

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

PESACH

13 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Twelve questions drawn from the lectures of Rav Raphaël Benizri on Pesach and the Haggadah: why the chametz we search for by candlelight is not in the house, why time is not a continuous line, why no blessing is said over the very telling that gives the evening its name, and why the four questions are not meant for children.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Pesach table

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SUBJECT 01

We hide the chametz so that we can find it



PRESENTATION

On the eve of Pesach the house is already clean. So, lest the blessing be said in vain, someone places ten little packets of chametz around the rooms, and off we go to search for them by candlelight, in all seriousness.

THE QUESTION

Searching for what we have just hidden ourselves: is it a game, or does the blessing concern something other than those ten packets?

THE ANSWER

The two prohibitions: “bal yera’eh”, it must not be seen, and “bal yimatzei”, it must not be found in your home.

The chametz we remove from the house is the chametz that dwells within us. It is not simply in the home: it is a matter of eliminating it in ourselves. It is by the light of our soul, our neshama, that we search for the particles of this chametz in ourselves — and so the blessing is never superfluous. The ritual is binding precisely because it means removing it from our thought, our way of speaking, our daily deeds.

For there is always, in what we do, a little ego, a self-satisfaction bordering on arrogance. Our Sages name three elements that stop an instinct from being creative: kinah, the competitive spirit; ta’avah, appetite; and kavod, self-assertion. We cannot say we part with them — they take part in other endeavors and can be positive — but seven days a year we must neutralize them, then take them up again with new ways of using them.

And the elimination covers three stages: my relationship with myself, my relationship with the other through the feminine, and my relationship with the Absolute through sacrifice — for a sacrifice turned from its course becomes idolatry.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not about suppressing the leaven, but about restoring it to its proper measure.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We search by candlelight for what we already know where to find. Let each of us name our share: is it comparing ourselves with others, appetite, or the need for recognition? And which of these three does the most damage at our table?

SUBJECT 02

Leaven is not added to the dough, it is already inside



PRESENTATION

We picture chametz as a foreign body: add the yeast and the dough rises. Yet leave the dough alone, without adding anything, and it will rise by itself. Leaven does not come from outside: it is part of the flour.

THE QUESTION

If the leaven is already in the dough, at what moment does it become the chametz that must be burned?

THE ANSWER

Leave the dough without leaven and, after a while, it will rise by itself. The leaven that gives the dough its flavor will spoil it if it outlasts its time. Everything is a matter of dosage over time, of an element that belongs to the dough and is not foreign to it. What in man is the element of desire is not to be abolished: it is the stimulus of every action. But leaven that has outlived its time must be removed.

And when does chametz appear? As long as we keep kneading the dough, there is no chametz. Chametz arises when we have stopped kneading, when we have left the dough to rest. It arises in the idleness of the self, when we are bored and find nothing to do.

That is why on Shavuot, on the contrary, we bring leavened bread — but to bring leavened bread one must first have gone through the matzah: we must work on ourselves constantly, so as not to get bogged down. Not letting it rise means not giving our impulse time to become distorted, time to rationalize itself.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Leaven is a by-product of time: stepping out of the enclosure of time is the beginning of freedom.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

What harms us almost never comes from outside: it is our own strength left at rest too long. What have we stopped kneading — a marriage, a friendship, a study? And what should we set in motion again as early as next week?

Pe-Sach: the mouth that speaks; Paro: the evil mouth



PRESENTATION

Our Sages split the name of the festival into two words: peh, the mouth, and sach, that speaks. And they split the name of the king of Egypt the same way: Paro, peh ra, the evil mouth. Two mouths, then, face to face.

THE QUESTION

Pharaoh too had a language. What distinguishes a free mouth from an evil one — and what holds language prisoner in Egypt?

THE ANSWER

The Targum renders “nefesh chayah”, a living soul, as “ruach memalela”, a speaking spirit.

When we are in exile, it is speech that is in exile. We can no longer understand one another because we have lost the authenticity of language: to make ourselves understood we use every artifice, and we lose all naturalness. A language in exile is a language conditioned by our daily life, by the culture imposed on us, by family problems, not to mention the yoke of the authorities under which we live.

