

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PURIM

11 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Purim: The Megillah in the Present”: why Amalek is born of our
own divisions, who “the king” is in a book where the name of G-d
is never written, and why Esther, left behind as a hostage in the
palace, has not yet had her last word.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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A Palace Intrigue?



PRESENTATION

Some critics read the Megillah as a court intrigue: a king taking revenge on his wife, assimilated Jews with Persian names, a Haman jealous over a post. Before answering them, the Rav recalls how the Torah is to be read: not with the eyes of the past, but facing the future.

THE QUESTION

Why can the story of Esther not be reduced to a tale of jealousies and collusion at the Persian court?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “The past is the traces, the marks left along the road.”

When one follows the text closely, one always perceives a parallel between what it says and what is happening in the world. The past is nothing but a set of simanim, of traces left along the road; through it, we foreshadow the future. The text of the past is always projected onto a future.

One could certainly read the Megillah as some critics do: Achashverosh takes revenge on his wife who refuses to obey him; Mordechai and Esther, with their Persian names, would be court Jews attached to their positions; Haman would want the post of the king's second-in-command, and Mordechai would be playing intelligence agent by exposing the plot of Bigtan and Teresh.

But no one would have instituted a festival for an intrigue of that kind, nor given it the importance it has: that of closing the history of the Jewish people. The Megillah unrolls the secret of Jewish history among the nations.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are not nostalgic for a past that is over, but for a past that we want to bring to its fulfilment.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our family stories, too, can be told as mere rivalries. Which episode of our own history have we reduced to a matter of interests or jealousies? What would become of it if we read it as a trace left for our future?

We Are the Ones Who Give Birth to Amalek



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, Amalek is not first of all an enemy from outside. He appears whenever a march shows signs of weariness, and he thrives on our fractures. The fall of the First and the Second Temple bears witness to it.

THE QUESTION

If Amalek “does not exist in reality unless we generate him”, where does he draw his strength from — and what should truly worry us?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Amalek — we are the ones who generate him.”

Amalek attacks us when we are on the way and we stop: we are tired, we hang up our apron and tell ourselves that others will carry on. It is by leaving it to others to take over that we open the door to him. He is born of the people's abdication, and he feeds on its fracture into several parts.

Question history: when the First Temple was destroyed, factions had formed within the people and kept up endless struggles, and the enemy took advantage of it. The same is true of the Second Temple. Had the people presented a united front, had it been truly convinced of its project for the future, the other nations would have had no hold on it.

Against external enemies, we are assured of victory: Baruch Hashem, we have withstood every persecution, with that discreet hand of Providence that joins in our journey. What always weakens us are the internal struggles that we fail to bring together toward a worthy goal.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What must always be feared are the divisions within the people.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In a family as in a people, internal quarrels open the door to what comes from outside. Which division among us has lasted too long? Toward what shared “worthy goal” could we bring it together?

SUBJECT 03

“The King”, With No Further Detail



PRESENTATION

The name of Hashem appears nowhere in the Megillah. Yet, says the Rav, it is constantly present there. One need only know how to read a word that keeps coming back: hamelech, the king.

THE QUESTION

How can G-d be everywhere in a book in which His name is never written?

THE ANSWER

“Achashverosh, who reigned from India to Kush, over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces” (Esther 1:1).

Divine Providence is going to hide, to put on a mask: it will not be seen. The name of Hashem does not appear in the Megillah. But this is not because it is absent: it is constantly present.

For an exception must be made for the king of the first verse: there, it really is Achashverosh who reigns from India to Kush, over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces. But every other use of hamelech refers to that Providence, to the Master of the universe, who is present in this world.

Why do we not see Him? Because we do not hold the keys to that vision of G-d beyond what the text can reveal to us. The presence is there, beneath the mask; it is our gaze that must learn to recognize it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The name of Hashem does not appear in the Megillah, but this is not because it is absent: it is constantly present.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are times when we do not see the hand of G-d in our lives. Let each one think of a “nameless king” in his year — an event, an encounter — behind which he now recognizes Providence. Did he see it at the time?

Adon: A Sovereignty One Does Not Keep for Oneself



PRESENTATION

The Rav distinguishes two ways of perceiving G-d: in nature, as Creator, and in consciousness, as Revealer. Between the two stands man, who also lays claim to power, to mastery, to sovereignty.

THE QUESTION

Why does the man who claims sovereignty for himself alone fall into a form of idolatry?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “There is G-d the Creator and G-d the Revealer, G-d outside in the forces of nature and G-d within in human consciences.”

