

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYESHEV

10 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Ten questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayeshev: The Book of Generations”: with Yosef, the families of
the fathers become a people. A word that is complete only twice,
four faces of man, a garment that hides, a letter added to a name,
and the verse that sums up the whole Torah.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Only Twice Is the Word Complete



PRESENTATION

The word toldot, “generations”, keeps recurring in the Torah. But it is not always spelled the same way: sometimes with both its vavs, sometimes with a letter missing. For the Rav, that letter tells the state of history.

THE QUESTION

Why are the generations of heaven and earth, and those of Peretz, the only ones written “in full”?

THE ANSWER

“Eleh toldot hashamayim vecha'aretz” (Bereshit 2:4) — “Ve'eleh toldot Peretz” (Ruth 4:18).

History is the fruit of the generations: it is built within families. The perfect generations are those of heaven and earth, of spirit and matter; they have their vav. It is a creation that meets its Creator's expectation. At the other end, the generations of Peretz, in Megillat Ruth, carry the messianic seed, the kingdom of David. They too have their vav: this stabilizing element is there at the starting point as at the point of arrival.

Between the two, every stage lacks stability. Either the first vav is missing or the final one, which attests to the failure of the journey. These are gallim, waves, which the Zohar calls gilgulim: cycles that repeat at different levels and attest to an indispensable tikkun.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

History makes only successive corrections.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What mistake in our family comes back from one generation to the next, in a slightly different form? And what could finally correct it?

SUBJECT 02

Four Faces of Man



PRESENTATION

Facing the four sins that undo societies — immorality, murder, idolatry, slander — the Rav describes four dimensions of man. With Yaakov, he says, we move from the particular to the general.

THE QUESTION

What does man lack as long as he has not reached his fourth dimension?

THE ANSWER

“Adameh le-Elyon”: I will be like the Most High.

There is the particular Adam, as he is meant to be, who cannot be separated from humanity in general. There is a spiritual Adam, zachar u-nekevah, composed of the masculine and the feminine. And there is the Adam who is no longer kneaded from earth, but aspires to be in the image of his Creator: that is the fourth dimension.

As long as we have not reached it, history makes only successive corrections. They are not the same snapshots, but they are the same elements carrying a society that must be driven by hesed and gevurah, love and rigor, by tiferet, the harmony between the two, and by yesod, the foundation, which must speak with a single voice.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our home, what wins out: love or rigor? How do we find the harmony between the two, and who in our family holds it together?

Hashem Without Elokim



PRESENTATION

The Rav pauses on the verse about the generation of Enosh: “Az huchal likro be-shem Hashem”. People began to call upon the Name... and that is already a profanation.

THE QUESTION

How can serving Hashem become a profanation?

THE ANSWER

“Az huchal likro be-shem Hashem” (Bereshit 4:26).

When we serve only Hashem, an entity in the absolute that transcends the created world, there is a chillul Hashem. People began to invoke the name of Hashem without still stressing that of Elokim, G-d the Creator. Yet we cannot separate Hashem from Elokim.

Elokim is plural because He is the totality of all the forces of creation. And just as creation is incalculably diverse, there is an incalculable diversity of faces of men and women: the same divine breath, yet all different. So each of us has his eloha, his particular ideal, which separates him from others. We must transcend it to reach Hashem and serve the unity of Hashem Elokim.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not reach Hashem without first having believed in Elokim.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What is the “particular ideal” of each person around the table? How does it bring us closer to others, and how does it set us apart?

Each of Us Has a Book of Bereshit



PRESENTATION

“Zeh sefer toldot Adam”, this is the book of the generations of man. This book, the Rav says, only truly begins with Shet. And it is not only about Adam: it is about each of us.

THE QUESTION

Why does the Torah begin the “book” of humanity with Shet, and not with Kayin and Hevel?

THE ANSWER

“Zeh sefer toldot Adam” (Bereshit 5:1); “Ki shat li Elokim zera acher tachat Hevel” (Bereshit 4:25).

Kayin and Hevel disappeared; nothing remained of them. The first children were rather the fruit of desire; the text does not stress that they bore the tzelem and the demut, the image and the likeness, as if they were only a draft of creation. True history begins with Shet, on whom the foundation of humanity rests.

And this book concerns us. Each of us writes his own book of Bereshit: each has his story, his autobiography, his way of living his destiny and of influencing his society, near and far. Each is to be discovered anew, because he did not come out of a repeating mold. Each carries a secret of creation, a fragment not yet brought to light.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Each of us carries a secret of creation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If each of us wrote the first page of our own book of Bereshit today, what would its title be? And what “fragment of creation” do you think you carry?

The White Space Around the Letter



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, the word *sefer*, “book”, has several meanings: the narrative, the allusion, the commentary, the count. And each letter of the Torah itself has several dimensions — down to the white space around it.

THE QUESTION

What is there to read in a letter of the Torah, beyond the letter itself?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on “Zeh sefer toldot Adam”: it is the counting of the generations (Rashi on Bereshit 5:1).

The *sefer* is the narrative we know through events. It is also the allusion, the numerical, the *remez*. It is the *derash*, the understanding of the text, which one cuts as the *sapar*, the barber, cuts. And it is the count: the text was counted so that no addition could corrupt it.

Each letter of the Torah is autonomous. It has its shape; its *nekudot*, the vowels, which change pronunciation and meaning; its *ta'am*, its musicality. But there is also the white space around the letter, full of unspoken things that are ours to discover, throughout the study of the text.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In what our loved ones say, what do we hear in the “white spaces”, in what is left unsaid? And are we attentive to those silences?

