

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

# SUKKOT

*12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table*

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Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture  
“Sukkot: The Festival of Joy”: why joy is not pleasure, why we  
go round in a circle, what was really being drawn when the water  
was drawn, and why one can rejoice precisely after having broken  
the first Tablets.



*Rav Raphaël Benizri*

# Table of Topics

*Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Sukkot table*

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## Joy is not pleasure



### PRESENTATION

On the day after Kippur, the Rav warns: one can perform the mitzvot without being imbued with them. One then has only a religious ritual no different from those of other religions. Sukkot, “the season of our joy”, comes to answer this danger.

### THE QUESTION

*What makes the difference between performing mitzvot and living the joy of a relationship?*

### THE ANSWER

***Zman simchatenu — the season of our joy.***

The whole point is not to perform the mitzvot. It is to manage to settle into an authentic, true spirituality, and to see in the mitzvot the instruments, the waymarks of the path that lets me live in intimacy with the divine.

The Rav compares this to a love relationship. What matters in it is not the gifts we give each other, nor the pleasures we treat ourselves to here and there, but the intimacy we share, the complementarity that makes our joy.

For joy lies in the whole set of contradictions that complement one another harmoniously and give that fullness of being. At Sukkot, I reach a level where I feel this nearness of G-d. Each person realizes his relationship with G-d at his own level, but the festival gives a unity to these different conceptions, which meet at their root.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Joy lies in the whole set of contradictions that complement one another harmoniously and give that fullness of being.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, do we give each other gifts or share an intimacy? Which mitzvah do we do out of habit, and which truly gives us a feeling of closeness?

## SUBJECT 02

### Why does the festival go round in a circle?

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#### PRESENTATION

What characterizes Sukkot are the hakafot: we go around the Torah, as once we went around the altar. And when the Torah simply says “the festival”, chag, without specifying which, it always means Sukkot.

#### THE QUESTION

*Why is Sukkot the festival of the circle — and what does the word chag itself say?*

#### THE ANSWER

***Chag, from the same family as chug, the circle, and mechugah, the compass.***

The circle is the ideal geometric figure: everyone in it stands at an equal distance from the center. We do the hakafot around the Torah because we no longer have a sanctuary; before, they were done around the mizbe'ach, the altar.

The word chag itself comes from there: one draws the circle with a compass. Each festival brings a cycle of light, an illumination. But at Sukkot, the radiance of the light is immense.

Why? Because we have given a positive meaning even to our wanderings. We have integrated them into a curve of life in which they too have their place. The circle excludes no one and nothing: it holds together what, in a straight line, would have been opposed.

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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In a circle, no one is in front or behind. Is there someone at our table who always feels “at the end of the line”? How could we, tonight, set him back at an equal distance from the center?

## SUBJECT 03

### Stone, flour, animal and man

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#### PRESENTATION

On the altar of the Temple, all the kingdoms of creation met: the mineral — water, ash, stone; the vegetable — flour, oil; the animal; and man. The Rav sees in this an answer to the gravest question: do we still have the right to believe that life has a meaning?

#### THE QUESTION

*Why do all the kingdoms of creation come together on the altar — and on what can we found the faith that allows us to pass on life?*

#### THE ANSWER

On the altar, man, endowed with speech, gives meaning to all of this, and draws nourishment from it in order to serve an ideal of life. Yet committing children to life in times like these is a gamble. It is not easy. What guarantees do we have? It takes a great deal of faith, and each person has it at his own level.

This faith very often rests on what seems absurd; the Rav prefers not to found it on certainty of outcome. But he has one certainty: this world has a meaning. It cannot be the fruit of chance, with me sitting here playing the lottery every day — not to win, but to lose.

If this world obeys a higher will, and I am the Creator's partner in its purpose, then everything is justified. The mineral, the vegetable, the animal also answer to a will to be, to serve a cause.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*The certainty is that this world has a meaning.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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What gives us the courage today to pass on life and our values to our children? Let each person say on what, for him, the certainty that the world has a meaning rests.

## Seventy offerings for seventy nations



### PRESENTATION

During the days of Sukkot, the Jewish people offered seventy sacrifices on behalf of the seventy nations that make up humanity. And it is said that in the future the nations will be obliged to celebrate a single festival: not Pesach, not Shavuot, but Sukkot.

