

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

ROSH HASHANAH

9 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Nine questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Inscribe Us in the Book of Life”: why the Amidah of Rosh
Hashanah keeps repeating the same request, why life is spoken of
in the plural, and why the word “good” is missing from the first
Ten Commandments. All the way to the part of us we do not
master, and the help we ask for to integrate it.



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

Four times the same request



PRESENTATION

The additions proper to Rosh Hashanah in the Amidah all come down, says the Rav, to a single request: to be inscribed for life. He rereads them one by one, from the first blessing to the last, as one would read a greeting card.

THE QUESTION

Why does the prayer of the day of judgment fit entirely into a single request — and what does the small nuance that slips into it reveal?

THE ANSWER

“Zochrenu le-chayim, Melech chafetz ba-chayim” — Remember us for life, King who desires life.

In the first blessing, that of Avraham, marked by kindness: remember us for life, inscribe us in the book of life, for Your sake, G-d of life. In the second, that of Yitzchak, which calls on gevurah, strictness: who is like You, merciful Father, who remembers His creatures for life, in mercy.

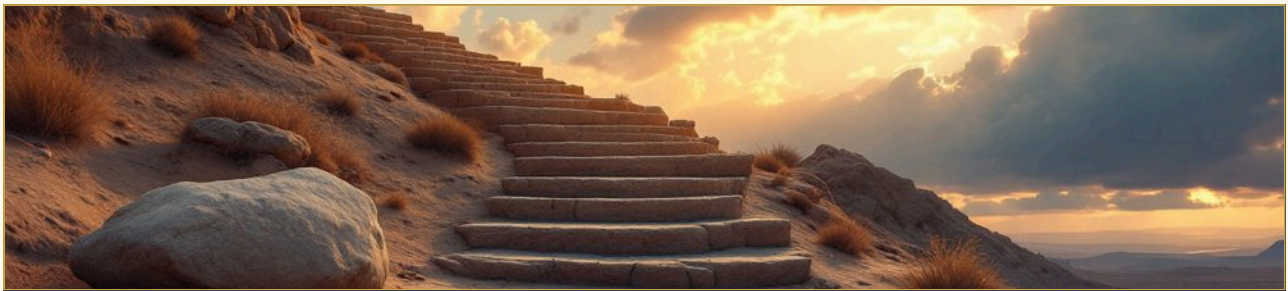
Then, toward the end, a nuance appears: “inscribe for a good life all the children of Your covenant.” Until then we spoke of life, plain and simple; now, of a life of happiness. Could there be a good life and a cursed life?

Finally: may we be inscribed in the book of life, of blessing, of peace, of prosperity, of salvation and of consolation. There you have it, smiles the Rav: a fine year-end greeting card.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If we had to write our own “greeting card” for the family, what would we ask for first? And why do we almost always add “a good” life?

Why is life spoken of in the plural?



PRESENTATION

“Remember us for life”: the Hebrew word for life, *chayim*, is never used in the singular. The Rav makes this his first remark on what Judaism calls living.

THE QUESTION

What does this double form say about the life we ask for — and why must we know how to come back down as well as go up?

THE ANSWER

Yaakov's ladder: “angels of G-d were going up and coming down on it” (Bereshit 28:12).

Judaism does not call life a renunciation of the world or of all enjoyment, but enjoying life to the full, on condition of joining heaven and earth to it. *Chayim* is a dual word: there is not one life. We always live a double life: inner and outer, in this world and in the world beyond, in reality and in dreams.

We are always on the scale of Yaakov's ladder: the angels going up and coming down are us; we are the angels who populate the ladder. We must know how to rise, but also have the wisdom to come back down, to take life as a gift from the Holy One, blessed be He, and to desire it in this world.

For life is the best of blessings, the perfect blessing: it allows us to enjoy closeness to the divine, since the divine is *Elokim chayim*, the source of life, the essence of life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The angels going up and coming down are us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily say: later, when I have time, I'll take care of what really matters. Where, in our home, does the line between the two lives run? And what have we put off “until later” that should have been lived this year?

The covenant G-d did not ask for



PRESENTATION

Three covenants were made with man; that of Noach, that of Avraham, that of Sinai. And just before Rosh Hashanah we read a parasha in which the covenant is renewed once again — but this time, it is not G-d who asks for it.

THE QUESTION

Who feels the need to renew the covenant on the eve of entering the Promised Land, and what does it mean that this time it comes from below?

THE ANSWER

“Atem nitzavim ha-yom kulchem” — You are all standing here today (Devarim 29:9).

With Noach, G-d commits never again to destroy His work, but sets a condition, the seven Noahide laws, without asking for man's approval: the world cannot stand without them. With Avraham, the covenant requires a physical mark, milah, at the foundation of one's being and of procreation. At Sinai, paradoxically, the people is asked to adhere of its own free will: all that the L-rd says, we will do.

