

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYESHEV

11 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Eleven questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Yehudah and Tamar: The Scandal That Prepares the
Redemption”: how the most scandalous chapter of Vayeshev
prepares the kingship of Israel. Three sons whose names lead
nowhere, a woman who dares, three pledges, two words —
recognize, please — and a broken letter in the word peace.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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SUBJECT 01

Why Yehudah, and Why Here?



PRESENTATION

Yosef has just been sold and taken to Egypt. The story breaks off abruptly, and a whole chapter is inserted: “Yehudah went down from his brothers”. The Torah, the Rav reminds us, does not hide the reality of life from us, even at its most scandalous.

THE QUESTION

Why halt Yosef's story at its worst moment to tell of Yehudah's descent?

THE ANSWER

“Yehudah went down from his brothers” (Bereshit 38:1); “What gain is there if we kill our brother?” (Bereshit 37:26).

Yosef's descent to Egypt is already the seed of the fulfilment of the promise made to Avraham: his descendants would be strangers in a land not their own. But before this descent becomes reality for the whole house of Yaakov, G-d is already preparing this people's liberation — and it will come about through Yehudah.

Yet it was Yehudah who proposed the sale. Two brothers wanted to save Yosef. Reuven wanted him thrown into the pit, to keep their hands clear of blood, of fratricide. Yehudah said: why leave him to rot there? Let us sell him; he will taste servitude in his own flesh, he who dreamt of greatness.

And at that same moment, Yehudah too undergoes a descent. His brothers, seized with remorse at seeing their father refuse comfort, blame him for having persuaded them. They no longer acknowledge him, and he parts from them. One goes down to become governor; the other, to prepare the redeemer.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What may seem most scandalous to us can carry a small glimmer of moral light.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some falls prepare something. Which “descent” in our life — a failure, a break — prepared, without our knowing it, what came next?

SUBJECT 02

Hirah, Hiram and the Merchant



PRESENTATION

Yehudah settles near an Adullamite named Hirah, and marries the daughter of a “kena’ani” man. Why does the Torah take the trouble to give us these details?

THE QUESTION

Can one and the same story be read as a commercial, political, moral or metaphysical affair?

THE ANSWER

“An Adullamite man named Hirah... the daughter of a kena’ani man” (Bereshit 38:1-2); Rashi: kena’ani, a merchant.

Until now the patriarchs had avoided any marriage alliance with the inhabitants of Canaan, and here Yehudah marries a Canaanite woman. But everything depends on the level of reading. For one who sees Yehudah as a tzaddik, this woman was not of Canaanite origin: kena’ani also means trader; she was a merchant’s daughter.

And why tell us that Yehudah’s companion is called Hirah? It is not for nothing: it should make us think of Hiram, who helped Shlomo build the Sanctuary. The Torah insists on it further on, naming “Hirah, his companion” when they go up to Timnah.

This holds for the whole Torah: it depends on the level at which one reads it, and from what perspective — commercial, political, moral or metaphysical. Each reader projects himself onto the text.

THE RAV’S CONCLUSION

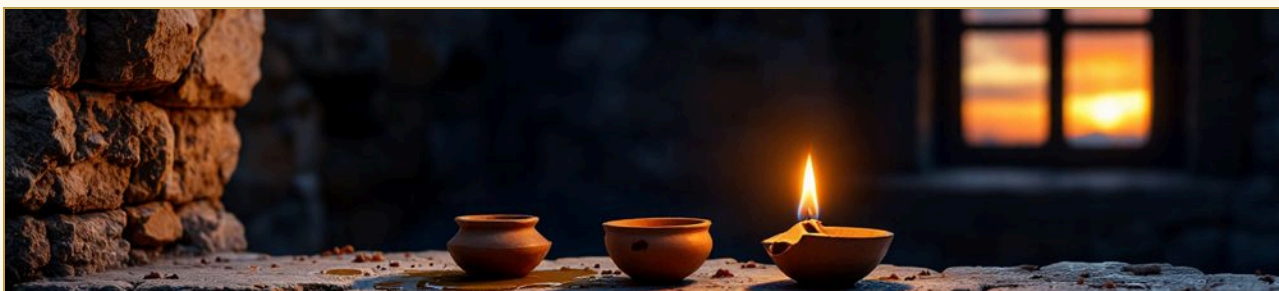
Each person will discover himself through the interpretation he himself gives the text.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Think of a family story everyone knows. Does everyone tell it the same way? And what does each one’s way of telling it say about him?