### THE QUESTION

*Why the number seventy — and why is Sukkot the festival the nations will be able to celebrate?*

### THE ANSWER

***The seventy bulls of Sukkot; the seventy members of the great court.***

A cause limited to my little self, my little family, my nation would not be a cause: it is universal. Why seventy? Because man is structured according to seven attributes, and these models of existence fit into a structure of ten levels: when seven is set within ten, we arrive at these seventy samples of humanity. They are there to judge our progress — that is why the great court has seventy members, representing the sensibilities that exist across the nations and are contained within the cell of the Jewish people.

The nations will be obliged to celebrate only Sukkot, because it is the festival within their reach. What one seeks is this joy of living, this complementarity of life.

But it must not be a fleeting joy, the joy of a drug, with a hangover the next day. It is a joy that allows one's being to regenerate completely and to see the world differently.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*A cause not limited to my little self, my little family, my nation: it is universal.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What joy do we speak of at our table: the kind that leaves a hangover, or the kind that regenerates? And for what part of the world did we feel responsible this year?

## My true home is my sukkah



### PRESENTATION

Our Sages point out two mitzvot into which a person enters entirely: the ritual bath, belonging more to the feminine than to the masculine, and the sukkah, belonging more to the masculine than to the feminine. And under the chuppah, the bride circles around her husband.

### THE QUESTION

*Why would the sukkah be our true home — and why is the feminine exempt from this mitzvah?*

### THE ANSWER

***The two mitzvot in which one is wholly immersed: the mikveh and the sukkah.***

My true home is not the one I live in permanently, for which I go into debt all my life to give myself the greatest comfort. My true home is my sukkah: at the threshold of my house, on the roof, on the balcony. It adjoins my house; it is vulnerable, fragile on the outside, but so solid on the inside.

It surrounds me, it clothes me, as a wife clothes her husband. That is the meaning of the circles made around the husband under the chuppah: the feminine is man's wall; it surrounds him on every side, and the sukkah is of the same nature.

The inwardness of this sukkah is the feminine, and that is why the feminine is exempt from it. Let us respect this: it is not an exclusion. And there one tastes the festival in total gratuitousness, expecting nothing, with the sole joy of being able to complete, however little, what someone else lacks.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*The inwardness of this sukkah is the feminine, and that is why the feminine is exempt from it. It is not an exclusion.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The sukkah is fragile outside and solid inside; our houses are often the reverse. What did we strengthen on the outside this year, and what did we let crumble within?

## Why pour water on the altar?



### PRESENTATION

On the altar, with the daily offering, wine was poured. On Sukkot, water was poured. People went down to the spring of the Shiloach, drew water, and came back up singing and sounding trumpets, on the fifteen steps that correspond to the fifteen Shir HaMa'alot. This was called Simchat Beit HaSho'evah, the joy of the water-drawing.

### THE QUESTION

*What exactly was being drawn, if not water — and why was this joy the high point of the festival?*

### THE ANSWER

***“And the spirit of G-d hovered over the face of the waters” (Bereshit 1:2).***

Water does not appear in the inventory of creation: we do not know when water was created. From the outset we are already in a world where water exists, since the divine spirit hovers above the waters. These waters, essential to all life, exist simultaneously with the manifestation of the divine spirit. Then the lower waters, left for man's needs here below, were separated from the upper waters, called shamayim.

So what was being drawn was not water: it was the divine spirit through this water, and it was poured onto the altar as if to consecrate it.

It was a return to the water that generates all creation, because it is at once purifying, germinating and nourishing. Nothing can be done without it.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*It was not water that was drawn: it was the divine spirit drawn through this water.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We drink, wash and water without thinking. What do we truly “draw” in our days? Let each person name a source that purifies him, makes him grow or nourishes him.

## SUBJECT 07

### Dancing is lifting one's feet

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#### PRESENTATION

Today we try to reproduce the joy of the water-drawing during the intermediate days of the festival, with dancing in synagogues and halls. But always in circles. The Rav dwells on the simplest gesture of dance.

#### THE QUESTION

*What exactly are we doing when we dance — and why holding hands?*

#### THE ANSWER

These dances always form the ideal geometric figure, the circle, in which the whole Jewish people takes its place — and not only it: all of humanity, since we are its representatives. That is why we join hands.

Dancing is lifting one's feet. Enough of the feet scraping the ground, staying confined in their matter, in their shoes. Dance is an effort at levitation.

That is the joy of the festival of Sukkot.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Dancing is lifting one's feet. Enough of the feet scraping the ground, staying confined in their matter, in their shoes.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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What in each of us refuses to leave the ground: a habit, a calculation, a caution? And when did we last dance with those we love?