Paro had his own language; the difference is that it was a closed language. When language cannot evolve, cannot go beyond its limits, then it is peh ra, an evil mouth. To free man is first to free his language, because the divine part in man is that breath which carries speech.

And there are four modes of speech. Amirah: I speak to myself. Dibbur: I speak to the other, we converse, but each keeps his ideas. Haged: we have formed a bond, we are tied together by what is said — that is the Haggadah. And finally the shir, the song, with which the evening ends. On the first three levels there can be false notes. Song accepts none.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

That is why the evening ends in song: there is nothing left to negotiate.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

At this table, how many of our sentences are true words, and how many are formulas to avoid a subject? Let us choose one thing that no one in our family ever says clearly — and let someone say it tonight, simply.

With which beginning should we begin?



PRESENTATION

On Seder night, two openings were possible. We could begin with “we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt”, or with “in the beginning our ancestors were idol worshippers”. A choice had to be made.

THE QUESTION

Why open with the slavery we endured rather than with our fathers’ idolatry — and do the two not say, at bottom, the same thing?

THE ANSWER

“Avadim hayinu le-Pharo be-Mitzrayim” and “Mi-techila ovdei avodah zarah hayu avoteinu”.

We chose “we were slaves in Egypt”, and left “in the beginning our ancestors were idol worshippers” for second place. We sought nothing, asked for nothing: it was decided without us, we were thrown into Egypt. And rightly so: every time we agree to live in any form of dependence, we are idolaters.

For man’s exile accompanies Adam’s sin from the very start. And for the Rambam, that sin does not begin with eating the fruit: it begins in the gaze the woman casts upon it, when she considers it and lets herself be seduced by its appearance, thinking it good to eat. The sin lies in the conception of the world we have before us. That is why our Sages speak not of drive or tendency, but of conception: yetzer ha-tov, yetzer ha-ra, from yetzirah — to conceive the good, to conceive the evil.

So our Sages chose to define the people not by the abandonment of idols, but by the abandonment of fixed ideas, of the world we conceive for ourselves and by ourselves. That is the starting point of all idolatry.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

An idol is not first a statue: it is a world one has conceived to one’s own measure.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all hold a fixed idea about someone in this family, and it is twenty years old. Which one? And if tonight we agreed to set it aside, what would we see that we no longer see?

He cast truth to the ground



PRESENTATION

Before man is created, the attributes argue. Truth objects: this being will be a liar, he will harm the world, he will feed quarrels. Others defend him: he is capable of kindness too. Then, says the midrash, He cast truth to the ground.

THE QUESTION

Why set truth aside in order to create man — and are the angels who protest not right?

THE ANSWER

The midrash: “Hishlikh emet artzah” — He cast truth to the ground. And the angels: how dare You cast to the ground the royal seal of Your creation?

The angels protest: how dare You cast truth to the ground, the royal seal of Your creation, of Your empire? And the answer is: from now on, I do not want the world governed by an exclusively divine truth, out of reach. I want man himself to take part in revelation.

For casting truth to the ground is not throwing it away: it is sowing it. Sowing it in the universe of creation and telling man: now bring it to light, discover it, teach it, share it. And just as the farmer scatters to the wind a tiny part of what he will harvest, what the Jewish people is called to sow will bring an immense harvest.

To resemble the Creator, then, is not only to practice kindness — to clothe the naked, to visit the sick as He did for Avraham, to bury the dead as He did for Moshe. It is also to take part in sustaining creation: not as a conservative who leaves the world as it is, but by creating the world in the same way, by discovering it and revealing it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Torah was not given entirely from above: man discovered a part of it, and it was countersigned.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We have been entrusted with a sown truth, not a delivered one. What have we truly searched for this year, rather than received ready-made? And to whom at this table do we leave too little room to search for himself?

The mitzvah over which no blessing is said



PRESENTATION

We bless before reading the Megillah, before sounding the shofar, before lighting the Chanukah menorah. Telling of the Exodus is also a mitzvah — “you shall tell your son”. And yet no blessing was instituted for the Haggadah.

THE QUESTION

Why is the one mitzvah of the evening that gives the book its name the one we do not bless?

