

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

YOM KIPPUR

12 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from Rav Raphaël Benizri's lecture
“Yom Kippur: The Book of Yonah and Teshuvah”: why Kippur is
the true head of the year, why teshuvah is not a magical erasing,
and why the book read at Minchah tells of a prophet fleeing his
mission — a mirror of Israel's vocation among the nations.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Four answers to a single question



PRESENTATION

A Midrash puts the same question to four authorities in turn: wisdom, prophecy, the Torah, and finally G-d Himself. A man has sinned: how can he pay his debt? The first three answers close the door. The fourth opens it.

THE QUESTION

Why must four authorities be asked to obtain an answer — and what does G-d give that wisdom, prophecy and the Torah do not?

THE ANSWER

“Good and upright is the L-rd; therefore He shows sinners the way” (Tehillim 25:8); Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 24:7.

Wisdom is asked, the Rav relates: what is the fate of the sinner? Logic says he should be eaten up by remorse; it answers: evil pursues sinners. There is no remedy. The question is put to prophecy: the soul that sins shall die. No other possibility. One turns to the Torah: let him bring a guilt offering, let him confess his sin, and it will be atoned for. But one who cannot afford an offering remains without a remedy.

So one turns to G-d, the last resort. And He answers: let him do teshuvah, let him decide to turn back into himself, back toward his sources, toward his roots, and his sin will be atoned for.

Here the verse applies: the L-rd is good and upright. He is good: how is His goodness verified? By His uprightness. He is upright: how is that verified? Because He is good. He always wants to set the sinner on the way back, for He does not want to condemn the sinner to death, but wants him to turn back into himself and live.

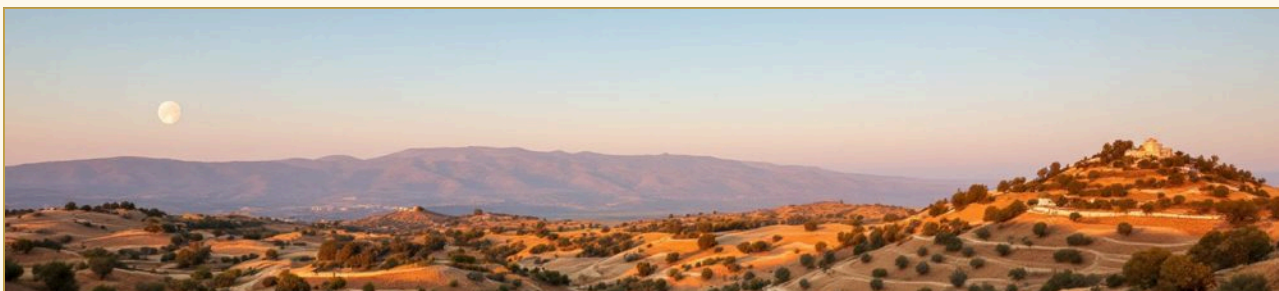
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

He does not want to condemn the sinner to death; on the contrary, He wants at all costs that he turn back into himself and live.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Faced with the wrongdoing of someone close, we speak sometimes as a sage, sometimes as a prophet, sometimes as an accountant. Which of these voices dominates in us? And to whom could we show a way back, rather than presenting him with the bill?

Kippur, the true head of the year



PRESENTATION

Nowhere in the Torah, the Prophets or the Writings is the first of Tishrei called Rosh Hashanah. We ourselves, in our prayers, call it Yom Teruah or Yom HaZikaron. The expression “Rosh Hashanah” appears in Yechezkel... to designate the tenth of the month, the day of Kippur.

THE QUESTION

How can Kippur be the “head of the year” — and what happens between Rosh Hashanah and Kippur?

THE ANSWER

“At the beginning of the year (be-rosh ha-shanah), on the tenth of the month” (Yechezkel 40:1); “the festival of ingathering, at the going out of the year” (Shemot 23:16).

It is not so strange, says the Rav, if we bear in mind that there is a head of the lunar year and a head of the solar year, and that the Jewish festivals are calculated by the solar seasons: Pesach is the festival of spring, Shavuot the festival of the harvest, Sukkot the festival of ingathering. Of Sukkot it is said “at the going out of the year”: the end of the year truly falls at Sukkot, and not at Rosh Hashanah.

