

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

SUKKOT

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Sukkot: From Kippur to the Sukkah of Peace”: why the festivals
are named in the plural, why Kippur is not first of all forgiveness
but covering one another, and why every evening we ask for a hut
rather than a house.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

Table of Topics

Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Sukkot table

01 **Why are Pesach and Hanukkah in the singular?**

02 **Your Name is one, and so is Your people**

03 **Kippur is not forgiveness**

04 **The two questions of judgment**

05 **The Ten Commandments face to face**

06 **Thirty-two times Elokim**

07 **Leaving one's cocoon**

08 **The four species: nothing, and everything**

09 **The ticket comes only at the end of Sukkot**

10 **A hut rebuilt exactly as it was**

11 **Esav equals shalom**

12 **The sukkah the nations would like to have**

Why are Pesach and Hanukkah in the singular?



PRESENTATION

The Rav opens his lecture, dedicated to the hostages, with a remark about language. Shavuot is a plural, so is Sukkot, so is Kippurim. But Pesach is a singular, and so is Hanukkah.

THE QUESTION

What is it about freedom and education that calls for the singular, where the other festivals speak in the plural?

THE ANSWER

“Educate the child according to his way” — King Shlomo, in Mishlei.

When it comes to freedom, there is no collective freedom. Each person takes it upon himself to free himself, to tear himself away from his conditioning, both outer and inner. That is Pesach, and it is a singular.

Hanukkah is education, the very foundation of Judaism. The mistake we always make is to reduce teaching to a whole, to a collective. Ideal teaching must come down to the pupil's level, like a tutor in charge of a single child, because not all sensitivities are the same, nor all capacities. That is what King Shlomo recommends: to educate the child according to his way, according to his capacity, according to his sensitivity. That is the best way for education to succeed.

So it is person to person. There is here a personal involvement in conceiving one's own life, in determining one's project, its beginning and its goals.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

When it comes to freedom, there is no collective freedom.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often raise our children as a block, with the same words for all. Let each person describe the particular “way” of one of his children, siblings or pupils — the one that belongs to no one else.

SUBJECT 02

Your Name is one, and so is Your people



PRESENTATION

If freedom is won alone, there is one domain where the Rav refuses the singular: commitment to the Torah. There, the whole people is committed, “as one man, with one heart.” And he asks a historian's question: how many nations have died out?

THE QUESTION

What has kept united a people that counts for nothing in numbers, when so many nations have disappeared?

THE ANSWER

“Atah Echad ve-Shimcha Echad” — You are One and Your Name is One (Shabbat Minchah prayer).

When it comes to commitment to the path of the Torah, the whole people is committed, like one man, with one heart, one will. The Torah is the basic cement of the Jewish people. Take away the Torah, and nothing is left that can make this people one.

Now this unity is equivalent, in a certain sense, to the very unity we proclaim. You are One and Your Name is One, says the Rav — but Your people too is one. The unity of the Jewish people is fundamental.

What has guaranteed it is the same laws, the same practices, the same convictions. That is why we are still here. How many nations have died out? The Jewish people counts for nothing in numbers, and it is still present.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Take away the Torah, and nothing will be left that can truly make the Jewish people one.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family too, what holds us together when tastes, opinions and distances divide us? Let each person name a shared practice that, in his eyes, still makes us “one heart.”

Kippur is not forgiveness



PRESENTATION

Yom HaKippurim is translated “the day of atonements”, or “the day of forgiveness.” “How dreadful!” exclaims the Rav: I forgive, you forgive, and everyone stays in his own corner. The Hebrew word says something else entirely.

THE QUESTION

If forgiveness is selichah, what does kapparah mean — and why is Kippurim in the plural?

THE ANSWER

“Ki be-tzelem Elokim asah et ha-adam” — for in the image of G-d He made man (Bereshit 9:6).

