

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

VAYESHEV

12 Questions for the Shabbat Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Vayeshev: Yosef and His Brothers”: why history begins with
brotherhood rather than with love, at what height of the soul we
dream, and what Yosef had to go through before he understood his
own dreams. Leading up to this answer of the Rav's: the twelve
sons of Yaakov are each one of us.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the table of Parashat Vayeshev

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Higher Than Love: Brotherhood



PRESENTATION

The history of humanity opens with enemy brothers: Kayin and Hevel, Yitzchak and Yishmael, Yaakov and Esav. With Yosef and his brothers, says the Rav, this rivalry reaches its height. Yet everything in this story rests on brotherhood — and not, paradoxically, on love.

THE QUESTION

Why is brotherhood placed higher than love — and why can no history begin before it?

THE ANSWER

“He will see you and rejoice in his heart” (Shemot 4:14); “If only you were as a brother to me” (Shir HaShirim 8:1).

In love there is still a mutual enjoyment: each one finds something in it. In brotherhood there is not: I efface myself entirely for the other's pleasure, for his success, for his fulfilment. That is why, as long as this brotherhood is not achieved, the history of humanity cannot begin. The very notion of freedom remains held captive, as it were, and everything stays dependent on the profit one draws from each situation.

The proof comes at the Exodus. Beyond the precedence of Ephraim over Menasheh, what set that history in motion is that Aharon effaced himself before his brother Moshe: he will see you and rejoice in his heart. A brother who rejoices in the other's success, even in his leadership — then history can start on sound foundations, and the Jewish people can be born.

The Song of Songs expresses it as a wish: if only you were as a brother to me. That, says the Rav, is the highest level of love.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

As long as brotherhood has not been won, nothing can yet be done.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to love our own than to rejoice in their success. Which success in the family have we rejoiced in without reservation — and which not? Who among us is still waiting for us to be glad for him?

G-d's Dream for Man



PRESENTATION

Before coming to Yosef's dreams, the Rav lays down a principle: man's fulfilment is itself a dream of G-d. But this dream runs up against what he calls the "wild plants" of life.

THE QUESTION

How does one move from seeing the other as a rival to seeing him as a "messenger of life"?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: "Man's fulfilment is a dream of G-d."

If man does not answer his calling, the whole universe of creation loses its meaning. Yet this life is overrun by many wild plants: desires, rivalries, a spirit of competition. They make man see the other as a rival, a tool, an instrument. And even when he perceives him as an equal, he remains somewhat indifferent to his lot, to his destiny.

There is a higher degree: to perceive the other as a messenger of life, as the inspirer of one's soul, as truly one's own project of creation. But one reaches it only after very deep work on oneself.

It is not easy, the Rav admits. We know what problems exist within one and the same family — all the more so when the mothers differ, when the surroundings differ, when the culture differs.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Around this table, who is a rival to me, who is a tool, who leaves me indifferent? And of whom could I say: he is a messenger of my life?

SUBJECT 03

How High Do We Dream?



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, there is more than one way to dream. The soul has several levels — nefesh, ruach, neshamah, chayah — and each has its dreams. We still need to know from which floor of ourselves our own dream comes.

THE QUESTION

Are all dreams of equal worth, and what sets man apart from the rest of creation?

THE ANSWER

The levels of the soul: nefesh, ruach, neshamah, chayah.

Existence proceeds from four elements, to which the components of man's life correspond. The nefesh is the being in its basic, instinctive makeup. The ruach, man in his attributes. The neshamah, his spirit. And the chayah, what lies beyond the spirit: his imagination, his intuition, his deep aspiration, that will to unify things instead of leaving them fragmented and scattered.

So there is a dream at the level of my desires, a dream at the level of inspiration, a dream at the level of my spirituality, and a dream that is the will to surpass myself.

And what is unique to man is that this movement always goes from below upward. All the rest of creation is inspired from above: it receives its powers from the Creator and can do nothing else with them. Man, for his part, can make something else of what he receives.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Man, limited as he is, still has the power to change his destiny.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What did we dream of this week: a desire, an inspiration, a reaching beyond ourselves? Let each one share a dream, and say on which floor of himself he places it.

SUBJECT 04

Ahavah, Achvah, Shalom, Re'ut



PRESENTATION

Under the chuppah, the bride and groom are blessed with four words: ahavah, achvah, shalom, re'ut — love, brotherhood, peace, companionship. The Rav reads in them a path to be travelled, not a mere list.

THE QUESTION

Why does the blessing of the bride and groom not stop at love, and where does it lead?

THE ANSWER

“Ahavah ve’achvah, shalom vere’ut” — the blessing of the newlyweds.

Love comes first. Then brotherhood: in brotherhood, I seek to exploit no one. Then shalom, peace, which of course implies compromises to be made.

