

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYESHEV

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture “Vayeshev: The Heritage of the Fathers”: with Yosef the story of the children begins, and with it the question that governs it — will they repeat their fathers' circuit, or carry it through to its goal? A missing letter, a shepherd too young, a preference that shows, and the difference between a king and a ruler.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

Truth in a Thousand Shoots



PRESENTATION

With Vayeshev the circle of the fathers is complete: Avraham the revolutionary, Yitzchak the realist, and Yaakov, the man of the ladder, who achieves the synthesis of the two. His attribute is *emet*, truth. But what truth is meant?

THE QUESTION

If truth is one, why do we find it scattered, and why do we think so differently from one another?

THE ANSWER

“Truth shall spring up from the earth” (Tehillim 85:12).

Truth, when it comes from heaven, is a single beam. When it springs from the earth, it is the joining of many beams. There are many shoots of truth, scattered truths. To find the ideal path again is to connect all these truths across persons, places and times.

That is why, the Rav says in answer to a question, differences exist and always will. We are different from one another; there is no single way of thinking. Even in spirituality there are currents, degrees. Yaakov's ladder is there to say so: it leads from earth to heaven, but by different rungs, and this must be accepted.

This does not erase our responsibility toward one another: on the contrary, it engages it all the more.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

From the completeness of these tendencies, of these movements, the messianic idea will be born.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

On what subject, at this table, do we all think differently? Can each one say what “shoot of truth” he glimpses in another's opinion?

The Land of Conversion



PRESENTATION

Yaakov settles “in the land of his father’s sojournings”, *eret megurei aviv*. In *megurei* the Rav hears two words: *giyur*, conversion, and *ger*, the stranger. And from them he draws a law of all Jewish history.

THE QUESTION

Why is the one who brings a light to the world first treated as a stranger?

THE ANSWER

“Yaakov settled in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan” (Bereshit 37:1).

Creation is not a haphazard venture: it has a beginning, and therefore a purpose. The agent of that purpose is humanity as a whole. But G-d chose Israel to guide this humanity and inspire it — not to rule it: to inspire it.

Now anyone who claims to bring a little wisdom and to radiate a teaching is first perceived as a stranger in the milieu where he finds himself. That is the whole history of the Jewish people, and it begins with Yosef.

That is the meaning of *megurei aviv*: the land where the fathers began to spread faith in a universal Creator, the land where pagan thought is converted. For that a soil was needed, a ground. But whoever brings this thought remains a *ger*: he is pointed at, his presence is questioned, his role is seen as parasitic.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

At first people will try to fight it, and little by little they will adopt it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have we ever been “the stranger” in a group because we brought a new idea? And what idea did we ourselves fight before we ended up adopting it?

The Righteous Have No Retirement



PRESENTATION

Yaakov settles down. He has faced Esav, he has earned the name Israel, he returns to the land where his father sojourned. And in the very word for this settling, Rashi hears a reproach.

THE QUESTION

After a life of wandering and struggle, why should Yaakov not have the right to sit down?

THE ANSWER

Rashi on Bereshit 37:2: Yaakov sought to settle in tranquillity, and the trouble of Yosef sprang upon him.

Rashi says, in the name of our Sages, that a tzaddik can never retire or withdraw: it is not enough for him that a reward awaits him in the World to Come, he would also like to enjoy his retirement in this world. No. Yaakov's mistake is to believe that, having waged his struggle against Esav and triumphed, having earned the title of Israel, he has completed his mission, he is finished.

And immediately the problem of the children resurfaces and calls us back to order. Even if we have achieved something for ourselves, even if we think we have solved every problem that arose and fulfilled our task, we must make sure that an active shalom — an active peace — keeps alive the story we have set in motion and brings the ideal we have set ourselves to its fulfilment.

For the real question begins here: will the children simply repeat their parents' circuit, or will they make sure that the path traced by the parents leads to the purpose of creation?

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The children can call everything into question.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has an area where we feel we have done our part and can finally rest. Let each one name it. And let us ask: what we consider finished — do our children consider it finished?

SUBJECT 04

Torchbearer for the Nations, or Pilot Country?



PRESENTATION

Once Yaakov has settled, an old question returns, the one the Rav had already brought out between Avraham and his brother Nachor: how will Israel fulfil its mission toward the nations?

THE QUESTION

Should we shine from exile, all over the world, or concentrate everything in the Land of Israel?

THE ANSWER

“... in the land of Canaan” (Bereshit 37:1): settling in the land, and the question of the mission.

We must make sure that an active peace keeps alive the story we have set in motion. And here the two movements brought out between Avraham and Nachor clash once again: how is this mission to be fulfilled?

Either by exiling oneself, by remaining a stranger to the notion of land, so as to be a torchbearer for the nations all over the world: founding schools here and there, sending emissaries here and there. Or by concentrating everything in Israel, to make it a pilot country for all the nations — the one they will always look at, observe, admire, criticize, praise or blame.