## SUBJECT 08

### A house that is not a prison

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#### PRESENTATION

Our dearest wish, in the Birkat Hamazon of the festival days, is that the Merciful One raise up “the fallen sukkah of David.” The Rav underlines what we do not ask for: neither an empire of David, nor a vast country.

#### THE QUESTION

*What did David achieve, that we ask for the return of his hut rather than his kingdom?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Ha-Rachaman Hu yakim lanu et sukkat David ha-nofalet.”***

What David achieved in his life is a spirit: a house that is not a prison-like shelter for man, but an open house — open to nature, open to people, open to every tendency, with the possibility of combining all the ingredients into a single element in the service of G-d.

That is what we do with the lulav and the etrog: the etrog, symbol of the accomplished person; the lulav, of the man who asserts himself by standing upright; the hadas, by its fragrance. And the aravah, which has neither fragrance nor taste, and yet it is there; it has its say. On the last day, Hoshana Rabbah, we take only the aravah, as if to say that we are a little like the child who does not know how to ask questions.

But what unites us, first and foremost, is this will to merge into a community, to make a people, to make a humanity.

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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Is our house a closed shelter or an open house? Whom could we welcome into it during this festival — and which “aravah”, without apparent fragrance or taste, should we finally listen to?

## SUBJECT 09

### Why was Sarah also called Yiskah?



#### PRESENTATION

The word sukkah comes from a root meaning covering, that of the sechach placed on the hut. But the same root also means seeing, seeing beyond. And our Sages teach that Sarah bore a second name, Yiskah.

#### THE QUESTION

*What does a hut have to do with vision — and what does one see who agrees to cover his fellow?*

#### THE ANSWER

***Yiskah is Sarah, “who saw through the holy spirit.”***

This covering we want, and we want to share it with everyone. We are responsible; we form a covering for one another. And when we are imbued with this duty to cover one another, we gain access to a vision, a prophetic vision. Sarah was called Yiskah because she could see beyond things, the other side, the sacred in every movement of life.

The risk is sinking into daily worries, into problems, and chewing them over every day with their share of disappointments. Then we lose sight of what lies beyond all things; we have only a very limited vision; we have given in to defeat, to despair.

Yet holding the lulav on the day of Sukkot means saying: we have won. Not that we have an ideal life, without fault — that is not possible.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Holding the lulav on the day of Sukkot means saying: we have won.*

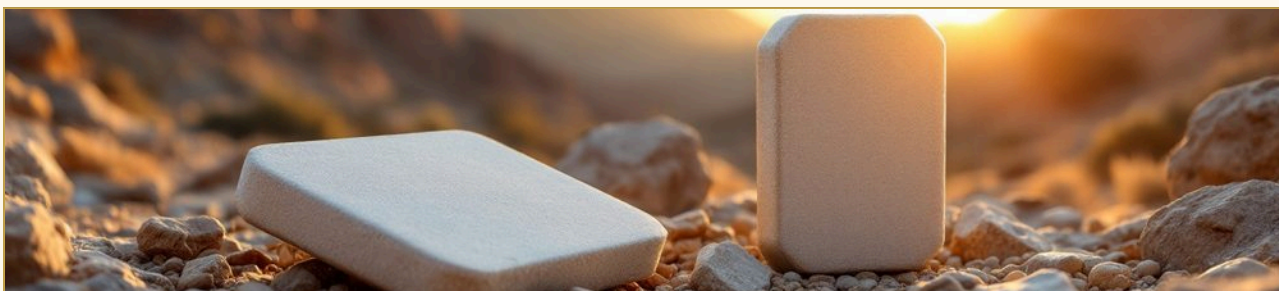
#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let each person name the worry that took up most of his view this year. And whom around us would we truly have seen, had we agreed to cover him?

## SUBJECT 10

### The joy of those who broke the Tablets

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#### PRESENTATION

The Torah almost never speaks of joy: once for Shavuot, three times for Sukkot. Why so much joy precisely now? The Rav recalls what happened on Kippur: there we received the second Tablets, after having broken the first.

#### THE QUESTION

*How can one rejoice most after a sin — and not before?*

#### THE ANSWER

***The chassidim: “Happy is our old age, which atones for the wanderings of our youth.”***

We were the breakers of the first Tablets. It was a scandal, and G-d said: I will make of Moshe a new people. Moshe answered: You are taking a risk; if a table on three legs did not hold up, how could a table on a single leg stand? So the method of teaching was changed, and on Kippur we were given the second Tablets. With them we defied the threat of annihilation, and we won.