There is a shift between the lunar year and the solar year. During these Days of Awe, two years overlap, the past and the present. The psalm we recite during this period says so: the L-rd is my light and my salvation. My light is Rosh Hashanah; my salvation is Kippur.

Until Kippur we recite selichot, pleas for forgiveness. From Kippur onward, they are calls for G-d's help, that we may be set back in the right direction of thought.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Kippur is the day of Rosh Hashanah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A new year does not necessarily begin on the day the calendar changes. At what moment, for each of us, did the year truly change? And what do we ask of G-d: only forgiveness, or also a new direction?

The Jubilee, or freeing oneself



PRESENTATION

It was on the day of Kippur that the shofar was sounded to proclaim the Jubilee, the fiftieth year: every person was set free, and every piece of land was returned to its original owner. For the land is never sold in perpetuity.

THE QUESTION

Why does the release of the Jubilee fall on Kippur — and from what servitude must we free ourselves first?

THE ANSWER

“On the tenth day of the month, on the day of Kippur, you shall sound the shofar throughout your land” (Vayikra 25:9); “the land shall not be sold in perpetuity” (Vayikra 25:23).

On the day of Kippur, the Rav explains, at the close of the Jubilee, it is required to free every person and also to give the land back its autonomy, its independence, by restoring it to its original owners. Land is never sold for good, but always for a forty-nine-year tenure.

So the day of Kippur is, in a sense, the day on which freeing oneself is truly rethought. For it is not the freeing of others that we must think of first.

If we have remained conditioned by ourselves, enslaved by very relative, very subjective ideals, if we have remained dependent on our way of life and of thinking, then we have not managed to get completely out of ourselves and to return to the source.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not the freeing of others that we must think of first.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is easier to want to free others than to free oneself. What habit of thought, what rather too personal ideal holds us prisoner? What would we have to “return to its owner” to set out free again this year?

Who thinks of forbidden unions on Yom Kippur?



PRESENTATION

Minchah of Kippur is the moment when the prayer of the person seeking to return to himself is truly accepted. And it is precisely then that the section of forbidden unions is read from the Torah scroll.

THE QUESTION

At the summit of the holiest day, why read the list of the basest instincts?

THE ANSWER

The Torah reading at Minchah of Kippur: the section of the arayot, the forbidden unions.

It is disconcerting, the Rav admits: we are in a day of near-asceticism; who is thinking of forbidden liaisons, of these base, perverse instincts? It is to tell us that the ideal teshuvah we imagine, and that we believe we are reaching at its highest point, is not possible.

Teshuvah involves many stages. The struggles we will have to wage are not going to change their nature by some magic effect, because we have kept a fast day and prayed fervently — as if by magic we had eliminated all our sins and made a fresh start. No: the next day, life goes on as if nothing had happened.

Teshuvah means making a decision about one very specific weakness we would like to overcome, and saying: mastering that weakness is what we are holding on to at all costs; we will not give in. To hold on to one aspect of life and want to correct it is a promise for the future of every possible restoration.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To hold on to one aspect of life and want to correct it is a promise for the future of every possible restoration.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Kippur does not ask us for a catalogue of good resolutions, but for a single, precise one. Let each person choose, silently or aloud, the weakness to which he no longer wants to give in. What could help him hold firm from the very next day?

SUBJECT 05

The higher we climb, the harder the struggle



PRESENTATION

The haftarah of Minchah is the book of Yonah. Yonah is a prophet who lives the torments of his total commitment to G-d. We readily imagine that a life with G-d is a peaceful life. The Rav asserts the opposite.

THE QUESTION

Why is life with G-d not free of torment — and what danger lies in wait for one who attains prophecy?

THE ANSWER

“Whoever is greater than his fellow, his inclination is greater than he” (Sukkah 52a).

Life with G-d is not without torment, says the Rav; the opposite would be entirely false. A person engaged on the path of spirituality goes through difficult trials. Our Sages said it: whoever reaches a higher level of thought and struggle, his inclination becomes even more aggressive, more stubborn.

The Rambam says that to attain prophecy one needs flawless logic, an approach to the absolute, to the infinite. This is not within everyone's reach, and one can easily go astray. And when one gets there, the danger is a return to a very strict morality: the prophet wants no compromise; his logic forbids it.