SUBJECT 03

Er, Onan, Shelah: Three Names, Three Paths



PRESENTATION

Yehudah has three sons. The Rav reads their names as three successive attempts, two of which fail. After the third, the text specifies, there will be no more children.

THE QUESTION

What do the names of Yehudah's sons say about the paths that lead — or do not lead — to redemption?

THE ANSWER

Er, Onan, Shelah (Bereshit 38:3-5); “until Shiloh comes” (Bereshit 49:10).

Er is awakening — but it also means to destroy: here is a destructive intelligence. Onan comes from the word on, strength; but it is also a synonym of avelut, mourning. Here is a strength one leans on, on which one builds hopes, but which sadly claims many victims: there is a scent of mourning in this strength.

Shelah is illusion, the imaginary; but it is also a will to transcend that destructive side of a negative intelligence and a harmful strength, the hope of a better world that would have learned the lesson. And Shiloh is a synonym of Mashiach.

There it stops: after this third child there are no more. The first two attempts came to nothing, because intelligence was not put to good use, and strength, too, proved destructive.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Intelligence can destroy, strength can bring mourning. In our family, what do we use most: intelligence, strength, or hope? And what do we use them for?

The Palm Tree and the Column of Smoke



PRESENTATION

Yehudah takes a wife named Tamar for his eldest son. Her name, says the Rav, has several faces: the sun, the palm tree, and the column of smoke that rose from the incense.

THE QUESTION

How can what is impure enter what is holy, and even strengthen it?

THE ANSWER

Tamar (תמר) = 640 = shemesh (שמש), the sun; “like columns of smoke”, ketimrot ashan (Shir HaShirim 3:6).

The numerical value of Tamar is that of shemesh, the sun: Yehudah, full of energy and faith, would like to bring forth another current, not the one that leads man toward Egypt, but the one that draws him out of it. Tamar is also the palm tree, the tree that rises toward the heights, whose fruit is inedible until it has ripened, and very sweet once it is ripe.

Lastly, it is timrot ashan, the column of smoke of the ketoret, the incense. That intense fragrance owed its strength to an impure element, the chelbenah, which was part of it and which, on its own, was forbidden. Such is Tamar's whole capacity: to integrate the impure into the pure, and thereby to justify this imperfect world.

For G-d left this world in a raw state precisely so that man could become His partner in the work of creation.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Is there in our life a “chelbenah” — a flaw, a bitter episode — that ended up giving strength to the best of what we do? Could we talk about it at this table?

SUBJECT 05

Keeping an Idol, Refusing a Name



PRESENTATION

Er dies; then Onan, whom Yehudah had given to the widow according to the custom of levirate marriage, dies in turn. The text is discreet about their sins. The Rav looks for what each one was refusing.

THE QUESTION

What did Er and Onan each refuse, in his own way?

THE ANSWER

“Onan knew that the offspring would not be his” (Bereshit 38:9).

Er falls victim to that intelligence which pays homage to beauty. Fascinated by his wife, he does not want to see her made less beautiful by carrying a child. He wants no child; he would like to keep her like an idol.

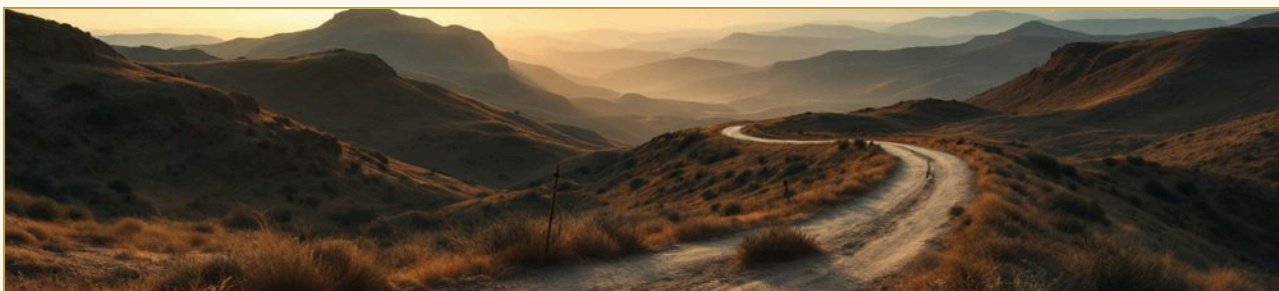
Onan is caught up in levirate marriage, yibbum: the brother who died left no child, so the younger brother marries his sister-in-law to give his brother a name and ensure his continuity. This demands self-effacement. But the idea of a child who would be his brother's project and not his own troubles him enormously. He will respect the forms without going all the way.

