

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

# PURIM

*11 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table*

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Eleven questions drawn from the lectures of Rav Raphaël Benizri on Purim: why Amalek is born of a door that was closed, why the only book in which the name of G-d does not appear is also the one that closes the cycle of the festivals, and why a festival that leaves us servants of an emperor takes precedence over the festival of our liberation.



*Rav Raphaël Benizri*

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*Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Purim table*

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## Amalek Was Born of a Closed Door



### PRESENTATION

Before reading the Megillah, we read Shabbat Zachor, the remembrance of Amalek. Yet Amalek is no stranger fallen from the sky: he is the grandson of Esav, and his mother is a woman who knocked at the door of the patriarchs and was not let in.

### THE QUESTION

*Timna wanted to enter Avraham's family and was turned away. Is Israel's worst enemy, then, born of a refusal on our part?*

### THE ANSWER

***Timna sought to join, turning to Sarah, to Rivkah, to Rachel and Leah. Rejected, she married Elifaz, son of Esav — and from her Amalek was born.***

She wanted to join Sarah, then Rivkah, then Rachel and Leah. Since she found no place and was pushed aside, she said to herself: since they do not want me, and I want at all costs to enter this family, I will take a side road and marry one of Esav's children. That is how Amalek was born. Know this well: each time we push aside, each time we turn away someone who shows the will to enter the path of Judaism, we risk producing through him a sworn antisemite.

Why did the patriarchs judge this way? Because they did not want this worm to get inside the fruit: they preferred to leave it outside, where one can still fight it. Her intentions were not sincere, and she risked corrupting the Torat avot, the teaching of the patriarchs.

The question is asked: could we not have prevented Amalek from emerging out of a refused conversion? The answer is that as long as the family is not solidly established, letting a foreign element slip into it puts its very existence in danger.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*A door shut for protection does not stop acting once it is shut.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Protecting our own sometimes requires saying no, and that no breeds grudges that last for generations. Whom have we pushed aside — from a marriage, from a table, from a family decision? Was the refusal right, and was the manner of it right as well?

## Amalek Attacks Only the One Who Has Stopped



### PRESENTATION

Amalek first appears between the Exodus from Egypt and the revelation at Sinai: no land yet, no Torah yet. He strikes neither before nor after, but right on the road, at the point where one wonders whether one is heading in the right direction.

### THE QUESTION

*Why does Amalek never show himself when we are strong, but always at the moment we stop along the way?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Amalek asher korch ba-derech”; and the site of the battle, Refidim, from rifyon yadayim, the slackening of the hands. Moshe held up by Hur and by Yehoshua.***

Amalek is the slackening of the hands. It is when we let ourselves go, when we give up, when we resign, when we despair and live an exile from ourselves: we no longer know where to go, we are disoriented, problems assail us and we lack the strength to face them. Amalek is there to exploit our weaknesses. He attacks a people on the way to being — for a Jew never simply is; he becomes one a little more each day.

Moshe needed Hur on one side and Yehoshua on the other to keep his hands raised: Yehoshua, who committed himself to the conquest of the land, and Hur, who fought to the point of giving his life so that the people would not embrace the golden calf. And that is how one manages to weaken Amalek without triumphing over him.

It is we who generate Amalek: he does not exist in reality unless we generate him. Each time in history that a march began to show signs of weariness, Amalek arose. What we must fear is not enemies from without: it is divisions from within.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*We do not defeat him: we take back the hold we had given him.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us has somewhere a march he has broken off — a project, a course of study, a reconciliation — telling himself that others would take over. Let each one name his own. And let us ask who, at this table, could hold up his hands.

## They Ate Kosher at the King's Feast



### PRESENTATION

Our sages ask why the Jews of the empire were condemned to extermination. The answer: because they took part in Achashverosh's feast. Yet that feast was arranged so that everyone ate exactly what his own law permitted.

