune, a “negative”. Once “developed”, what does it show today?

A Festival That Contains All the Festivals



PRESENTATION

Our sages affirm that if all the festivals were to disappear, Purim would remain. The Rav gives the reason: placed at the end of the year, just before the next Exodus from Egypt, Purim carries within it the substance of all the others.

THE QUESTION

In what way does Esther's festival contain Pesach, Shavuot, Kippur and Sukkot?

THE ANSWER

“The Jews fulfilled and accepted” (Esther 9:27); “many of the peoples of the land became Jews” (Esther 8:17).

Purim is Pesach, since we escape Haman's design. It is Shavuot: at Sinai, the Oral Law, the interpretation of the law, had been accepted under compulsion; on Purim, the whole people embraced it of its own free will. Approached in a pure spirit, this Torah is a perfume of life; in an impure spirit, it becomes a poison.

It is also Rosh Hashanah and Kippur — Kippurim, like Purim: the return to prayer, the appeal for divine help, the plea for atonement. And it is Sukkot, the opening of the Jewish people to the nations: many then discover Judaism and adopt its thought and its way of life.

Instituted in exile, this festival prepares the restoration: as the first exile prepared the Second Temple, Purim prepares the Third, and that is why it closes the cycle of the festivals. But this closing demands an Adam in the image of the first being, for all the ingredients of the Megillah are the ones that make us up.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If all the festivals were to disappear, Purim would remain, because it holds within it all the substance of the other festivals.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If we could keep only one festival, which would we choose, and why? What would we have to put into it — freedom, study, prayer, forgiveness, openness to others — for it truly to contain all the others?

No Longer Telling Haman from Mordechai



PRESENTATION

The rule of Purim is surprising: drink until one can no longer tell “cursed be Haman” from “blessed be Mordechai”. For the Rav, the goal is not drunkenness but a going-beyond. And the disguises of that day say more than we think.

THE QUESTION

What does it mean to no longer tell the cursed from the blessed — and what do our Purim disguises reveal?

THE ANSWER

“Haman took the garment and the horse, and he dressed Mordechai and had him ride” (Esther 6:11).

We long for the day when Haman — that is, our bad side, our evil inclination, our Amalek — will himself lead Mordechai on a horse adorned with the trappings of royalty, because he will have placed himself in the service of justice, of the right path, of human dignity. But one can stop telling them apart only in a moment of joy, of euphoria.

If we wear disguises on Purim, it is because they are our disguises all year long, all our lives. These garments are not abject in themselves. They become so when we label them, when we separate them, when we individualize them without seeking the connection between them.

The same is true of a society in which people reject one another under different labels, without seeking a common language. The best way to celebrate Purim is to kill those seeds that tend to divide us rather than unite us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “costumes” do we wear all year — the serious one, the religious one, the rebel, the success? What label have we stuck on someone because of his clothing? What would we see if, tonight, we looked beneath the costume?

The Chaver and the Re'a



PRESENTATION

On Purim, we send portions of food “each man to his re'a”. Yet Hebrew has two words for a friend. The Rav pauses on this difference, which changes the meaning of mishloach manot.

THE QUESTION

Why is mishloach manot addressed to the re'a and not to the chaver?

THE ANSWER

“Sending portions each man to his fellow, and gifts to the poor” (Esther 9:22).

Chaver is my partner; chibbur, an association; chavurah, a body, a union. The chaver is the one with whom I share an interest. The re'a, mind you, is not a partner: he is the other. I do not recognize myself in him, and yet I ought to integrate him. Mishloach manot is this effort to integrate the other.

It is the remedy for the sin of Achashverosh's feast, which sought an assimilation made of opposing individualities. When I wall myself up in my house and do not seek to share with the outside world, the separation I imposed on myself ends up being imposed on me by others from outside: they persecute me.

I then stir up an outside hatred that can become the weapon that destroys my whole being, a whole people. That, says the Rav, is the story of the Megillah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To whom do we send our mishloach manot? Most often to those who are like us. This year, who would be our true re'a — a neighbor, a colleague, someone from another background in whom we do not recognize ourselves? What could we bring him?

They Ate Kosher at the King's Feast



PRESENTATION

Our sages ask why the Jews of the Persian empire were condemned to extermination. Their answer: because they took part in Achashverosh's feast. Yet that feast served kosher meat to whoever wanted to eat it, and kosher wine to whoever wanted to drink it.

THE QUESTION

If one could eat kosher there, where is the sin — and what was being swallowed at that banquet that was not on the plates?

THE ANSWER

“The drinking was according to the law, without compulsion” (Esther 1:8).

They simply went along with the atmosphere, and wanted to share it with the others. What harm is there in that? Ah, this will to assimilate into a world where good and evil are confused, where they no longer keep their boundaries, where good can disguise itself as evil and evil as good: that is Adam's first sin, the sin of the tree of knowledge.

Eating kosher means nothing in itself. You can eat kosher without making a blessing before and after, without acknowledging, without sanctifying what you eat: that is slippery ground. When I seek to eat kosher, I want to draw a distinction between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil, to give meaning to what I do.

It was a woman who was at the origin of the first deviation; it is a woman, Esther, who repairs it. And it is on a tree, etz, that Haman is hanged with his ten sons.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When I seek to eat kosher, I am seeking a spiritual hygiene for my food.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One can respect everything to the letter and already have given way on the essential. Are there places we go, tables we sit at, telling ourselves that nothing there is formally forbidden? And our blessings at the table — are they still a way of making distinctions?