Then comes “You are all standing here today”, which our Sages understand as referring to the day of Rosh Hashanah. But the covenant is no longer asked for by G-d: it is Moshe who feels the need to renew it, and to bind to it the present generation along with the one not yet here.

What happened? We were children who needed a somewhat strict upbringing. At the threshold of the promised land, after forty years in the desert — the desert of the nations — we reached such maturity that our faith is no longer to wait for G-d to act on our behalf, but to answer what G-d expects of us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Our faith is not to wait for G-d to act on our behalf, but to answer what G-d expects of us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We keep our promises when someone holds us to them. What promise does no one ask of us, and yet we should make this year? To whom will we say it tonight, so that it exists?

The word missing from the first Ten Commandments



PRESENTATION

The commandment to honor one's parents appears in both versions of the Ten Commandments. In the first: so that your days may be prolonged. In the second is added: and so that it may go well with you. One more word — and a question in the Talmud.

THE QUESTION

Why is the word “good” missing from the first Ten Commandments — and what does its absence say about those to whom it had to be promised?

THE ANSWER

Rabbi Chanina ben Agil questions Rabbi Chiya bar Abba (tractate Bava Kamma 54b–55a).

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba does not know what to answer and refers him to a master of aggadah. The answer reported is this: the word is not written in the first Ten Commandments because those Tablets were destined to be broken; they therefore did not merit this qualifier. Otherwise, the good would have ceased for Israel.

The Rav's answer is simple: life in itself is a source of blessing, and it calls for no other qualifier. Through life, man can bring about the meeting with the divine and fulfill his mission. That is why, in the first text, respect for one's parentage is required without any compensation: the one blessing is life.

But is everyone able to grasp this? No. A people that, after the revelation, found a way to bow down before a calf showed that it was not there yet. It needed softening, promises. So in the second Ten Commandments, G-d came back down to the level of human beings: so that your days may be prolonged, and so that it may go well with you.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are not capable of grasping life as a full and complete source of blessing: we need gentleness, promises.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To whom, this year, did we have to promise a reward to obtain what should have gone without saying? And we ourselves: what would we have stopped doing if no one had promised us anything in return?

Adam and adamah



PRESENTATION

In the second version of the Ten Commandments, the promise continues: “...in the land that the L-rd your G-d gives you.” Life and good are always tied to the land. The Rav dwells on this tie, and uses a word he takes care to explain.

THE QUESTION

Why is the promise of offspring always tied to that of the land — and what does “motherland” mean here?

THE ANSWER

“So that it may go well with you, in the land that the L-rd your G-d gives you” (Devarim 5:16).

Our dimension as Adam is perfect only within the bounds of the promised land, to the point that our Sages said the mitzvot are signposts for the return to our land: it is there that Israel reaches its full dimension. In a foreign land, the Torah is cut off from the laws relating to the land and to the Sanctuary, and we are as if cut off from a spiritual part of ourselves.

Others speak of a fatherland, says the Rav; we speak of a “motherland.” The people’s relationship to its land is that of a man to his wife: when the Assembly of Israel is back within its borders, it recovers, like a man, the part that had been taken from it. And when it has not proved worthy, there is something like a rejection, a divorce: exile — one leaves the house.

But returning home is possible. That is why teshuvah is first a collective and national phenomenon, before being individual: that is what Nitzavim emphasizes, the solidarity of the Jewish people as a whole.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Others speak of a fatherland; we speak of a motherland.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our family links everyday life to the land of Israel — a mitzvah, a memory, a plan? And if we thought of it as a marriage, where would our relationship stand?

The small root that does not follow



PRESENTATION

In every collective commitment there is a loose electron: a root that holds back and, little by little, gnaws away at the vital forces of the whole. The Rav says this holds for a people, and just as much for a single person.

THE QUESTION

If our free will is always cut short by a part we do not master, what is the point of making resolutions on Rosh Hashanah?

THE ANSWER

“Lest there be among you a root bearing poison and wormwood” (Devarim 29:17).

In a community, however hard I try to fulfill my duty, I cannot be sure the other will follow, nor in the same way. And this small root that does not fully commit distills its poison until it weakens the potential of the nation: we all find ourselves condemned to an unwanted fate, paying for those who neglected their obligation.

It happens at the individual level too. However much we want to be righteous, to build a family that can weather anything, to succeed in life: we do not fully command our free will. Even today, when I pray and make good decisions, I know that tomorrow I will not change from one extreme to the other.

Our wish on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, then, is to receive G-d's help to integrate that part, so that it does not drag us down. “I am never sure of myself,” the Rav admits. “I am always asking myself questions, even as I speak to you.”