THE ANSWER

“Ve-higadta le-vinkha” — you shall tell your son.

First answer: if we are still in the midst of liberation and the mitzvah has no end, how can we bless what has not yet been completed? A mitzvah is performed for its completion — and here it is not there.

Second answer: the Haggadah is only an instrument we use to reach our goal. And we never bless the instruments that make the fulfillment of a mitzvah possible.

Third answer: the Haggadah is itself a form of blessing, a tribute to the liberating movement in four stages — I will bring you out, I will deliver you, I will redeem you, I will take you as a people. And there is one more reason: for the Megillah or the shofar, one person can discharge the duty of a hundred. Not the Haggadah. It requires interaction: you cannot read it for everyone without discussion among all those at the table.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What is unfinished is not blessed — and no one can do it in your place.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Some things can be delegated and others cannot. Who in this family has let someone else speak for him — at festivals, in decisions? Tonight, the rule is that everyone speaks for himself: let us begin.

To whom did He speak when there was no one?



PRESENTATION

The world was created by ten utterances. But when we count them we find only nine: our Sages complete the count by counting “Bereshit” as an utterance. Yet an utterance assumes someone to whom one speaks.

THE QUESTION

How can “Bereshit” be an utterance if there is no one yet to hear it — and what does it have to do with the tenth plague?

THE ANSWER

The ten utterances of creation; “Ani” and “Ayin” are written with the same letters.

If there is no one, I can only speak to myself: it is always my ani, and this ani is an ayin, a nothingness — ani and ayin share the same letters. It is in the withdrawal of my self that I can affirm my self; I cannot affirm it without first thinking that at a certain moment I did not exist. My own existence is like the creation of the world: me-ayin le-yesh, from nothingness to being. And it is indeed an utterance, because there was a leap.

The ten plagues illustrate the manipulation of the ten utterances of creation and the way they were emptied of their purpose: they attest to the malfunction of the laws of nature. And there is a close link between the last plague and the first utterance. The plague of the firstborn is the collapse of all the premises of thought accepted in Egypt.

That is why, for that plague, neither Moshe nor Aharon intervenes: it is I who go out, it is I who reveal Myself. When the principle of the beginning is distorted, everything else falls with it.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Affirming one's self begins with remembering that one might not have been.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Whoever thinks he is the beginning of everything can no longer receive anything. Who at this table feels that the house would collapse without him? And what would really happen if, for one week, he let the others do it?

Time is not a continuous line



PRESENTATION

We live by making plans: tomorrow, next year, in three years. We believe in the continuity of things. Yet in Hebrew, the notion of continuous time does not exist.

THE QUESTION

If each instant is a creation of its own, what gives us the illusion that time flows without interruption?

THE ANSWER

“Ha-mechadesh be-tuvo be-khol yom tamid ma’aseh Bereshit” — He renews each day the work of creation. And: “Reshit goyim Amalek”.

Just as a line is only an unbroken succession of points, time is an unbroken succession of moments. No moment is identical to another, and every moment is a creation. There is no continuous energy sustaining the world: that energy is renewed as the drop of oil that feeds a lamp is renewed. It is not the same drop: it is another drop, one tiny drop more to keep giving light — and this gives us the impression of continuity.

What we call the continuous movement of creation is in reality a series of discrete creations: they are nissim and nifla’ot, miracles and wonders, and every moment of life is in itself a wonder. To falsify this notion, to halt the beginning and substitute another starting point — that is what the verse “Reshit goyim Amalek” says.

And that is why the festival is called Chag ha-Matzot. What lies between a matzah and a loaf of bread? The time given to the dough. Seven days a year, we must neutralize in our minds this notion of time that intervenes and distorts the original flavor.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The Exodus is not the end point of an evolution: it is an interruption.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We put off important things to a moment that does not yet exist. If nothing guarantees continuity, what must be said or done this week, and not “someday”? Let each of us name one thing, and a date.

Why firstborn daughters do not fast



PRESENTATION

On the eve of Pesach, the firstborn fast. Yet the plague did not spare the firstborn daughters of Egypt either, and the firstborn daughters of Israel were saved like their brothers. And yet nowhere do they fast.