To a participant who asks in what sense Onan is “destroyed at the root”, the Rav answers: he did not want to give his strength a purpose, because it would serve his brother's project. It is a phenomenon we still see today: brothers who would gladly accomplish the thing, but in their own name, for their own glory, not for a brother.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

An intention reveals itself by its need to be signed. What have we refused to do because the credit would go to another? And what are we keeping untouched, for fear of spoiling it, instead of letting it bear fruit?

An Invisible Hand



PRESENTATION

Some passages of the Torah, such as that of Reuven, are read in the synagogue without being translated. That of Yehudah and Tamar is read, translated and expounded. The Rav sees in this the sign of a presence.

THE QUESTION

How can a story made of human weaknesses be guided, in secret, by a hand from above?

THE ANSWER

Mishnah Megillah 4:10: the episode of Reuven is read but not translated; that of Tamar is read and translated.

This is not simply a wild outburst of human nature: there is also a hand of G-d in this story. It is as though, behind everything that happens, an invisible hand were driving Yehudah toward a Canaanite woman, making him choose a woman such as Tamar for his sons, then causing him to stumble in a trial he does not overcome.

Sometimes in life there are situations we no longer master, which force us into actions contrary to our own convictions. Afterwards we wonder why we let ourselves be carried along; we would like to take it back, but what has been done has been done.

And it is precisely through this story, which is not hidden away, that the kingship of Israel is prepared.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Have we lived through a situation in which we acted against our own convictions, as if swept along? Looking back, do we see in it only a fault, or also the beginning of something else?

Bitterness That Dares



PRESENTATION

Shelah has grown up, and still he is not given to Tamar. She takes off her widow's garments, covers herself with a veil and sits by the road to Timnah. A participant is surprised: does bitterness not paralyse instead?

THE QUESTION

Does bitterness necessarily make one passive, or can it drive one to act?

THE ANSWER

“For she saw that Shelah had grown up, and she had not been given to him as a wife” (Bereshit 38:14); Esther: “and if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16).

Tamar knows she has been set aside and will not accept it. There is that bitter side of Tamar — mar, bitterness — which drives her to revolt: she will not submit to a fate. She has become part of this family and wants at all costs to fulfil herself within it, as Ruth will do later.

Bitterness, the Rav answers, is having hoped so much: things were promised to her and are not given. So, having nothing left to lose, she chooses another path. That is what Esther says: until now I was forced; now I will go to the king myself, even at the cost of my pride, to save my brothers. This is called *averah lishmah*: a transgression committed for the sake of a great mitzvah.

Someone compares this to the Akedah. A good comparison, says the Rav, except that the Akedah was a trial from which Avraham was held back; here it is an experience carried through to the end, on man's own initiative.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Bitterness is having hoped so much.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

When a promise made to us is not kept, do we withdraw or do we act? And how far is it right to go to obtain what is due to us?

The Seal, the Cord and the Staff



PRESENTATION

Yehudah, passing by, does not recognize his daughter-in-law under the veil. He promises her a young goat; she demands a pledge. And that pledge is not chosen at random.

THE QUESTION

Why does Tamar ask for precisely these three objects?

THE ANSWER

“Your seal, your cord and your staff that is in your hand” (Bereshit 38:18).

We are in a world where the Torah has not yet been given, where the rules of marriage have not yet been laid down. A woman one found pleasing was, if she consented, given what she asked for, or else taken as a wife.

Tamar, however, asks for the three things a woman may demand of her husband out of respect for her person. The staff is bread: that he feed her. The cord is clothing: that he clothe her. The seal is respect for her person. These are the three obligations every bridegroom still undertakes today.

Under the veil, she is already claiming what a wife is entitled to demand: you will guarantee me this.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Feeding, clothing, respecting: which of the three is most easily forgotten in a family? And what, today, would be a “seal” given to someone we respect?