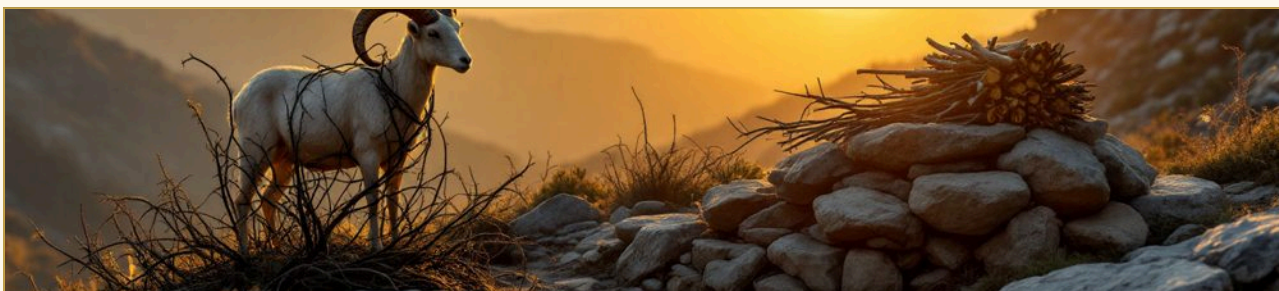
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There will always remain something I will not master.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know what our small root is: the weakness we do not master and never talk about. Should it be pulled out, or should we learn to integrate it? What would we ask for tonight, if we dared to name it?

A partner in everything I undertake



PRESENTATION

Why, on Rosh Hashanah, do we invoke the Akedat Yitzchak and the thirteen attributes? The Rav answers by starting from that part of ourselves we do not master — and at the end he draws hope from it.

THE QUESTION

What do we do with our imperfection on Rosh Hashanah — and what hope can we draw from it?

THE ANSWER

The Akedat Yitzchak and the thirteen attributes, invoked in the prayers of the day.

We call upon the Akedat Yitzchak because we are Yitzchak: this people placed on the altar of the nations for the salvation of humanity — but aware that it is not perfect. Renewing the covenant means showing maturity, and saying at the same time that the whole cannot depend on me alone.

There is a partner in what I undertake: not only my fellow, nor only my spouse, but the divine, the third dimension with which I live. When I recite the thirteen attributes, it is with the awareness that I can only turn to the One who holds them in their entirety, so that He may let me benefit from them at the moment I feel myself failing.

A small failing left unchecked can destroy us spiritually. But a positive act can change not only my own person, but my family cell, my social cell: if you believe that one can destroy, you must also be convinced that one can rebuild everything.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If you believe that one can destroy, you must also be convinced that you can rebuild everything.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In which family project did we forget that there was a “third partner”? And what that was damaged this year do we truly believe we can rebuild?

Living for oneself, becoming a model



PRESENTATION

A listener shares her difficulty: how can one share the love of spiritual life with a whole generation of young people who seem disconnected from it? The Rav, who says he himself quickly runs out of breath, offers neither method nor argument.

THE QUESTION

How can we pass on a spirituality to those who do not want it?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “We do not practice a Judaism for others.”

We do not practice a Judaism for others. We live it first for ourselves: we answer to our own expectations, our hopes, our obligations, our duties. We do not want to convert anyone: we live with the conviction that we came to fulfill a mission, and we try to carry it out as well as possible.

But know that you become, without wanting to, a model for your husband, for your children, for your grandchildren, and little by little it spreads. As in a home we want to see succeed: we are ready to give ground, to show humility, to bear things patiently, as long as it succeeds.

The Rav gives the example of someone who first thought of building his own house, and who, through his house, opened his doors to many people. Try to build your life on this double register, material and spiritual: there is no gap, no separation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

You become, without wanting to, a model.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What have our children, or our parents, learned from us without our teaching it to them? Let each person name a gesture he saw in someone close that one day made him want to do the same.

Each to his own idol?



PRESENTATION

Another listener asks: loving life, nature, music — is that not already a disguised way of loving the Creator? The Rav agrees — on one condition.

THE QUESTION

Is marveling at the beauty of the world enough, or is something more needed?

THE ANSWER

“On that day the L-rd shall be one, and His name one” (Zechariah 14:9).

Absolutely: marveling at the beauty of nature, of a musical work or of any art is also paying tribute to the divine. But the world is idolatrous on different levels. There must be a faithfulness, a common denominator to all these beauties: they must not be allowed to fracture and turn into little idols — each to his own idol.

There is a whole: it is Elokim, the G-d of nature, present in all His manifestations. These energies must be made to converge into one, toward their source: that of love and kindness. What bears His name is multiple, but Hashem is one in His essence. Bringing them back to their source — that is Judaism.

That is why there is not an artist's life and, alongside it, another life. There are not different sequences of life: it is one single life that covers everything, that breathes the same beauty, and through which the same breath of the shofar passes.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The same breath of the shofar passes through them.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What fills us with the most wonder — a landscape, a piece of music, a book, a match? Let each person say it, then look for how to connect it to the rest of his life instead of making it a separate “little idol”.