THE QUESTION

If firstborn sons fast because they were spared without having deserved it, what did the firstborn daughters have that stood in for merit?

THE ANSWER

The firstborn sons fast because they were spared, and spared not through their own merit: G-d had decided so, bound by the commitment made to the forefathers. That is all.

The daughters, for their part, had their merit. The resistance in Egypt was carried out by the women, and this merit of resistance covered them: nowhere are they required to fast. It was they who surrounded their husbands and urged them to rebel against Pharaoh's decree — and it is by the merit of these righteous women that our fathers came out of Egypt.

This goes back a long way. Sarah sent Yishmael away, Rivkah set Esav aside, Leah set Lavan aside; Rachel is not buried in the Cave of the Patriarchs: she has a grave of her own, at the crossroads, and she weeps for her children — it is she who is charged with finding them again. And Avraham's journey already begins with the command to listen to Sarah.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The men were saved by a promise; the women, by what they had done.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

An entire generation came out of Egypt by the merit of women whose names are not recorded. Who in our family has held the house together without being counted? Let us name them tonight, one by one, and say what they really did.

SUBJECT 10

The promise we do not drink for



PRESENTATION

Four cups for four expressions of redemption: I will bring you out, I will deliver you, I will redeem you, I will take you as a people. But the verse counts five: I will bring you to the land. No one drinks for that one.

THE QUESTION

Why stop at four cups when there is a fifth promise — and what would we risk by drinking for the land?

THE ANSWER

The five expressions: “Ve-hotzeti, ve-hitzalti, ve-ga’alti, ve-lakachti... ve-heveti etkhem el ha-aretz”.

If there were a fifth cup, the Land of Israel might become the ultimate goal, instead of “I will take you as My people”. The most important thing to realize on Pesach is that we were chosen. The land is only the means to realize it: I will bring you to the land I swore to your forefathers, to give you the means to fulfill this mission.

This takes nothing away from the land. Israel is called to expand, its borders are not definitively set, and its holiness is not the same everywhere: that of Jerusalem is not that of Beer Sheva. But this holiness radiates far, and Israel cannot live confined within its borders: by its mission, it is called to go beyond them.

And that is why, at the end of the evening, we say “le-shanah ha-ba’ah be-ar’a de-Yisrael” and not “be-Eretz Yisrael”. Eretz comes from ratzah, to want, to run toward: there is a will in Eretz Yisrael. As long as we still speak there the languages of all the exiles, we are still speaking the language of exile.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not drink for the means, however great: we drink for what it serves.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often confuse the goal and the means: the house, the career, the children’s success. Let each of us say which means has become the goal in his life. And what that means was meant to serve in the first place.

SUBJECT 11

The One, borne by four



PRESENTATION

A poem attributed to Ibn Ezra, dedicated to Pesach, speaks only of four. Four letters, four emblems, four angels, four banners, four seasons, four corners of the world. And the number never leaves Seder night.

THE QUESTION

Why does this four recur everywhere on the night of Pesach — and what exactly does it carry?

THE ANSWER

The poem attributed to Ibn Ezra: “Yachid be-otiyot arba, nissa be-arba... degalim arba”. And the four-letter divine Name, like Alef-Dalet-Nun-Yud.

The One in four letters is borne by four emblems: the lion, the eagle, the ox and Adam. He is surrounded by four angels who accompany us: Michael on the right, Gabriel on the left, Uriel in front, Raphael behind. And the people in the desert march under four banners. These four we carry: Michael, the reference of chesed; Gabriel, strength — for kindness is not surrender; Raphael, who remedies imbalances, from the verb azen, to balance, which gives moznayim, the scales; and all this toward Uriel, advancing the light.

The forefathers traced these contours: Avraham is chesed, Yitzchak gevurah, Yaakov emet, who measures and corrects the two — and Yosef, whom we forget to count among the fathers though he is the foundation of the people from Egypt onward.