But the goal is re'ut: that we be companions in one and the same project, one and the same work. It then matters little where each one stands, since both are indispensable to the working of our life, of our universe.

This introduction, says the Rav, is needed to understand the trials of Yosef's family: a brotherhood that at first tears a family apart, and in the end gives the history of the patriarchs a new dimension — no longer at the level of children, but at the level of brothers. As if being a brother were a higher rank than being a child.

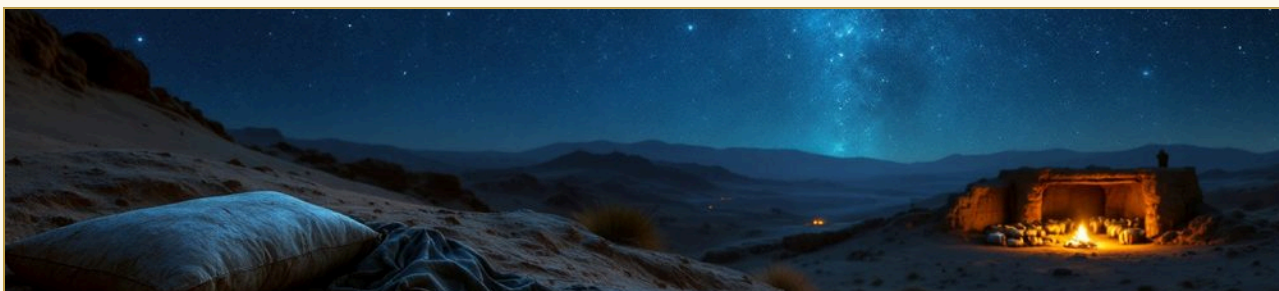
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The goal is that we be companions in one and the same project, one and the same work.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In our marriage, in our family, what is the “shared project” of which we are the companions? And is there someone in our home who believes his place does not matter?

The Ladder and the Flock



PRESENTATION

Yosef dreams as his father dreamt — but not the same dream. The Rav then recalls Yaakov's dreams: first the ladder; then, in Lavan's house, a dream that is about nothing but the flock.

THE QUESTION

What is the point of climbing, if it is only to come back down?

THE ANSWER

“And behold, a ladder set up on the earth, its top reaching to heaven, and messengers of Elokim going up and coming down on it” (Bereshit 28:12).

Yaakov's dream was the ladder, and he himself was part of it: a man, in his aspirations, must learn to go up and to come down. In every ascent, I am only serving those who remain below. Consequently, I must also learn to come down, to share with them what I have managed to attain.

This ladder, says the Rav, is a ladder of values, and Yaakov himself is that ladder. But he will have another dream: in Lavan's house, one dreams only of the flock, that is, of how to make what one has yield still more. Two dreams of the same man: one to rise and come back down to share, the other to accumulate.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In every aspiration, I am only serving those who remain below.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What “ladder” have we climbed — studies, profession, knowledge? What have we brought back down from it for those who stayed below? And were our dreams this week dreams of the ladder, or dreams of the flock?

A Sixtieth of Prophecy



PRESENTATION

For the Rav, Yosef's dreams are not a teenager's fantasies. But what is a dream? A reflection of our worries, a vanity — or a message? Our Sages gave it a surprising measure: one sixtieth.

THE QUESTION

Is a dream merely the reflection of our concerns, or can it carry a message from above?

THE ANSWER

Iyov 33:15-17: “In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls upon men... then He opens the ears of men... to turn man from his deed and keep pride from him”; and our Sages: a dream is one sixtieth of prophecy (Berakhot 57b).

Our Sages said that a dream always takes up the problems we wrestle with during the day, which are bound up with our desires, our cravings, our worries. There are also dreams that are vanities, things beyond our reach: some dross is mixed into them.

But there is something in a dream that surpasses my consciousness. It is not only the product of my concerns: it is an illumination. Iyov says it: G-d speaks through dreams, through visions of the night, when deep sleep falls upon men; He conveys His message to them, seeks to turn man from his ways, to spare him pride and preserve his soul.

Why at night? Because the world speaks to us, but to listen we would have to silence all the noise we keep up around ourselves. When the body is at rest, the soul can sometimes catch messages that go beyond its immediate perception.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is a ray of the Divine in a dream, but it is also covered by a husk.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What in our days makes so much noise that we no longer hear anything? And when did we last understand something important in silence?

The Sheaves, Then the Stars



PRESENTATION

Yosef does not hide his dreams. First sheaves in a field, then the sun, the moon and eleven stars. The brothers hate him all the more; his father rebukes him, then “keeps the matter in mind”.

THE QUESTION

What, from the very first dream, makes Yosef unbearable to his brothers?

THE ANSWER

“Behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright, and your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf” (Bereshit 37:7); “and his father kept the matter in mind” (Bereshit 37:11).