That is what is happening today, the Rav observes.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Israel is the mirror of the nations, but it is not yet the ideal.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Does our family shine more by going out toward others, or by making our home a place others look at? And what would they see, looking into our home?

The Missing Letter



PRESENTATION

The chapter opens: these are the generations of Yaakov, Yosef. Without the small conjunction that elsewhere links a chapter to the one before. Where the text says “and these”, there is continuity; here, something has been broken off.

THE QUESTION

What can a missing letter say about a family — and why is it missing precisely when Yaakov's descendants are announced?

THE ANSWER

“Eleh toldot Yaakov” (Bereshit 37:2), without the opening vav; “Ve’eleh shemot Bnei Yisrael” (Shemot 1:1), with the vav.

When the text writes ve’eleh, with the vav, there is continuity, events that follow logically. When the vav is missing, a new chapter begins with no immediate link to what came before — which means the generations are not yet assured of success, that the ideal is far from reached. The book of Shemot opens precisely with this vav: everything in it is tied back to Bereshit, so much so that some have regarded the two books as a single entity.

The two vavs of the word toldot should unite parents and children. If something hinders this connection, there is imperfection, questioning, non-fulfilment. And here the missing vav is the first one: that of the fathers, who are no longer in harmony with the children.

The children want to establish a new order. One may improve what the parents built, touch up certain points. But to contest entirely those who brought us into the world, as Korach tried to do in the name of renewal and of a new way of taking charge of the people — that cannot be.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Touching up certain points, yes; contesting the authority of the fathers is something we cannot do.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One generation improves, another contests, and the difference lies in very little. What has each of us touched up in our parents' legacy, and what have we rejected wholesale? And which of our children is still waiting for that conjunction from us?

A Family Does Not Exclude



PRESENTATION

Kayin and Hevel, Yitzchak and Yishmael, Yaakov and Esav: until now, conflicts between brothers were settled by excluding one of them. With Yaakov's sons, that solution no longer exists. And the text says the brothers "could not speak to him peaceably".

THE QUESTION

When no one can be set aside any more, what is left to hold a family together?

THE ANSWER

"And they could not speak to him peaceably" — velo yachlu dabro leshalom (Bereshit 37:4).

Until now, the problem between brothers was resolved by excluding one in favour of the other. But can that be done within one family? No. Here wholeness, unity, must remain the watchword and the goal: to reach that shalom which is itself an attribute of G-d, He who makes unity in the heavenly heights.

People in fact avoided writing the word shalom in full, for fear of later having to tear up or throw away the paper; they wrote shalem, without the vav. Shalem remains the ideal of perfection, of unity, but a cohesion not yet visible. Yet our Sages instituted shalom as a greeting, as the bond between a man and his fellow — while avoiding saying it in an unclean place. And when it is a matter of securing the union of a couple, G-d's Name may be erased to give substance to shalom.

That is the very word the brothers can no longer bring themselves to say to Yosef.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In families we still "exclude": we stop calling, we stop inviting. Is there someone to whom we can no longer say shalom? And what would we be ready to erase from our pride for the sake of peace?

SUBJECT 07

A King Loved, a Ruler Feared



PRESENTATION

The brothers ask Yosef: “Will you reign over us, or will you rule over us?” Two verbs, two powers. For the Rav, Yosef bears both at once, and that is where his exclusion begins.

THE QUESTION

What separates a king from a ruler?

THE ANSWER

“Hamaloch timloch aleinu, im mashol timshol banu?” (Bereshit 37:8).

Yosef's very name expresses a hope: “may the L-rd add to me another son” (Bereshit 30:24). He is a possible element of cohesion for all of Yaakov's children. But he is at once melech and moshel.

The melech is the fruit of the people's choice, of a love of the people that carries him, of recognition. The moshel is neither elected, nor chosen, nor carried by the people: he imposes his authority. And Yosef combines these two functions in his person.

That is what lies behind his initial failure to find his place in Yaakov's family. He himself will be excluded from it; only his children will take his place and carry on after him within the structure of the people.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The king is loved; the moshel is feared.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At home, at school, at work: do we obey someone because we love him, or because we fear him? And when we have a little authority ourselves, are we more of a king or more of a moshel?

Shepherd of His Brothers



PRESENTATION

Yosef is seventeen; he still tends his appearance. The text says he is ro'eh with his brothers, and the word means shepherd. But the same word names G-d as the Shepherd of Israel, and is also used for the chiefs of armed bands.

THE QUESTION

What exactly is held against a seventeen-year-old boy who behaves as his brothers' shepherd?

THE ANSWER

“Yosef, being seventeen years old, was shepherding with his brothers” (Bereshit 37:2).