We are glad because we have overcome the pitfalls. The chassidim used to say: happy is our youth, for those who had a quiet life; but happy too is our old age, which atones for all the wanderings of our youth, for those who made mistakes and pulled themselves together.

That is why the festival of Sukkot is such a fullness of being in joy.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Happy is the one who makes no mistakes, but happy is the one who has managed to be forgiven for his wanderings.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

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Are we ashamed of our past mistakes, or can we rejoice at having pulled ourselves together? Let each person tell, if he wishes, of a “second Tablet” in his life: what he rebuilt after having broken it.

## SUBJECT 11

### The festival of ingathering, the festival of reckoning



#### PRESENTATION

Sukkot is also called chag ha-asif, the festival of ingathering. For the Rav, it is also the festival of reckoning for the whole year of festivals: Pesach freed us, Shavuot gave us the Torah. What remains of each by the autumn?

#### THE QUESTION

*What have we done with the freedom of Pesach and the Torah of Shavuot — and why would one without the other be dangerous?*

#### THE ANSWER

##### ***Chag ha-asif — the festival of ingathering.***

The fullness of being of Sukkot comes to give meaning to freedom, because liberation without moral conscience would be dangerous.

But a moral conscience that was not shared with others, and that confined itself to strengthening one's own being, would also be a deviation of life.

What is needed is a moral conscience that breathes openness to the outside: going out toward nature, going out toward the outside world, and man's full responsibility for this world. This world is fleeting, but we give it such faith that it can at no moment disappear. While nature enters autumn, its decline, and will soon hibernate, we are the watchmen of this night, full of faith, full of joy.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

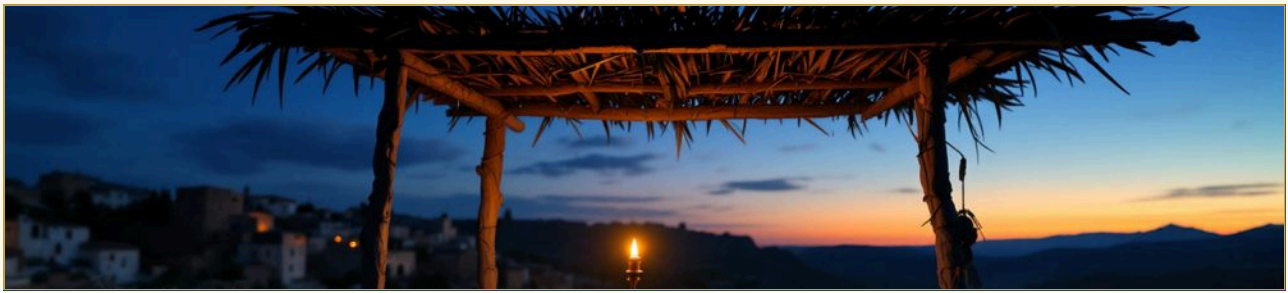
*Liberation without conscience would be dangerous.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Let us take our own harvest: what did we do this year with our freedom? And did our moral conscience stay shut up at home, or did it breathe out toward others?

## SUBJECT 12

### A bubble of time



#### PRESENTATION

The Rav ends his lecture with an image: the whole month of Tishrei is a bubble of time, like *bein ha-shemashot*, that waning of the day between sunset and nightfall, of which we do not know whether it belongs to the day gone by or the day to come.

#### THE QUESTION

*How can we live both inside and outside, in the fleeting and in the fixed — and where, then, is our joy?*

#### THE ANSWER

***“Make your sukkah your fixed dwelling, and your house your temporary one.”***

This waning of the day is full of promise. It sits on the scale between the two, on both the past and the future: that is what Tishrei is within time.

In space, it is the sukkah. In it we are at once in the *arai*, the fleeting, and in the *keva*, the fixed. The fixed becomes the fleeting, and the fleeting becomes the fixed in which we settle. We are on the threshold, inside and outside the house, inside and outside time.

In human terms too. There are the years we share with our grandparents, the past, and with our grandchildren, the future. And there are our own years, which encroach neither on our parents' past nor on our children's future: this furtive present, without real substance, at the crossroads of past and future. But that is where I stand.

#### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*That is where I stand, and that is my well of joy, my secret of being.*

#### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Between our parents and our children, where are “our” own years? Let each person say what, in the fleeting present he lives today, is his own well of joy.