We must ask forgiveness, of G-d and of our fellow, but that is not enough. Beyond forgiveness there is kapparah. Kaper means to cover: to provide cover for the other, to stand by him, to regard his commitment as committing me too. Kippur is the day on which the effective solidarity of all members of the people of Israel is affirmed, each taking responsibility for the other. That is why we say Kippurim, in the plural.

Why this solidarity? Because whoever has committed himself to the path of the Torah has taken it upon himself to spread it, to share it, to make it shine. He believes in the image of G-d that every person bears. So we can never separate our faith in G-d from the other.

Even more, says the Rav, serving the other is truly the place where my faith in G-d is forged.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

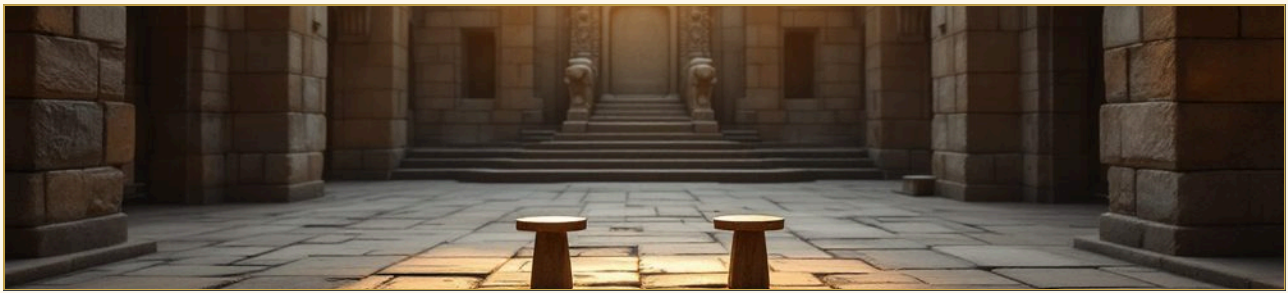
Whoever separates the service of G-d from the service of man has not yet left the sphere of idolatry.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Asking forgiveness leaves each of us in his own corner; covering the other commits us. For whom around us could we “provide cover” this year — and how, concretely?

SUBJECT 04

The two questions of judgment



PRESENTATION

All the prayers of the Tishrei festivals revolve around the kingship of G-d. Our Sages say that man, when called to account, will be asked: did you regard the Creator of the world as your king? But the Rav asks: what does that get us?

THE QUESTION

Why is the question “did you proclaim G-d king?” not enough, and what other question goes with it?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “Did you affirm the sovereignty of your fellow?”

Recognizing G-d's kingship commits us to being servants: whether we like it or not, we must obey the Master's will. Otherwise come sanctions, curses, pogroms, until we accept His sovereignty. But what does that get us, if everything stops there?

That is why a second question is tied to the first. Did you affirm the sovereignty of G-d? And: did you affirm the sovereignty of your fellow?

Affirming one without the other leads nowhere. For the Torah, at its source, joined obligations toward G-d and obligations toward man. It set them in parallel, it intertwined them, so that it is impossible to separate them.

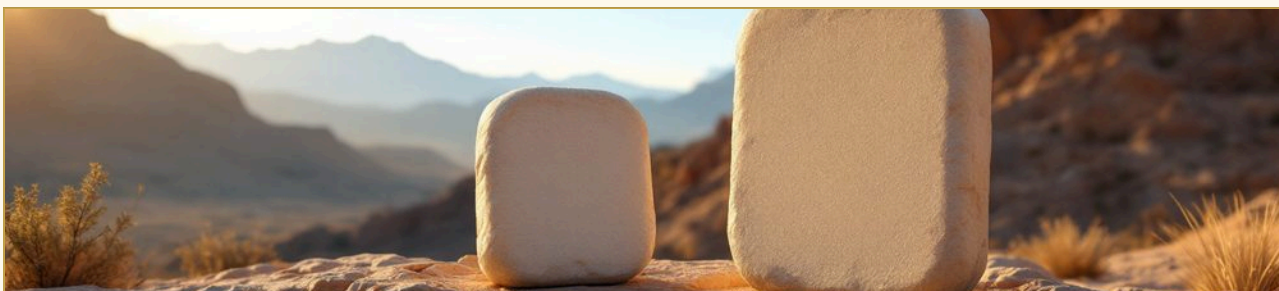
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Affirming G-d's sovereignty without affirming your fellow's, or your fellow's without G-d's sovereignty, leads nowhere.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What would “affirming the sovereignty” of a brother, a spouse, a child mean in our home? In what area do we tend to rule over others instead of recognizing them?