The Two Men in the Market Who Made People Laugh



PRESENTATION

The prophet Eliyahu walks through a crowded market with a master. The master asks who, in this crowd, is a “son of the World to Come”. The answer: no one. Then Eliyahu shows him two.

THE QUESTION

Two public entertainers in the middle of a market are worth more than everyone else. What did they do that the serious people did not?

THE ANSWER

“Then our mouth will be filled with laughter” (Tehillim 126:2).

Eliyahu shows him two men who entertain the public in the middle of the market and give hope, joy of living, to people who are afflicted, crushed by daily worries. These, he says, are bnei olam haba: not merely that they have a share in it — that is not in question for the others either — but they already inhabit that world, through their will to rise above the contingencies of life.

The first Jewish child is Yitzchak, the one who laughs. Sarah, told at ninety that she will have a child, laughs, because that laughter lies beyond the reality in which she finds herself. Joy lies beyond da’at, beyond the rational: when I am surprised by what defies everything I logically expected, I am happy.

Our sages studied in joy: when they grew tired, they began to laugh, to tell stories, because it opened other horizons for them and took them beyond the limits of their interpretation. But it is a constructive laughter, never that of contempt, derision or mockery.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

These men live their World to Come here; they prepare it here.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are those who are right and those who do good; the market remembered only the latter. Who, around us, carries others by simple cheerfulness — have we ever told him so? And what kind of laughter do we laugh at this table: the kind that opens, or the kind that wounds?

Remembering Without Crusading



PRESENTATION

Two injunctions frame the remembrance of Amalek: “Remember” and “Do not forget”. The same passage sets a surprising condition: it is when the L-rd has given you rest from all your enemies that you shall blot out his memory.

THE QUESTION

Why two memories — and why is the memory of Amalek blotted out only in rest?

THE ANSWER

“When the L-rd your G-d has given you rest from all your enemies round about... you shall blot out the memory of Amalek” (Devarim 25:19).

There is always an active memory and a passive memory. Active memory mobilizes me; but I cannot live only in memory: let me live, let me breathe. If I do things only in opposition to the other, in a spirit of competition, it will destroy me: I will feel disarmed, diminished.

Lo tishkach, do not forget, is something else. Everything I do, I do by myself; but while carrying out my project, I do not forget the limit that must not be crossed: there are red lines.

And the rest the verse speaks of is menuchah, the serenity of being. It is lived to the full on Shabbat, when man disconnects from daily concerns, recharges, and discovers the pleasures of family and society. When you feel this serenity, you may consider the memory of Amalek blotted out.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

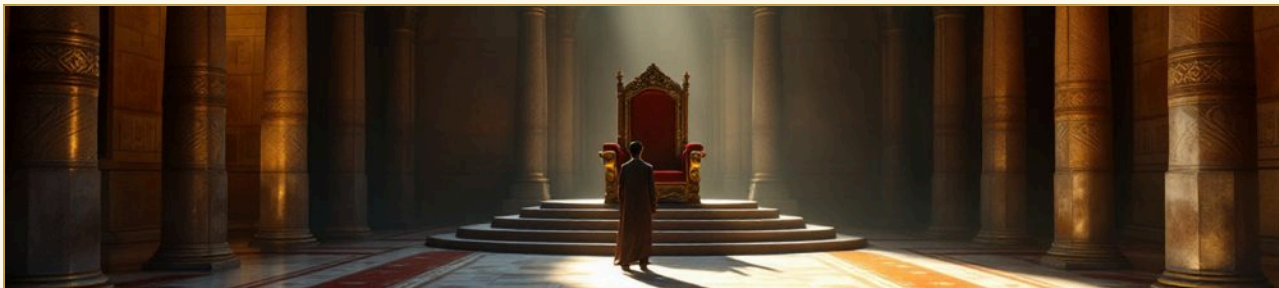
I do not forget, but I am not a crusader for this memory at every turn.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Certain wounds in our family or collective history mobilize us constantly. Which of them do we live “against” someone? And what Shabbat, what moment of true serenity, would let us remember them without their directing us?

SUBJECT 11

The King Who Hides Behind Haman



PRESENTATION

At the end of the lecture, a listener asks: how could Achashverosh, so foreign to everything Esther represents, have desired her? The Rav's answer sketches the portrait of a man who has not found his place.

THE QUESTION

Why does Achashverosh need Haman so badly?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “There are many Achashveroshes hiding behind others.”

Achashverosh, says the Rav, is like a Jew of the nations who has not found his place and is afraid to declare himself. He considers that the Jewish people holds a choice place within his population. But he is swept along, carried away by Haman, who in effect tells him: your life belongs to me, I am your protector, I am the one who can secure your throne.

And he needs this Haman, because he tells himself that if there is a revolution or a riot, it is Haman who will be on the front line, and he himself will escape with his life.

Because these men have not found their way, or have not had the courage to go all the way, they remain uprooted: they have lost their roots.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There are many Achashveroshes hiding behind others.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Sometimes we let someone else speak or act in our place so as not to expose ourselves. In what situation have we let “a Haman” decide for us? What courage would it have taken to follow our own path to the end?