That is why prophecy declares: the soul that sins shall die. For prophecy, that man's mission is over; there is no other opening. And that is precisely what the book of Yonah will explain to us.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Life with G-d is not without torment; the opposite would be entirely false.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes believe that the most devout have no more battles. Have we noticed that our inner struggles grow as we progress? And are we sometimes too severe with others because we demand a great deal of ourselves?

The dove that did not come back



PRESENTATION

The prophet we read on Kippur bears the name of a bird: Yonah, the dove. It is not its first appearance in the Torah. During the Flood, Noah makes use of a dove, and he sends it out three times.

THE QUESTION

What do the three sendings of Noah's dove tell us — and why is the prophet who bears its name the “son of truth”?

THE ANSWER

“He sent out the dove, and it did not return to him again” (Bereshit 8:12); “Justice and peace have kissed” (Tehillim 85:11).

The first time, the Rav relates, the dove can find nowhere to land and quickly returns to the ark: before, there was death, the Flood; there is nothing; it seeks shelter. The second time, it returns with an olive branch in its beak: this time, there is hope. The third time, it goes out and does not return. It has won its freedom; it no longer seeks to be “fathered” by Noah. These three stages we will find again in the prophet Yonah.

What is this prophet's name? Yonah ben Amitai, and Amitai comes from the word emet, truth. He wants everything to rest on truth. But we know very well that this is impossible: truth would demand strict justice, and under strict justice the world could not stand. It would be atrocious, it would be cruel, without chesed, without kindness.

It is when love is present that justice and peace find themselves embracing, each in the other's arms.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Truth would demand strict justice — and under strict justice, the world could not stand.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are moments when we are right, entirely right. To whom should we give, this year, something other than the truth: a little kindness, a little patience? And in what situation has our “justice” become cruel?

The challah of humanity



PRESENTATION

Yonah is sent to Nineveh, a city that is not Jewish, but a city of culture with its own standing. Why must a prophet of Israel concern himself with it? The Rav answers with an image taken from bread dough.

THE QUESTION

What is Israel's role toward the other peoples — and what happens when it loses interest in them?

THE ANSWER

“Arise, go to Nineveh, the great city” (Yonah 1:2); the seven laws of the children of Noach.

Each person here below answers to a mission, says the Rav. There is no one who does not have his moment in history. We may be the challah of the world, but we are only the challah: there is the rest of the dough, and it is the challah that consecrates the rest of the dough. But careful: the blessing is deserved only if we go on allowing this dough to feed its world.

Of the other peoples we require only the seven Noahide laws, a basic morality from which each one develops. But the one charged with watching over the preservation of this structure, and with grafting teachings onto it little by little, is the Jewish people. And the Jewish people is Yonah. Invested with a mission, it cannot lay claim to an unconditional blessing.

So we must take care of our relationship with the rest of humanity, for what affects humanity affects us, and what affects us ends up affecting it. If we have remained indifferent to how the surrounding society develops, shut away in our own neighborhood, and have neglected contact with others, there too we have sinned.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We may be the challah of the world, but we are only the challah.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is comfortable to stay among our own. What bond do we keep up with neighbors and colleagues who do not share our faith? What have we shown of Israel, this year, to those who are watching us?

Sent to the East, he heads West



PRESENTATION

The order is clear: go to Nineveh. Yonah goes down to the port of Yafo and sets sail for Tarshish. Now Tarshish is also the name of one of the twelve stones on Aharon's breastplate, the stone of the tribe to which, according to the Rav, Yonah belonged.

THE QUESTION

Yonah flees neither G-d nor his conscience. What is he fleeing toward, then, when he chooses Tarshish of all places?

THE ANSWER

“Yonah rose to flee to Tarshish from before the L-rd” (Yonah 1:3).

Each person is a pearl in himself, says the Rav: on Aharon's breastplate, the tribes were represented by twelve stones, each with its own intrinsic value. He is sent to the East; he goes to the West, to Tarshish, the jewel of his tribe. He would like to confine himself to what he is, within the space of his tribe and his people, and not invest himself outside.