The Word and the Slander



PRESENTATION

Yosef carries within him the power of a Word that unifies. He will know the seventy languages. Yet the first act the text reports of him is dibbah: he brings back evil reports about his brothers.

THE QUESTION

How can someone with the gift of universal speech begin with slander?

THE ANSWER

“Vayave Yosef et dibbatam ra'ah el avihem” (Bereshit 37:2).

It is the mistake made every time someone takes in hand the political, intellectual or moral leadership of a people: there is always an abuse. Dibbah is slander, ill-speaking, a refusal to listen.

Yet Yosef is bound to speech. That is why he spoke the seventy languages, the universal language from which spiritual teaching can be spread. There is no point freezing this teaching in a written form that would be like a mold from which nothing new can emerge: that is the whole problem of discord in society and between nations. The Jewish people went into exile only to be able to align itself with the language of others as well.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Every time someone takes in hand the leadership of a people, there is always an abuse.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When we hold responsibility — eldest child, parent, group leader — what misuse of speech threatens us? Do we know how to speak the “language” of those we want to convince?

What the Garment Hides



PRESENTATION

Between Yaakov and Esav there was always a problem of clothing. The garment Yaakov wore before his father came from far back: from Nimrod, and before him from Adam.

THE QUESTION

Why, ever since Adam, has clothing stood at the heart of conflicts between brothers?

THE ANSWER

Beged, garment, and bagad, to betray; levush, clothing, and lo boshah, not being ashamed.

What prolongs Yaakov's exile is that he found no common language with Esav. And there is always a problem of clothing there. Clothing hides nakedness, but it sometimes hides the truth, the measure of man. It is this negative aspect of clothing that we neutralize with the tzitzit we wear.

The garment Yaakov wore to present himself before his father dated from Nimrod, and from Adam, who felt the need to cover his nakedness. It was handed down from generation to generation so as to hide his shame, his betrayal. That is why beged also points to bagad, to betray, and levush to lo boshah: a way of hiding one's shame, of not being ashamed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Clothing hides nakedness, just as it sometimes hides the truth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do our “garments” — our appearance, our titles, our successes — sometimes hide about us? And what do they keep us from seeing in others?

A Letter Added to Yosef



PRESENTATION

In a psalm, Yosef's name receives an extra letter: Yehosef. That letter is the heh, the fourth of the Divine Name. And for the Rav, Yosef is the fourth dimension.

THE QUESTION

What does the heh added to Yosef's name mean?

THE ANSWER

“Edut bi-Yehosef samo” (Tehillim 81:6).

The fourth letter of Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh is the heh: that is the letter added to Yosef. This heh, the letter of the feminine, carries the interrogation, the question, and calls for a definition. It also indicates purpose, trajectory, as in Yerushalaymah, toward Jerusalem. It is the only letter repeated in the Name of the Creator who transcends creation.

And it is this heh that Yosef will use: “Heh lachem zera”, here is seed for you (Bereshit 47:23). Responding to the needs of the other: that is the great question mark.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Responding to the needs of the other: that is the great question mark.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What question should we ask someone close to us this week to find out what they truly need? And what could we say to them: “here is for you”?

The Verse That Sums Up the Torah



PRESENTATION

The Sages searched for the verse that contains the whole Torah. Rabbi Akiva, Hillel, Ben Azzai, Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi: each has his answer, and the Rav brings them into dialogue.

THE QUESTION

Loving one's fellow as oneself — is it really possible?

THE ANSWER

Rabbi Akiva: “Ve’ahavta lere’acha kamocha”; Ben Azzai: “Zeh sefer toldot Adam”.

Rabbi Akiva says: “You shall love your fellow as yourself.” The Arizal says this is not possible; that is why Hillel adjusted it into the negative: what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. According to the Arizal, this commandment lies within the couple: making sure that love keeps animating it for a whole lifetime, without aging or becoming banal.

Ben Azzai disagrees: the essence of the whole Torah is “this is the book of the generations of man”. Going out of the narrow framework of the home, radiating, giving this love a momentum that embraces all of humanity. And for Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi, enough speeches: a person is measured by what he offers spontaneously, morning and evening, in happy moments as in sad ones, selflessly, for the sake of the other.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Humanity is measured by what each one offers spontaneously.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

For you, which “verse” sums up your home: the love of the couple, openness to the world, or everyday giving? Let each one choose and explain.

SUBJECT 10

Strangers in the Land of the Fathers



PRESENTATION

“Vayeshev Yaakov”: Yaakov comes back to settle where his father sojournd. The Rav reads in it our own history: exile, persecution, return... and the divisions that spring up again.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yaakov remain a stranger in the land to which he returns?

THE ANSWER

“Vayeshev Yaakov be'eret megurei aviv” (Bereshit 37:1).

Yaakov returns to his father's house, where he had settled as a ger, a stranger. This land never belonged to him; he settles there by divine command. He is at once a citizen and always a ger. The promise is absolute, but the land is his if he conforms to the divine will that assigned it to him.

We are living this situation: we have returned to the land of our ancestors. But look how much dissent there is within the people, how many divisions in one single great family — and Yosef is contested once again. These are the first steps of a people. The last will come at the end of days, when the people achieves its unity and makes heard, from Israel, a word that leaves no room for slander.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not his property in the absolute.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What does it mean for us to feel “at home” without thinking of ourselves as owners? And what can we do, on our own scale, about divisions in our own family?