The first dream is material. Yosef is with his brothers, he is one with them, they are working in a field; and behold, his sheaf rises by itself, and the others are made to bow down before his success. Yosef tells his brothers: our father's choice of me is neither arbitrary nor idle; it rests on a future, on a success that awaits me. You will benefit from it one way or another — but on condition that you agree to submit, to recognize my authority. Who would accept such a dream?

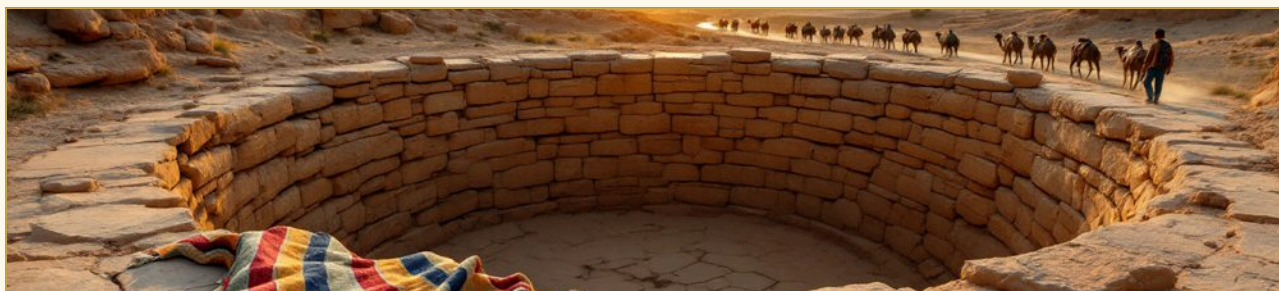
The second goes further, and Yosef reveals it even before his father: the sun and the moon, the father and the mother, and the eleven stars, the brothers, bow down before him. He places himself above everything, like a messenger. It is no longer only the brothers: the whole house must bow.

Yaakov says nothing more to his son. Perhaps he is waiting for another occasion to reproach him for it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Announcing a success to those who will not share in it is sometimes setting a condition without saying so. Have we ever told of a success in a way that required others to bow? How could we have put it differently?

The Master of Dreams



PRESENTATION

Yaakov sends Yosef to see how his brothers are faring as they pasture the flock far from home. They see him coming from afar: “here comes this master of dreams”. They talk of killing him, then sell him.

THE QUESTION

What did the brothers really want: to do away with Yosef, or to do away with his dreams?

THE ANSWER

“Go now, see the welfare of your brothers” (Bereshit 37:14); “Here comes this master of dreams... and we shall see what becomes of his dreams” (Bereshit 37:19-20).

Yaakov seizes the occasion to tell Yosef: go and see where your brothers are, go and ask after them. You must learn to serve them. But to his brothers he is the ba'al ha-chalomot, the master of dreams, the one who truly takes himself for the master of the family.

Kayin had killed his brother; he had reduced him to silence. Here the brothers do not only want to be rid of him: they want to prove that he is the one who will be the slave, and that they are not the ones who will be there to serve.

And so Yosef will learn the hard way, through suffering, before attaining that title of leader and seeing his dreams come true. He will be the servant; he will be thrown into Pharaoh's prison. Yet what happens afterwards will give these dreams their meaning.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

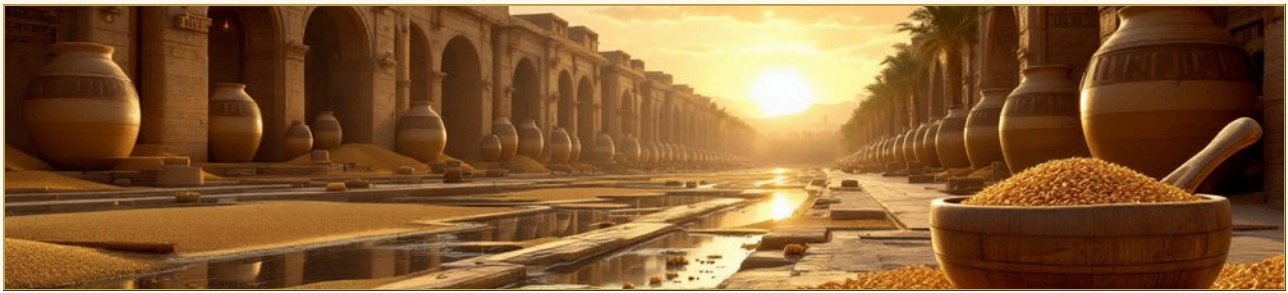
Rather than kill him, they preferred to show him that his dreams were worth absolutely nothing.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One can crush someone's dream without ever striking him. Which dream of someone close to us have we mocked? And which dream in our home had to go through trials before it was taken seriously?

