

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

ROSH HASHANAH

8 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eight questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture "The Month of Elul and the Cry of the Shofar": the golden calf as frozen thought, a single word that turns the curses around, the shofar and the mezuzah against growing old, and the one-year lease we renew ourselves. All the way to Kippur, which the Rav calls a day of joy.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Rosh Hashanah table

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SUBJECT 01

Forty days to climb back up



PRESENTATION

The forty days of Elul correspond to the last forty days Moshe spent on Sinai to bring back the second Tablets. Yet forty days after the revelation at Sinai, the people had committed the sin of the golden calf.

THE QUESTION

Is the golden calf the sin of a bygone age, or one we still commit — and how do we recognize it?

THE ANSWER

From Rosh Chodesh Elul to the day of Kippur: the forty days of the second Tablets.

It is a sin we all share, says the Rav, because we are incapable of grasping the divine as it is. We give it a substitute: we take Elokim, that is, a plurality of divine manifestations, and we cling to a single aspect of that plurality. There we are, in the sin of the golden calf.

We are then in fixed ideologies, and we can no longer restructure ourselves: there we are, as if in a mold, with fixed thinking, set behavior. This conduct reduces us to the laws of nature — a nature condemned to grow old and die.

Yet the Creator renews His creation every day. And just as He renews heaven and earth, we are assured that He will always sustain the people through whom His own creation is justified.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Creator renews His creation every day.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us here holds an idea so tightly that it has stopped being an idea. Which one? And if for years it has kept us from changing our mind about someone in this family, what exactly has it become?

A single word: ya'alem



PRESENTATION

Ki Tavo, read just before Rosh Hashanah, foretells the destruction of the Second Temple; unlike the curses read before Shavuot, it ends with no consolation. The Rav does not go over the whole question again: he dwells on a single word of the text.

THE QUESTION

What does reading a single verb — ya'alem — change in the way we hear the curses?

THE ANSWER

“Every sickness and every plague... ya'alem Hashem alecha” (Devarim 28:61).

After the first curses, we returned to Israel after seventy years. The second series we are still living through, and there is no consolation there. To Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who wept because he did not know what to answer, the prophet said: the second curses contain in seed all the blessings.

The reason lies in one word. Every sickness and every plague that the L-rd “ya'alem” upon you: this does not mean that He will bring them down upon you, nor that He will spread them. Ya'alem means that He will divert them, eclipse them.

When we reach a point of no return, a force comes into play: the promise made to the Jewish people that it will not disappear, because the future of humanity and of creation itself is bound up with its existence. Then these curses recede, as if the recasting of the people took place of its own accord, and they become a source of blessing.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The curses become a source of blessing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there is an episode whose good outcome no one can yet see. Which one? And who, tonight, needs to hear that his misfortune has not yet had its last word?

Growing old and sleeping: one single root



PRESENTATION

“When you have children and grandchildren, and you have grown old in the land...” Three generations, no more. And the word for growing old, *ve-noshantem*, shares its root with the word for sleep.

THE QUESTION

What is growing old, if it is not a matter of years — and how do the shofar and the mezuzah guard us against it?

THE ANSWER

“Wake up, sleepers, from your sleep” (Rambam, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4).

Growing old means remaining in a way of life where everything belongs to the daily round, where everything is repetitive, where everything belongs to natural phenomena. In Hebrew, *yashan*, old, and *yashen*, asleep, share the same root. Entering a repetitive system, with nothing new, no prospect of a new life, is the growing old that leads to death.

The Rambam mentions two mitzvot that keep man in a state of permanent wakefulness. In space, the mezuzah: it calls us to change our attitude when we pass from one space to another, between public and private, between the stages of our life. In time, the shofar: it is a decree of the text, but there is a hint in it — wake up, sleepers, from your sleep.

This growing old calls for a cry: that of the shofar. It is the cry of the person who suddenly finds himself facing a situation he can no longer explain, as if waking from a dream and wondering where the reality of things lies.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Letting oneself grow old means entering a repetitive system in which there is nothing new.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

How many of our days this year were interchangeable? Let each person look for something he has never done and could do this month. And what threshold in our home should remind us to change our attitude?

From the beginning to the end of the year



PRESENTATION

The land of Israel is not like Egypt, which is watered like a vegetable garden: it drinks water from the rain of heaven. And the Torah says that the eyes of the L-rd are upon it “from the beginning of the year to the end of the year.”

THE QUESTION

Why must each end of the year be lived as a small end of days?

THE ANSWER

“The eyes of the L-rd your G-d are upon it, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year” (Devarim 11:12).

The lease we enjoy in life is always for one year: it is the cycle of one stage, a microcosm. History spans six millennia, but each year is a sample of it, a stage that should lead toward the end of days.

That is why the land of Israel does not obey the same rules as other lands. It depends on G-d's providence, which ensures its rains, and He keeps His gaze upon it from the beginning of the year to the end. The beginning is Rosh Hashanah; the end is the last month, Elul.