Why? Because the mission is too heavy, and the disappointments would be too great. It is not easy to play the teacher: in a classroom, the teacher tries to set everyone on the right track, and the class responds by putting the teacher in its sights. One must find a way to communicate, to engage in dialogue; but the path we always choose is flight. We flee confrontation, we flee the other, sometimes we flee ourselves.

Yonah does not want to flee G-d, nor his conscience. But he knows that if he must teach not according to pure logic, mixing in a little understanding and generosity, things will be somewhat altered. He is afraid of betraying his own nature.

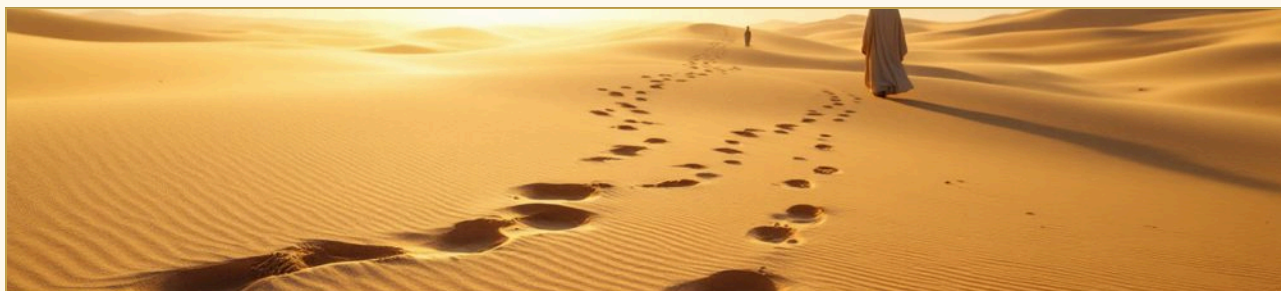
THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We flee confrontation, we flee the other, sometimes we flee ourselves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has his Tarshish: the circle where we are understood without effort. Whom have we stopped speaking to because it had become too tiring? What would we be ready to give up of our “pure logic” to renew the dialogue?

One step along a kilometer



PRESENTATION

Yonah's entire prophecy fits into five Hebrew words: "Forty more days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown." The rest of the book is the story of a man wrestling with his mission. And at the end, he admits why he fled: he knew G-d would forgive.

THE QUESTION

What should we do when a mission seems too heavy or doomed to failure — and what does it mean that G-d "relents"?

THE ANSWER

"I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate G-d... who relents of evil" (Yonah 4:2); "It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free to withdraw from it" (Pirkei Avot 2:16).

Yonah will say: I knew that G-d is merciful, that He would lift the threat; I would have carried out a mission for nothing, I would look ridiculous, I would have made demands that not even G-d makes. Should one give up, then? Above all, do not give in to despair, says the Rav: that is the first lesson. Even if we have advanced only one step along the kilometer we had to cover, it will be that step, and it is enough. Someone else will continue. We were warned: you are not obliged to finish the work — but neither are you free to say: it's too much for me.

For one cannot escape G-d. In creating His world, He was aware of all its baseness, but He committed Himself with the intention of never letting it go: to let go of His world would be to sign His own failure. Man can fail; G-d cannot.

When it is said that G-d "relented", it is human language, to make it accessible to us. There are methods that do not succeed, as in raising a child: if one sees that a method has failed, one must apply another. The paths are infinite; much wisdom is needed.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Even if we have advanced only one step along a kilometer, it will be that step, and it is enough.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We sometimes give up because we will not see the end of the road. What "step" can we take this year, even a small one? And in raising our children, do we have the courage to change method when ours is not working?

SUBJECT 10

The only man asleep in the storm



PRESENTATION

The storm rises and the crew panics. The sailors, says the Rav, represent the seventy nations, the seventy cultures: each cries out to his god, then all throw their gear overboard. Meanwhile, one man alone has gone down into the hold and fallen asleep.

THE QUESTION

At the very moment the world realizes that its beliefs do not save it, why does the one with a teaching to pass on choose to sleep?

THE ANSWER

“The captain came to him and said to him: What are you doing, sleeper? Arise, call upon your G-d; perhaps G-d will think of us” (Yonah 1:6).