SUBJECT 09

Three Gifts to Egypt



PRESENTATION

Slave, prisoner, then Pharaoh's second-in-command: Yosef leaves Egypt a legacy that the Rav sums up in three points. Pharaoh himself recognizes in him “a man in whom is the spirit of Elokim”.

THE QUESTION

What lasting gift can an exile bring to the nation he lives in?

THE ANSWER

“Can we find a man like this, in whom is the spirit of Elokim?” (Bereshit 41:38).

Yosef gave Egypt three things. First, faith in Elokim: Pharaoh himself asks whether there is a man inspired by G-d, and thereby acknowledges the existence of a Creator of the world. Next, interpretation: Yosef is the poter chalomot, the one who resolves dreams — he is, says the Rav, the Freud of his day. Finally, organization: he nationalizes all the land and places it under Pharaoh's control, a system in which society's goods are distributed equally.

Faith in a Creator, a way of interpreting events, an economic organization. For everything we live through is something of an image, a parable. We would have to step out of the appearances we drape ourselves in to see the true essence of things, their true language.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Things speak to us; the world speaks to us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If our family were to leave three things to the town where we live, what would they be? And can we read what this year's events have been trying to tell us?

SUBJECT 10

The One Who Reads Others' Dreams



PRESENTATION

Yosef explains the cupbearer's dream, the baker's, then Pharaoh's. But his own dreams he cannot explain to himself. It will take him years to understand what they meant.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yosef, so skilled at interpreting the dreams of others, not understand his own?

THE ANSWER

“Do not interpretations belong to Elokim?” (Bereshit 40:8); “It was to preserve life that Elokim sent me before you” (Bereshit 45:5).

These were not the dreams of a teenager, nor those of a heedless man dreaming of domination: there was substance in these dreams. But Yosef had to realize what he himself would say later: it is G-d who is the *poter chalomot*; it is He who resolves dreams.

For everything depends on how one interprets the dream. If one reduces it to its narrowest expression, it is bad. If one projects it so that it moves us to act toward the other, it can become a form of revelation.

Yosef will acknowledge it before his brothers: if G-d blessed my sheaf and set me on the path of success, it was to serve you better, to keep you alive. That is the purpose of Yosef's dream. Unfortunately, he reaches this conclusion only after hard trials.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A dream — everything depends on how one interprets it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to understand other people's lives than one's own. Which “dream” in our life did we understand only much later? And whom does our success today help to live?

SUBJECT 11

Governor, Never King



PRESENTATION

Even at the summit of Egypt, Yosef will only be Pharaoh's second. Yaakov will bless him as nezir echav, “set apart from his brothers”. But kingship will go to Yehudah.

THE QUESTION

Why is the most righteous of the brothers not destined to be king?

THE ANSWER

“May they rest on the head of Yosef, on the brow of the one set apart from his brothers” (Bereshit 49:26).

Yosef will hold the office of moshel, of governor, the one who is imposed; he will never hold that of melech, of king. He is nezir echav, the one set apart from his brothers. And that is precisely what keeps him from kingship.

For a wholly righteous tzaddik cannot be placed at the head of a people. If he has nothing to reproach himself for, if he has no remorse, if he has not been through an unhappy experience from which he learned to repent on his own, he is not a model for the people.

That is what will destine Yehudah for kingship, while Yosef remains at the level of the holiness of the nazirite.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The people need to see themselves on an equal footing with their leader.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Would we rather be guided by someone who is never wrong, or by someone who has been able to admit his mistakes? And in our family, who dares to say: I was wrong?

SUBJECT 12

The Twelve in Each of Us



PRESENTATION

At the end of the lecture, a participant is puzzled: Yosef seems passive, he accepts his fate, and when he finally asks the cupbearer to remember him, he is punished for it. How can he be a model? The Rav answers by shifting the question.

THE QUESTION

Are Yaakov's sons characters to be judged from outside, or faces of our own life?

THE ANSWER

The Rav: “The twelve children of Yaakov are each one of us.”

At certain moments we are Yosef; at others, Binyamin; at others, Yehudah. There are moments in our life that identify us with one of Yaakov's children rather than another. Our life unfolds in these twelve dimensions, up to a hundred and twenty years, each span of ten years making us live a portion of the destiny of one of them, a portion of the destiny of the Jewish people.

If we are aware of this, then Yosef's dreams are not foreign to our nature. We bear their consequences, we draw their lessons. The Torah gives us Yosef's example as a warning: take care, you are going through this trial; expect such consequences if you do not correct your course.

In families too, there are brothers who have played the role of Yosef, and others that of Yehudah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Do not ask the question as something separate from the whole, but from within the whole.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Which son of Yaakov do we resemble at this moment of our life? Let each one say so, and say also which one he was ten years ago.