The Ten Commandments face to face



PRESENTATION

The Ten Utterances are engraved on two tablets. The Rav reads them facing each other: each commandment toward G-d has its counterpart toward man, and one cannot be understood without the other.

THE QUESTION

What connects “I am the L-rd your G-d” with “you shall not murder”, Shabbat with false testimony?

THE ANSWER

“I am the L-rd your G-d” facing “You shall not murder” (Shemot 20).

On one side, “I am the L-rd your G-d”; on the other, “you shall not murder.” Whoever kills has diminished the image of G-d that is in man. And whoever violates his fellow's intimacy is as if he were practicing idolatry, as if he were associating another belief with G-d.

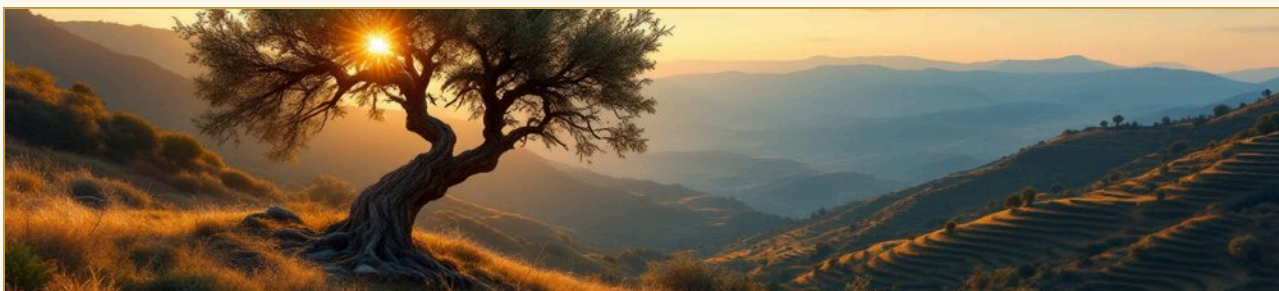
So too “you shall not steal” facing “you shall not take the name of G-d in vain.” Whoever infringes on his fellow's property contests the distribution of this world's riches as G-d conceived it, since we are born under different stars and do not share a common inheritance.

And Shabbat faces false testimony. Whoever desecrates Shabbat is as if he were bearing false witness against his fellow — and his fellow is first of all the One who gave him life, his Creator, who instituted Shabbat for him and breathed a soul into him. The bond between the two tablets is close, inseparable.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let us choose one of the Ten Commandments at the table and look together for its counterpart. What does it teach us about the way we treat others — and about the way we serve G-d?

Thirty-two times Elokim



PRESENTATION

The day of Kippur ends with a sentence repeated seven times: “Hashem Hu ha-Elokim”, the L-rd is G-d. The Rav connects this final cry to the account of creation, where the name Elokim appears thirty-two times — the numerical value of lev, the heart.

THE QUESTION

Why end Kippur by proclaiming that “the L-rd is Elokim” — what must pass from one name to the other?

THE ANSWER

“Hashem Hu ha-Elokim” (I Melachim 18:39), the close of Ne’ilah.

The heart ensures the perfect distribution of the flow of life, of balance. But the name Elokim is constraining, because it is tied to the laws of nature. These laws run from cause to effect; they are determined: as soon as we come into life, we move little by little toward death. Yet bringing children into the world only to see them disappear is not the purpose. Each has a role to fulfill; each carries a particle of the image of G-d.

That is why we repeat “Hashem Hu ha-Elokim”: what belongs to nature, conditioned by creation, must be passed over, poured into the sphere of love.