And there are four stages in the unfolding of creation: emanation, creation from nothing, formation, action. The world of the spirit and the world of matter are separated by a chasm — and we are always trying to bring reality back toward the first.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What is one lets itself be borne by four: that is how it becomes habitable.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Kindness, strength, balance, light: each one alone becomes distorted. Which of the four dominates in each of us, and which is most lacking in our home? Let us ask our neighbor at the table to answer for us.

The four questions are not meant for children



PRESENTATION

We give the Ma Nishtana to the youngest, he sings it, everyone is amused, and that is that. Yet the Seder plate was moved on purpose, before the meal, so that a question would arise — and it was not meant for children alone.

THE QUESTION

If the four questions correspond to four ages we all pass through, which one are we asking tonight?

THE ANSWER

The four ways of reading: peshat, remez, drash, sod; and the four sons: the chakham, the rasha, the tam, the one who does not know how to ask.

The four questions correspond to the four levels of interpretation — the literal, the allusive, the analogical, the hidden — but also to the four kinds of children, and even more to the four ages we pass through over time. We can go through them as a progression, or end up with the one who does not know how to ask — and that is unfortunate.

For the opposite of the wise man is not the unbeliever. The opposite of the chakham is the tipesh, the fool. Why was the fool not given a voice? Because with him dialogue is impossible. The rasha is better than him: his critical sense is so developed that one can turn things around and find him beside the wise man. He is no idiot, he is a brilliant mind — he simply wants everything to conform to the laws of nature.

And to the one who does not know how to ask: “at petach lo”. We should have said atah, in the masculine. If we say at, it is to tell the man: take the woman as your example. She does not simply give, she gives herself entirely. You too, give yourself to him.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

In the word shanah there is repeating, studying, sharpening and changing: one never returns to a text without being changed by it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Tonight, at this table, there is a wise one, a challenger, a simple one and one who asks nothing. Each of us knows which he is. But the one who asks nothing is waiting for someone to come to him: who will do it before the meal is over?

“On Pesach, the word joy does not exist”



PRESENTATION

Let us count the words. On Pesach, the Torah does not say the word joy even once. On Shavuot, only once. On Sukkot, three times. And Sukkot bears a name the others do not: simply say Chag, without specifying, and it is Sukkot that is meant.

THE QUESTION

Why is joy reserved for the last of the three festivals — and not for the festival of freedom?

THE ANSWER

The count of mentions of joy in the Torah: none on Pesach, one on Shavuot, three on Sukkot. Sukkot is called Chag ha-Asif, the festival of ingathering, and Zman Simchatenu.

Sukkot is Chag ha-Asif, the festival of ingathering, that is to say the festival of taking stock. What have we done with our freedom from Pesach? What have we done with the Torah received on Shavuot? A liberation without moral conscience would be dangerous; and a moral conscience not shared with the other, confined to a personal comfort of being, would also be a deviation of life. The fullness of Sukkot is that of a conscience that breathes openness: going out toward nature, going out toward the outside world, man’s full responsibility for this world.

And where does the word Chag come from? From the compass, the instrument that draws the circle. Each festival brings its radiance of light, but on Sukkot the radiance is immense. Do you know why? Because even our errors we have given a positive meaning: we have integrated them into the curve of life, and there too they have their place. Remember: we were the breakers of the first Tablets, it was a scandal, and G-d said He would make a new people from Moshe. Moshe answers: You are taking a risk — if this people, a three-legged table, did not hold, how do You expect a one-legged table to stand? So we do not change the people: we change the method of teaching. And on Yom Kippur we received the second Tablets.

This is what the chassidim used to say: happy is our old age, which atones for the errors of our youth. Happy is he who makes no mistake — but happy too is he who has managed to be forgiven his lapses. The joy of Sukkot is therefore not a fleeting joy, a little joy with a hangover the next day and a return to a sad reality a few hours later. It is not the joy of a drug: it is a joy that allows the self to regenerate entirely and to see the world differently — even though we stand on the eve of autumn, of nature’s decline and its hibernation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We hold the lulav to say something very simple: we have won. We are the watchmen of the night, full of faith and full of joy.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The festival of taking stock asks its question directly: what have we done this year with our freedom? And this one, harder: which error from our past have we finally managed to integrate — instead of continuing to hide it under the table?