There is a way of perceiving G-d in the immanent, through creation, and this one is very close to us, because we ourselves can claim the title of adon, of master. We want to master things, we demand sovereignty. But this relative authority cannot be attributed to oneself as one's own: it would become avodah zarah, idolatry.

It must be shared with everyone, and regarded as a gift from the One who has mastery over everything and who governs the world.

To bring this consciousness into nature, to go from the ma'amar, the creative word, to the revealing word: this is a spiritual journey that demands a great deal of energy. For what founds man, his adnut — today, the Rav slips in, we would say his DNA — what weaves him, comes only from the inner perception of the divine within him, that of the Name of four letters.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us exercises authority somewhere: over our children, at work, in an organization. How do we live it: as a possession, or as a gift received, to be shared? What would that second way of seeing change tomorrow?

Haman and Mordechai Are Written in the Torah



PRESENTATION

Our sages ask the same question about the two adversaries of the story: Haman — where is he written in the Torah? And Mordechai — where is he written? The two answers come down to two words, and they answer each other.

THE QUESTION

Which words of the Torah already carry the names of Haman and Mordechai — and what do they say about what each one embodies?

THE ANSWER

“Have you eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?” (Bereshit 3:11); “pure myrrh”, mor deror (Shemot 30:23).

Haman is the hamin of the verse: have you eaten of the tree from which I commanded you not to eat? It is the tree of knowledge, that will of man to impose himself through his knowledge, as though he could reach everything, understand everything, subject everything to the power of an all-powerful reason. No, says the Rav, that is not possible.

Mordechai, for his part, comes from mor deror. Deror means freedom, and mor is a perfume: a perfume of freedom. He is a man able to measure himself against every situation and to assert his convictions forcefully in the face of an oppressive world that exposes him to death.

It is this kind of man who is able to carry the history of the Jewish people forward. And indeed it is on him that the Megillah closes: Mordechai the Jew, who seeks the good of his people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Deror is freedom, but it is a perfume.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Haman is the part of us that wants to get the better of everything; Mordechai, the part that holds to its convictions without seeking to subjugate everything. Around this table, what won out this year in our discussions: the need to be right, or the perfume of freedom?

Esther, a Hostage in the Palace



PRESENTATION

The Megillah closes on Mordechai, now the king's deputy. Of Esther we hear nothing more. Yet, says the Rav, it was not Mordechai who saved the people: he sounded the alarm. The one who saved it was a woman.

THE QUESTION

What did Esther sacrifice that no one else could sacrifice — and why did she have to remain in the palace?

THE ANSWER

Sarah lived a hundred and twenty-seven years (Bereshit 23:1); Esther reigns over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces.

Esther condemned herself to live with Achashverosh, and we hear nothing more of her. To understand what enabled her to reign over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, she must be compared with Sarah, the princess, who defended the identity of the people at all costs, without compromise with Yishmael, and who remained faithful throughout her hundred and twenty-seven years. Esther is of the same mettle.

But there is a difference. Hashem stayed Avraham's hand: if you must sacrifice something, sacrifice your animal nature, do not sacrifice your person. With Esther, the sacrifice was carried out: she remained in the palace like a hostage, a Jewish figure held hostage among the nations.

Why a woman? Because she is the one who can gather the elements of every culture, filter them and bring them back to their source, as we do with the korban, the offering, which raises the mineral, the vegetable, the animal and man in an ascending fire. To gather the elements of culture and rid them of their dross: that is the essential theme of the Megillah.

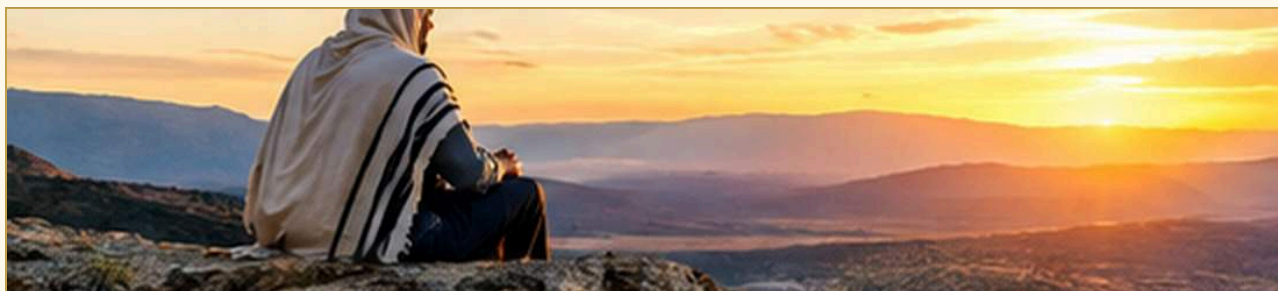
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Mordechai sounded the people's alarm, but the one who saved it was the woman, it was Esther.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there is someone who stays “in the palace”: the one who looks after a parent, who keeps the household going, who gives things up so that the others can move forward. Who is it among us? And what are we doing so that this person does not vanish from the story?