And life is called chayim, in the plural: one cannot separate life here below from life beyond, nor life beyond from life here below.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is through love that we can truly triumph over both justice and death.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our lives there are things we undergo like “laws of nature”: temperament, habit, age. Which one would we like to pass “into the sphere of love” this year?

Leaving one's cocoon



PRESENTATION

Coming out of Kippur, we do not rest: we take planks and build a hut with fragile walls and a roof that lets the sky through. Then we leave the house to live in it for seven days.

THE QUESTION

Why is the first thing asked of us after Kippur to leave our house — and what proof is expected of us?

THE ANSWER

We must not remain in the world of theory: daily application is needed. When one has wronged one's fellow, it is not enough to ask his forgiveness; one must tell him how one wronged him, lay out one's own faults. That is how one checks, on leaving Kippur, whether one has taken the right measure — whether one has not regarded oneself as entitled to life, when one still had to prove one's commitment to one's fellow.

So we build sukkot. Huts are more real: we leave our cocoon, our house, our conditioning, our box, our convictions. We lay them out in broad daylight and put them into practice. We open our door; we open our house.

And at the same time, we place ourselves in the shade, in G-d's shelter, under the ananei ha-kavod, the clouds of glory: we are all placed under the same banner.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We must not remain in the world of theory. Daily application is needed.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person name a conviction he has never had to put into practice outside his home. And this question: whom have we asked for forgiveness without ever saying for what?

The four species: nothing, and everything



PRESENTATION

A citron, a palm branch, myrtle and willow. Yesterday at the market these plants were worth almost nothing; after the festival they will be worth nothing at all. And yet, during Sukkot, we take them in hand and wave them like trophies.

THE QUESTION

What do these four species say, and why must each bring what it has to the others?

THE ANSWER

The etrog, the lulav, the hadas and the aravah.

They represent nothing by themselves. But during the festival, through their symbolism, they count as service of G-d and of man. What matters is that during Sukkot we said it, we cried it out with these four species: we have loved, we have triumphed. These are our swords; these are our weapons.

There is the aravah, the willow, which has neither fragrance nor taste, and is nonetheless included in this divine service. There is the etrog, which might tend toward independence, toward living apart, like a tzaddik or a chassid who does not want to be swept along by the movement: no, it too is there to spread its fragrance, its deeds, its thoughts, and to share them. And there is the lulav, bearing fruit but without fragrance: what it can give, its fruit, it shares with the others.

Those who bear fruit and those who give fragrance are thus all bound together in praise of the L-rd.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We have loved, we have triumphed. These are our swords; these are our weapons.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our family, who is the etrog tempted to live apart, who is the aravah who thinks he has nothing to offer? Let each person say what he has to share — a fruit or a fragrance.

SUBJECT 09

The ticket comes only at the end of Sukkot



PRESENTATION

On Kippur, every stream comes together in the same synagogue, with the same prayer book. The day ends with being inscribed for life. And yet we go on asking for a pitka tava, a good note, until the last day of Sukkot.

THE QUESTION

If we were inscribed for life on Kippur, why has the “ticket” not yet been won?

THE ANSWER

The blessing of Hashkivenu, added in the evening: “geulah arichta”, an extended redemption.

We fear that Kippur was only a surge, an elevation of the soul within a spiritual conditioning, and that on leaving it nothing remains. All that we promised, we have not yet shown the Father that we will keep. For in prayer there is geulah and shemirah: release and preservation. There is no point in reaching a level if one does not know how to stay there.

The structure of the prayer says so. In the evening, after the blessings surrounding the Shema, the Men of the Great Assembly added Hashkivenu, in which we ask for protection. Yet nothing is supposed to come between the blessing of redemption and the Amidah. Our Sages answered that it is a geulah arichta, a single extended redemption: protection is inherent in the redemption of Israel.