Our Sages teach that just as we set out at the beginning, we will find ourselves at the end. This end of the year is not far off: it is a projection of the end of days. We must therefore regard this acharit as a purpose, and as a source of experience.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each year is in itself a sample of what the end of days will be.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If this year were a small model of our whole life, what would we want it to bear witness to? Let each person say how he would like his year to end — and what he can still do between now and then.

SUBJECT 05

A one-year lease



PRESENTATION

The Rav offers an image: life is leased to us in one-year periods. At each Rosh Hashanah the lease expires, and it is we who renew it — as when we move house.

THE QUESTION

What should we keep and what should we leave behind when we “move” from one year to the next?

THE ANSWER

Rosh Hashanah: the rosh of shinui, the head of change.

The approach of Rosh Hashanah commands us to be the rosh of shinui, the head of change. We always hold a one-year lease on life, from the beginning of the year to its end. And this lease is renewed by us.

We renew it as when we move house: we change our setting. What do we keep? The things that can find their place in the new décor, in the new apartment. And we get rid of everything that does not fit: we sort through, we throw out everything that does not match the new circumstances of life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This lease is renewed by us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If we were moving tonight from one year to the next, which “furniture” — habits, relationships, plans — would we take with us, and which would we leave on the doorstep? Let each person name one of each.

Elul, or the reversed letters



PRESENTATION

The Sages looked for where the month of Elul is hidden in Scripture. They found it in the verse about the circumcision of the heart — and in a verse of Psalms, but with its letters reversed: “Lulei”, had I not...

THE QUESTION

What does it say about a month that its name reads forwards in the circumcision of the heart, and backwards in a “had I not believed”?

THE ANSWER

“Lulei he'emanti lir'ot be-tuv Hashem be-eret chayim” (Tehillim 27:13).

Whenever milah, circumcision, is at issue, it is about stepping outside the natural order: we do not want to subject ourselves to the laws of nature. And stepping outside this framework means ceasing a little to compare what we are with what others are, our situation with theirs. For each time we want to be like the other nations, we expose ourselves to the same scourges as they do.

The second hint is in the psalm: had I not believed that I would see the goodness of the L-rd in the land of the living... — implied, says the Rav: I would have found myself among violent men. These are the letters of Elul, reversed. The path of the month obliges us to situate ourselves in relation to these words of the prophets, which assure us of another status, another language.

The prophet is told: like the shofar, raise your voice. That is: recast your language each time, so that it does not sink into vulgarity. There is, moreover, a discretion in biblical language: the intimate organs of the body have no name there.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Recasting one's language each time, so that it does not sink into vulgarity.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The month asks us to recast our language. What expressions do we commonly use that demean the person we are speaking of? Who here would agree to do without them until Kippur?

A servant does not expect a reward



PRESENTATION

The twelve months of the year correspond to twelve combinations of the Name of G-d, drawn from the initial or final letters of a verse. That of Elul, says the Rav, is taken from a verse that speaks of tzedakah: “U-tzedakah tihyeh lanu.”

THE QUESTION

If we are only doing our duty, what do we have to claim on Rosh Hashanah — and why does what we hope for bear the name of charity?

THE ANSWER

“U-tzedakah tihyeh lanu” — and it shall be righteousness for us (Devarim 6:25).

A servant need not expect a wage or a reward from his employer: he is hired for this work, and on the contrary he must do it well. We are bound to fulfill our mission in this world, and ours carries many responsibilities: on it depend the balance of the world, the very health of the universe. But what effort do we put into it?

We do our duty as we should, but the wage we must expect is tzedakah: a charity, a gesture of the Holy One, blessed be He, toward us. That is why Elul begins with rachamim, the selichot, the invocation of divine mercy — the mercy that made the second Tablets possible.

When we put ourselves on the same footing as others, we call forth the measure of justice; and before it, it is said: these are My creatures, and those too. We are on the same scale: why should we be favored? We claim nothing: we do toward the universe what we do toward our children.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We claim nothing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all keep a secret account of what we are owed — in the family, at work, even in our prayers. What is written in that account? And what would happen if we decided tonight to close it?

SUBJECT 08

Kippur, a day of joy



PRESENTATION

We imagine Kippur as the most austere day of the year. Yet the Rav concludes his lecture with a surprising Mishnah, which places it among the two finest festive days of Israel.

THE QUESTION

How can the day of fasting and forgiveness be a day of joy?

THE ANSWER

“There were no festive days for Israel like the fifteenth of Av and the day of Kippur” (Mishnah Ta’anit 4:8).

On the fifteenth of Av, a few days after mourning the destruction of the Temple, people returned to life: it was the day of meetings, of new shidduchim; homes were going to be rebuilt.

On Kippur it is the same. It is not an austere day; it is a day of joy, because it heralds another opening for man. Like the slaves who, in the Jubilee year, were freed on that day, man too gains his own freedom, in the full sense of the word.

That is the message of the selichot, which begin on the first day of Elul and culminate on the day of Kippur: to implore divine help in what we undertake, with a sacred sense of our responsibilities.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is a day that is not austere; it is a day of joy.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

From what would we like to be freed on Kippur this year — a debt, a fear, a habit? And how can we prepare, starting now, a Kippur that is also a joy for the family?