“If You Keep Silent, Deliverance Will Come From Elsewhere”



PRESENTATION

Esther hesitates: one does not appear before the king without being summoned. Mordechai neither reassures her nor pleads with her. He answers that deliverance will come in any case, but from another place.

THE QUESTION

If the people will be saved in any case, why should Esther risk her life — and what does “from another place” mean?

THE ANSWER

“Relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place” (Esther 4:14); “And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16).

Mordechai tells her: beware — if you do not come forward of your own accord, if you do not do the work yourself, know that the deliverance of the Jewish people will come from another place. That means it will come from the nations, from the other side. And how? Through a Shoah: a threat that prunes away the greater part of the people and leaves only a few of its members alive.

It is then that Esther overcomes her reservations, her doubts and her fears: since one must sacrifice oneself for this people, as Moshe did — *ka'asher avadti avadti*. I will disappear from this world, I will sacrifice my World to Come to save the Jewish people.

The people always wonders whether the L-rd is with it: if He is there, should we not triumph over every obstacle? But it is an act of total self-denial, of self-giving, that moves HaKadosh Baruch Hu to set His plan in motion. Without Moshe, no Exodus from Egypt; without Esther, no deliverance from Haman's will to annihilate.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

No event can occur in history without mesirut nefesh.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often say: someone else will take care of it. That may be true — and that is precisely the problem. What is the one thing each of us here knows he must do and keeps putting off, counting on someone else? At what price, and by whose hand, will it be done otherwise?

Yehudim in Exile, Israel on Its Land



PRESENTATION

One might have thought that Purim, a festival of exile, would cease to be celebrated once the people had returned to its land. The Megillah affirms the opposite: these days will not pass away, and their memory will not fade from their descendants.

THE QUESTION

Why must the one who has become “Israel” once more on his land go on celebrating the festival of the “Yehudim”?

THE ANSWER

“These days of Purim shall not pass away from among the Jews, nor their memory cease from their descendants” (Esther 9:28).

Yehudi is an attribute of the Jewish people in exile. It comes from Yehudah, because it was the kingdom of Judah that was exiled last; the other tribes scattered, and today their traces can barely be found. But when we return to the land, we have another title: we are no longer Yehudim, we are Israel.

And Israel is something else: the one who fights for G-d. This fight cannot be waged openly among the nations; it can be waged only once one has recovered one's national identity. There is a definition: whoever repudiates idolatry is called a Jew. That holds for the Diaspora. For the Jews of Israel, renouncing avodah zarah is not enough: there is something else to be accomplished through oneself.

And yet, even back on our land, we must go on celebrating Purim, in every generation and in every family.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When we return to the land, we are no longer Yehudim, we are Israel.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are habits of exile that we keep even when conditions have changed — and others that must be kept precisely so as not to forget. Which ones, in our family? And what might “fighting for G-d” concretely mean for us?

Beyond Knowledge



PRESENTATION

On Pesach, we left Egypt and became free. On Purim, the people is saved — and remains a subject of Achashverosh. Yet our sages say that if all the festivals were to disappear, Purim would not disappear.

THE QUESTION

What did we reach on Purim that we had not acquired on Pesach, the festival of our liberation?

THE ANSWER

“We are still the servants of Achashverosh” (Talmud); on Purim one drinks “ad delo yada”, until one no longer knows.

On Pesach, the task was to sacrifice the Egyptian idol: we left foreign cults behind, we attained freedom. On Purim, we went beyond the stage of knowledge: we are in what lies beyond knowledge. There, there is no longer any difference between good and evil; the divine presence is there, as much in the forbidden as in the permitted.

This means that Haman himself is an actor, put on stage by the One who directs this whole international play of humanity. The great tyrants of this world are actors too.

How do we celebrate this attainment? Through a state of intoxication: we set reason aside, we no longer draw distinctions in our thinking, we no longer dissect. We know that we live with a mask, in half-light. That is also why, to proclaim the unity of G-d, we put our hand over our eyes: that unity is beyond our ability to understand.