And it is at night that we need it: by day, the miracle of this small people facing seventy nations is visible; at night, facing persecution, only faith remains.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is no point in reaching a state if we do not know how to preserve it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person say what he has already let slip since Kippur ended. What concrete “guard” should be put in place so that the decision holds?

SUBJECT 10

A hut rebuilt exactly as it was



PRESENTATION

Every evening we ask: “U-feros aleinu sukkat shelomecha”, spread over us Your sukkah of peace. And we pray that “the fallen sukkah of David” be raised up. The Maharal of Prague dwells on this word.

THE QUESTION

Why do we speak of the “sukkah of David” and not the “house of David”?

THE ANSWER

“I will raise up the sukkah of David that has fallen” (Amos 9:11) — a question of the Maharal of Prague.

When one speaks of the house of David, the Maharal explains, and the house falls into ruin, it must be built anew. And building anew is never the same thing: one changes the plans, one changes the infrastructure.

But a hut, when it falls, one simply puts it back up. It is just a puzzle that has come apart: one puts it together again, and it is always the same hut, always the same sukkah. David’s sukkah is a sukkah of protection that always remains the same.

Even when it comes apart, one need only put it back up, redo the puzzle and reassemble it. It may be fragile on the outside, but on the inside it remains very solid.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It may be fragile on the outside, but on the inside it remains very solid.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our family has “fallen” this year — a habit, a relationship, a tradition? Must everything be rebuilt differently, or should we simply put the same pieces back together?

SUBJECT 11

Esav equals shalom



PRESENTATION

The Kabbalah notes that the name Esav has the same numerical value as shalom, peace: 376. Now Sukkot proclaims precisely a “sukkat shalom”, a sukkah of peace. We must therefore know which peace we are speaking of.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yaakov refuse the peace Esav offers him — and what peace does the sukkah proclaim?

THE ANSWER

Esav (376) and shalom (376); Aharon, bearer of peace, through whose merit we had the clouds of glory.

When Esav came before Yaakov, he offered him peace: let us walk together. That is what the nations offer us: don't worry, we will cover you, we will guarantee your protection. Yet that is the greatest danger, precisely because it is a mission of peace.

Yaakov did not want it. He answered: I prefer to walk at the family's pace; we cannot go together. Peace as you conceive it is not mine, for mine is unifying, whereas theirs is separatist, fragmenting.

The man who carried the banner of the other peace is Aharon, who sought to negotiate peace within the people of Israel. It is through his merit that we were surrounded by the clouds of glory, and his attribute is hod, majesty.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Peace as you conceive it is not mine.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are sometimes offered a convenient peace: “don't worry, we'll take care of everything.” Did we accept, this year, a peace that divided us instead of uniting us? And who in our home plays the role of Aharon?

SUBJECT 12

The sukkah the nations would like to have



PRESENTATION

Sukkot is the universal festival, the one others want to celebrate with us. In the future, says the Rav, the nations will come forward saying: “We too carry the love of humanity; we too have our sukkot.” And yet he insists on the purity of our sukkah.

THE QUESTION

If Sukkot is the festival of all humanity, why must our sukkah remain “ours”?

THE ANSWER

The pitka tava, the receipt attesting that the decision of Kippur was sincere.

The nations have philosophies in the service of man. But when it comes to putting these philosophies into practice, one sees how bankrupt they are, they who placed man at the summit of everything: as soon as their immediate interests are at stake, all these theories are worth nothing. The Jewish people, for its part, has preserved its values as best it could, and in some measure it passes them on.

That is why, on leaving Kippur, we must prove that we remain exclusive in this Jewish solidarity, without cluttering it with outside conceptions. Just as we claim the purity and holiness of Jerusalem as the reference for our place, the sukkah remains for us not the one the other nations want, but ours, pure in its inwardness.

And when we have given proof of this, at the close of the festival, we are entitled to the pitka tava.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are entitled to the pitka tava, the receipt attesting that our determination on the day of Kippur was truly sincere and has proved itself.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We gladly share our values — but do we still know what makes them ours? What in the way we live the festival could not be borrowed from anyone?