The word has a positive and a negative sense, and applying it to his brothers is presumptuous, even if it were justified. One cannot, in the name of the authority one holds, belittle others and constantly call them to order. One must always see oneself with one's brothers, on the same footing as they are. We can never take on the role of a shepherd facing a flock: we are part of the human flock.

Consequently, if there are reproaches to make, we must first question ourselves, because we are not strangers to the way situations develop. Not everyone has the same assets, nor the same strength, nor the same wisdom. We are responsible for one another. That is what Yosef did not show at first.

Those who always want to present biblical figures as the symbol of the perfect tzaddik may do so. But the Torah does not speak to us of angels: it speaks of the human beings we are, and we carry Yosef within us too, with his ups and downs.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not a matter of wanting to justify everything, but of wanting to correct everything.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Reporting is sometimes a way of placing oneself above. Who at this table is the shepherd of the others without anyone having asked? And on whom have we passed judgment without recognizing our own share of responsibility?

The Sons of the Handmaids



PRESENTATION

The verse specifies that Yosef was “a youth, with the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives”, and that he reported “to their father” what was said of them. Four mothers, and a set of brothers that is not of one piece.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yosef draw close precisely to the handmaids’ sons — and why does the text say “their father” and not “his father”?

THE ANSWER

“And he was a youth, with the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Yosef brought evil report of them to their father” (Bereshit 37:2).

There are four wives, and therefore an unevenness among the children: those of Leah, those of Bilhah, those of Zilpah and those of Rachel. The sons of Bilhah and Zilpah are not acknowledged by the others on the same footing. Yosef tries to draw them to himself: since they are poorly acknowledged, he may as well pull them to his side to impose a certain authority on the rest of the brothers. But they cannot bear being used. And because they are kept apart, they allow themselves to neglect some of the family’s moral rules — as happens in any family, as a way of asserting one’s independence.

Yosef then reports their doings “to their father”. That is surprising: if he truly cares about the family’s unity, that father is his own father too. A second reading even suspects him of being none too scrupulous about the parents’ spiritual heritage.

The text calls him ro’eh and na’ar: is he the shepherd, or the young boy? He is still behaving irresponsibly.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In any group there are always those who are less acknowledged. Do we draw close to them for their sake, or for ours? And when we speak of a brother to our parents, do we say “my brother” or “your son”?

The Preference That Must Not Show



PRESENTATION

“Israel loved Yosef more than all his sons, for he was the son of his old age, and he made him a coat of many colours.” The Rav dwells on each word: who loves, and how this love becomes visible.

THE QUESTION

Can a parent help recognizing himself more in one child — and what, then, must he avoid?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit 37:3; and Devarim 21:16: he may not give the birthright to the son of the beloved wife.

In a couple, the father's personality and the mother's do not always merge into a single entity. An unevenness remains that draws one toward this child, the other toward that one. The love may be the same, but one recognizes oneself more in one than in another, and that is perfectly normal. The Torah had in fact warned us: a man who has two wives, one of whom is preferred, cannot give the birthright to the son of the favourite.

And note who loves. It does not say that Yaakov loved Yosef, but that Israel loved him: Yaakov's affirmed spiritual dimension. The text also says mikol banav, more than all his sons, and not mikol echav, of all his brothers.

It is this dimension that makes him the tunic, the passim: a special garment, a uniform, which makes Yosef the master of all the tendencies present in the family of Israel, the one who represents it. That is what becomes the bone of contention between Yosef and his brothers.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

These differences must not be shown, because they breed rivalry, jealousy and hatred.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There is always a child, a nephew, a student in whom we recognize ourselves more. Who is it, for each of us? And how did the others notice?

SUBJECT 11

Imitating or Sensing



PRESENTATION

The power cut that interrupts this lecture falls in the middle of an answer: the Rav was speaking of the Mashiach, who “scents” the authenticity of things, and of the test of the incense, the ketoret, that Moshe imposed on Korach.

THE QUESTION

What distinguishes an authentic spiritual life from a successful imitation?

THE ANSWER

“He shall breathe the fear of the L-rd; he shall not judge by what his eyes see” (Yeshayahu 11:3); the test of the incense (Bamidbar 16:7).

The Mashiach is the one able to scent the authenticity of things, and not their garment, their outward show, the material way they express themselves. That is why Moshe puts Korach to the test of the ketoret, the incense: to see whether he is able to grasp what the scent of spirituality is.

For it does not lie in exactly what you do. You can imitate things: you saw someone act in a certain way, and you follow in his footsteps. That is not spiritual life. Spiritual life is when the fear of Hashem is so authentic that it becomes part of the air you breathe.

It was on these words, as the Rav was speaking of the value of the incense, that the lecture broke off.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Spiritual life is when you sense the thing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What do we do only because we have seen it done? And which mitzvah, in our home, has become “the air we breathe”?