“Recognize, Please”



PRESENTATION

Tamar, condemned to the fire, does not denounce Yehudah. She sends the pledges he had left with her and has him told: recognize, please, whose these are. Yehudah had used the same words before his father, with Yosef's tunic.

THE QUESTION

Why does Tamar, being led to the fire, prefer to risk her life rather than name the father of her children?

THE ANSWER

“Haker na” — recognize, please (Bereshit 37:32 and 38:25); “Tzadkah mimeni” — she is more righteous than I (Bereshit 38:26); Sotah 10b.

The brother who used a ruse against his father by showing him the garment and saying “recognize, please” is now confronted with a woman who has wrapped herself in a garment and says to him in turn: recognize, please. He could have kept silent. He is told his daughter-in-law has played the harlot; if he did not want to give her Shelah, this was the best opportunity to break with her.

But Tamar chose not to crush him, and simply said: here are the objects given to me as a pledge, it is for you to recognize them. From this our Sages learned that a person should rather throw himself into the fire than humiliate his fellow in public. And Yehudah says it: she is more righteous than I, she is with child by me, because I did not give her to my son Shelah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

She did not want to humiliate him: she wanted him to take responsibility.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Keeping silent so as not to humiliate costs more than we think. Whom have we spared a humiliation this year by paying the price ourselves? And about what are we still waiting for someone to say: it comes from me?

The Hand That Comes Out and Withdraws



PRESENTATION

At the birth, a hand comes out, then withdraws; the other child bursts forth, and the first comes back afterwards, a scarlet thread on his wrist. They are named Peretz, the breach, and Zerach, the sunrise. And this time they are true twins.

THE QUESTION

What is at stake in this hand that comes out and withdraws — and why does the breach come before the dawn?

THE ANSWER

Bereshit 38:27-30; with Rivkah, the word for twins, tomim, is written without an aleph (Bereshit 25:24) — one righteous, the other not.

With Rivkah, the word for twins is written without an aleph: they are false twins, one a tzaddik, the other a rasha. Here the word is complete: they are truly twins, both tzaddikim. They are two currents, two redeemers.

From Peretz will come David, who raises his weapon against Goliath, establishes the kingship of Israel, liberates the land and already plans the site of the Temple — and Ruth will come to Boaz in similar circumstances to bring him into the world. Peretz is the bursting forth: he wants no endlessly renewed diplomatic attempts, where one simply does what one can while minding what the nations think. Zerach is the dawn: a promise that has not yet seen the light of day cannot be asserted by force alone; there must be recognition among the nations.

One entrusts the final redemption to G-d and accepts that it will come little by little; the other says we must not wait, we must act fast. The two already clash as they leave Tamar's womb.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He wants no hand that goes in and comes out.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are those who force and those who wait for recognition, and each calls the other reckless or cowardly. Which are we? And in what matter, right now, are we reaching out a hand without daring to let it come out?

The Broken Vav of Shalom



PRESENTATION

Last question of the lecture: should we aim for perfection? The Rav answers with a letter. In a Sefer Torah, a broken letter makes the scroll invalid — except one, broken on purpose: the vav of the word shalom, in the covenant given to Pinchas.

THE QUESTION

Why is the only deliberately broken letter in the Torah found in the word “peace”?

THE ANSWER

“Behold, I give him My covenant of peace” (Bamidbar 25:12), written with a broken vav; “For there is no righteous man on earth who does good and never sins” (Kohelet 7:20).

Pinchas used violence to halt a plague that had already claimed twenty-four thousand victims, killing Zimri together with the princess Cozbi. And G-d made a covenant of shalom with him. But the vav of this shalom is broken, because a peace gained through violence is not to be commended.

True, we do not live in a shalem world: perfection does not exist. But what we must bring about is shalom: that imperfection should come to support the movement toward perfection. The vav is the letter of conjunction, the one that binds one letter to another, one object to another, a person to his fellow.

That is why we say Shabbat shalom: Shabbat gathers into itself all the imperfections of the week and brings about the harmony of all the elements of creation. And even the tzaddik must be aware of his imperfection.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Perfection does not exist; what we must bring about is shalom.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What have we left “imperfect” this week that Shabbat could gather together? In our home, do we prefer a perfect peace imposed, or an imperfect peace shared?