The text acknowledges that each one implores his god, says the Rav. The perception of G-d differs on many levels. A belief, even a primitive one, deserves respect, because it keeps alive in the person a certain hope, a certain moral demand. We are not going to sweep it away: better that than nothing at all. But this time they throw all their gear overboard, because they realize that none of it holds. This is the moment to pass on a teaching amid the uncertainty the world is living through. And it is the moment Yonah chooses to withdraw to the bottom of the hold and sleep.

So it is the others who come to wake him. The captain says to him: everyone is worried, and you allow yourself to doze off, to sink into an anesthesia of thought; call upon your G-d. Perhaps — ulai — the G-d of the Jews will find the solution to our troubles.

Here is a question that repeats itself throughout history: the other peoples keep their eyes turned toward the first people that brought the world the revelation of the absolute.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

This is the moment to pass on a teaching amid the uncertainty the world is living through.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

It is more comfortable to sleep in the hold than to speak up on deck. What is happening around us while we “sleep”? And who had to come and wake us this year, so that we would do our part?

SUBJECT 11

What is your message?



PRESENTATION

The lot falls on Yonah, and the sailors question him: what is your occupation, where do you come from, what is your country, of what people are you? The Rav dwells on the word used for “occupation”, and on Yonah's answer.

THE QUESTION

Why do the sailors ask for his melachah and not his avodah — and why does Yonah answer “Ivri anochi” rather than naming a country?

THE ANSWER

“What is your occupation (melachtecha)?... He said to them: I am an Ivri, and I fear the L-rd, the G-d of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (Yonah 1:8–9).

Avodah is work, says the Rav: in avodah one is an eved, a slave. In melachah, one is a malach, a messenger: one carries a message. What is your message, by what art did you come into the world, what do you have to teach? Then: what is your country? For the promise of the land preceded the giving of the Law: “Go forth from your land.” G-d first destines a land, a place of anchorage for realizing an ideal of life.

And Yonah answers: Ivri anochi. This does not mean that I come from a land; I identify first with my ancestor Avraham, the one from the other side of the river. But Ivri also comes from the verb to cross: I am the one who carries ideas, the profession of faith. I am the ferryman of the L-rd of heaven, the one charged with establishing the link between heaven and earth.

He adds: who made the sea and the dry land. Three elements, shamayim, yam, yabashah: it was by crossing the sea on dry land that this people was charged with its mission.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

I am, so to speak, the ferryman of the L-rd who is in heaven — that is, the one charged with establishing the link between heaven and earth.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

If we were asked tonight not “what is your job?” but “what is your message?”, what would we answer? Let each person answer in one sentence. And what are we ferrying across for those around us?

SUBJECT 12

“Throw me into the sea”



PRESENTATION

Yonah pronounces his own sentence: take me and throw me into the sea, and the sea will calm down. The sailors comply; the storm ceases. And the text says that a great fear of the L-rd seized them, that they offered a sacrifice and made vows.

THE QUESTION

Why does Yonah ask to be thrown overboard — and what are we to make of these sailors who adopt the G-d of Israel at the very moment they rid themselves of Yonah?

THE ANSWER

“Take me and throw me into the sea” (Yonah 1:12); “The men feared the L-rd with a great fear... and made vows” (Yonah 1:16).

Yonah has decided, says the Rav, that he cannot bear alone this weight G-d places on his shoulders. He prefers to say: take Your people, You take charge of them; take Your humanity, You take charge of it. We say it too, privately, about our small problems: we have enough worries; why burden ourselves with other people's? And we wash our hands of it, knowingly.

The sailors had first feared the storm and the man they held responsible. This time their fear is of another order: they make vows of loyalty. We do not know much about what they promised, but they adopted the G-d of Israel; they made Him their own — while believing they had done away with Yonah. That is what the great religions did: they took the G-d of Israel and ignored the fate of the Jewish people.

But the Jewish people, even if it knows descends into Sheol, into death, is not dead for all that. If it is thrown into the waters, it will one day or another be able to emerge.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

If it is thrown into the waters, it will one day or another be able to emerge.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

“Take Your people, You take charge of them”: that is the sentence of those who are tired of carrying. When did we want to wash our hands of a responsibility that was too heavy? And who around us needs help so as not to let go?