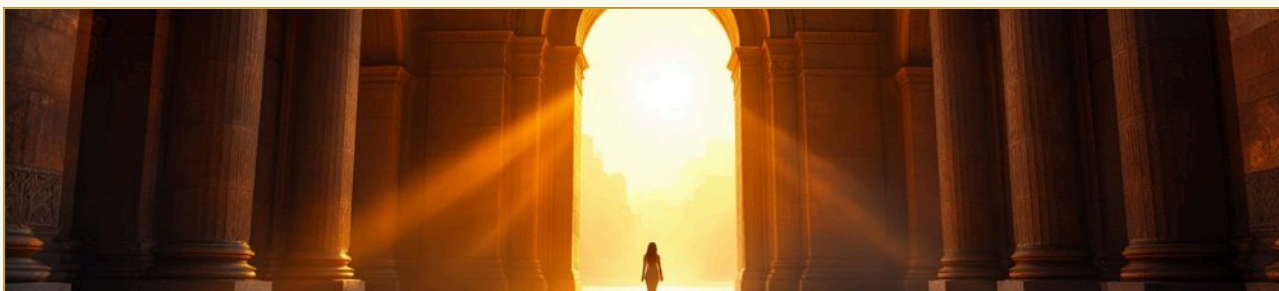
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In what lies beyond knowledge, the divine presence is there, as much in good as in evil, as much in the impure as in the pure.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are trials and people we see only as the “villains” of our story. What if they too were playing a role in a play whose director is hidden from us? What role — even a painful one — was played this year by something we first experienced as a misfortune?

Esther Has Not Had Her Last Word



PRESENTATION

The Megillah is read unrolled, spread open from one end to the other. For the Rav, this gesture has a meaning: the story is not closed. A midrash even announces that at the end of days, a woman will be at the head of the Jewish people.

THE QUESTION

Why would the last act of history fall to a woman — and what did Esther leave behind “as a pledge” among the nations?

THE ANSWER

The Midrash of Zerubavel: at the end of days, a woman will be at the head of the Jewish people.

Why a woman? Because she is the one who integrates all the elements of culture, all the currents of thought spread throughout the nations. In its own way, this was already Pharaoh's plan: to make the men disappear and keep only the women, so as to pass all Jewish genius through the Egyptian womb.

Among the nations, the divine presence is still only incidental, fortuitous, dictated by events. That is the difference between a prophet of the nations, who prophesies intermittently, and a prophet of Israel, established in the permanence of revelation. Esther left this presence as a pledge among the nations; it must still be recovered, given its trajectory and its permanence.

The intuition that dwells in a woman is a prophetic dimension: she grasps what lies beyond logic. That is why Esther has not finished her work. She will return to complete what she began, before the coming of the Messiah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Megillah remains open; it stays unrolled, spread out throughout its reading.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A Megillah left unrolled is a story we have not finished writing. Which story in our family remains “open” — a reconciliation, a transmission, a project? And who among us has the intuition of what it would take to bring it to a close?

Why Adar Sheni?



PRESENTATION

In a year of thirteen months, there are two months of Adar. Our sages asked which of them would receive Purim. The first Adar seemed the obvious choice: it is the month of Moshe, the people's liberator. They chose the second.

THE QUESTION

Why was Purim attached to Pesach rather than to the memory of Moshe?

THE ANSWER

Moshe was born on the 7th of Adar and died on the 7th of Adar.

Purim could have been attached to the first Adar: it is the natural movement of the calendar, and it is the month closest to Moshe's date, born and died on the 7th of Adar. The Rav even notes that, had he not been born circumcised, his milah would have fallen at the time of Purim. Given the identity of mission between Esther and Moshe, it would have been natural to celebrate Purim in the first Adar.

But our sages preferred to bring it close to Pesach, to graft it onto Pesach. On Pesach, we were born with the notion of freedom; the story of Esther, however, was not closed by freedom. Rather, through it we gave the nations an awareness of the divine presence, there where the greater part of the exiled people found itself.

For wherever hundreds of thousands of Jews are gathered, the divine presence makes its dwelling: we are the ones who draw it in and share it with the nations. That is why our sages wanted Pesach, freedom regained in the midst of humanity, to close this story.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Our sages attached an unfinished story to the festival of freedom rather than to the memory of a great man. In our family, to what do we attach our festivals: to people we honor, or to what we still hope for? What freedom are we awaiting that has not yet come?