### THE QUESTION

*If one could eat kosher there, where is the sin — and what was being swallowed at that banquet that was not on the plates?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Ve-ha-shetiyah ka-dat ein ones” — each one drank and ate according to his law, with no compulsion.***

Achashverosh was in fact very cunning: he allowed everyone to eat what suited him, with no compulsion, neither about the food nor about the wines served. The Jews now saw themselves as full citizens of the empire, and taking part in the national festivities was for them a way of showing they were not shutting themselves off. What harm is there in that? They simply joined in the atmosphere, and wanted to share it.

Eating kosher means nothing in itself. You can eat kosher without a blessing before and after, without acknowledging, without sanctifying what you eat: it is slippery ground. When I seek to eat kosher, I am seeking a spiritual hygiene for my food; I am drawing a distinction between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

That is where the sin lies: in this will to assimilate into a world where good and evil are confused, where good can disguise itself as evil and evil as good. It is Adam's first sin, the sin of the tree. And it is indeed on a tree that Haman will end up hanged. At that banquet they even used the vessels of the Temple, to show that they held no holiness.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*It is not what goes into the mouth that decides, but what one agrees to take part in.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

One can respect everything to the letter and already have given way on the essential. Are there places we go, tables we sit at, telling ourselves that nothing there is formally forbidden? What does our presence approve there, without our having said a word?

## The Queen Deposed for Refusing to Appear



### PRESENTATION

The king orders Vashti to appear before his assembled ministers so they may see her beauty. She refuses. She is deposed on the spot — she who, as Nebuchadnezzar's granddaughter, was the only one who gave her husband's throne its legitimacy.

### THE QUESTION

*The story opens with a woman punished for refusing to be looked at. What does this first chapter tell us, in which the Jewish people does not yet appear even once?*

### THE ANSWER

***In the first verse, Achashverosh does not bear the title of king; Vashti, however, is called Vashti HaMalkah.***

Everything points to Achashverosh not belonging to the dynasty: he seized power, and the first verse does not give him the title of king. He uses Vashti to ensure continuity, yet gives her no credit for it: he has her summoned to show that what counts in her is first of all her beauty, and the rest is incidental. It is an assault on the dignity of the feminine. To her credit, she resisted, and even showed contempt for this man who had once been only the keeper of her father's stables.

So a new queen is sought: a contest open to all the nations, where each culture presents its assets. Today it takes the form of the beauty queens of this or that country — and it is always the feminine, never the masculine. Why? Because what makes a culture strong is the place the feminine holds in it. The higher the feminine stands there, the more that culture commands respect. Where there is contempt, there is a primitive conception of society.

And that is why Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi warns: do not give in to the lure of the beauty other cultures display without looking at what lies within.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*A civilization is judged by what it asks of women, not by what it shows of them.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The king wanted his wife to be looked at; she preferred to lose everything. By what do we measure, in our home, the real place of its women — by what we say about them, or by what we ask of them? And what would change at this table if we measured it honestly?

## The Scroll Does Not Bear Mordechai's Name



### PRESENTATION

It is Mordechai who uncovers the plot, who alerts the people, who stands up to Haman, who ends up second to the king. He is the hero from start to finish. And yet the book bears the name of a woman who was torn from her home.

### THE QUESTION

*Why is the scroll not called Megillat Mordechai — and what did Esther do that Mordechai himself could not?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Ki Mordechai ha-Yehudi mishneh la-melech Achashverosh, gadol la-Yehudim, doresh tov le-am” — the Megillah closes on Mordechai, and we hear no more of Esther.***

Mordechai sounded the alarm, but the one who saved the people was the woman: Esther, who sacrificed her life by remaining with Achashverosh. And we hear no more of her. The book closes on Mordechai, now the king's deputy — and we remain the subjects of Achashverosh.

The end of every completed cycle is sealed by Malchut, kingship, which belongs to the side of the feminine: it is the feminine element that forms the link between the stages of the chain. Already Avraham's path begins with “whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her”; the deliverance from Egypt is set in motion by the resistance of the midwives, and Miriam is a resistance fighter in her own way.

Esther remained in the palace as a hostage: a Jewish figure held hostage among the nations. For it is she who can gather in all the elements of the other cultures, filter them, and bring them back to their source, as is done in the offering. That is why Esther has not yet finished her work: she will return at the end of days to complete what she began.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*The book bears her name because her work is not yet finished.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there is the one who speaks and the one who holds things together. Who, in our home, has paid with daily life for what another got the credit for? And what should be said tonight, aloud, so that it is no longer left unspoken?

## The Only Book Where the Name of G-d Does Not Appear



### PRESENTATION

We read the Megillah taking care not to miss a single word. And in all those words, never the name of G-d. It is absent from one end of the story to the other — which happens in no other book, except Shir HaShirim.

### THE QUESTION

*Where is the name that is not written hidden — and why is the festival that closes the cycle precisely the one in which G-d does not show Himself?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Ve-anochi haster astir panai ba-yom ha-hu” — and I will surely hide My face on that day: this is where the name Esther comes from.***

There are times when G-d is eclipsed. Our destinies do not always converge; there are times when we do not walk before Him but turn our back on Him, and in that eclipse we live an exile from ourselves. Providence puts on a mask, and we do not see it. But that does not mean it is absent: it is constantly present in the Megillah.

For each time we read “ha-melech,” the king, with no further detail, the text is referring to the Master of the universe. We do not see Him because we do not have the keys to that vision. What we see is not true reality: we have a black-and-white negative that must be developed differently to obtain the real picture.

And that is why every word must be heard. When you read a letter addressed to you personally, on which your joy depends, on which your future depends, and a word is missing — you understand, when it comes from a beloved.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*What is written is not His absence, but His hidden face.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We call chance what we have no key to, and abandonment what we do not understand. Let each one tell of an event of his year that he first read as a misfortune. Does he read it the same way today?

## Haman Is Written in the Torah



### PRESENTATION

Our sages ask the same question about the two men of the story: Haman — where is he written in the Torah? And Mordechai — where is he written? Both answers come down to two words, and they answer each other.

### THE QUESTION

*Which words of the Torah already carry the names of Haman and Mordechai — and why does Haman end up hanged on a tree?*

### THE ANSWER

**Haman:** “*Ha-min ha-etz asher tziviticha levilti achol mimenu.*” **Mordechai:** “*mor dror,*” pure myrrh, an ingredient of the ketoret.

Haman is the “ha-min” of the verse: is it from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? It is the tree of knowledge, man's will to impose himself through his knowledge, as though he could reach everything, understand everything, subject everything to the mastery of reason. And it is indeed on a tree that Haman is hanged, he and his ten sons.

Mordechai comes from mor dror — a fragrance, and dror means freedom: a fragrance of freedom. He is a man able to measure up to every situation and to affirm his convictions before an oppressive world that exposes him to death. It is also myrrh, an ingredient of the incense: a man whose radiance within an exiled people is such that he alone can save the situation.

And if only we draw on this fragrance within ourselves — this tzelem Elokim, this divine breath that is in each of us — we can triumph over Haman, who is what drives us to self-destruction and makes us sow hatred, division and rejection around us.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*One is a fruit that someone tried to seize; the other a fragrance that can only be spread.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Haman is the part of us that wants to win every argument; Mordechai, the part content to spread a good scent. Around this table, what prevailed in our discussions this year: the need to be right, or the wish to leave something good behind?

## Shaul Took Pity on King Agag



### PRESENTATION

The Megillah takes care to give Mordechai's lineage: son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Kish. Kish is the father of Shaul. Yet Shaul's name itself is not spoken.

### THE QUESTION

*Why keep silent the name of King Shaul in Mordechai's ancestry, at the very moment we confront Haman the Agagite?*

### THE ANSWER

**Mordechai, “ben Yair ben Shimi ben Kish”; and Haman, “ha-Agagi,” descendant of Agag, king of Amalek.**

Shaul had a surge of mercy for Agag, the king of Amalek. And Haman the Agagite descends from him. By dint of wanting to nurture mercy for an enemy, that mercy ends up turning against us, and we then suffer the forceful return of the antisemitism we left dormant — because we judged that this king should not be condemned to death and should still be given his chance to survive.

Mordechai, for his part, is presented first as Yehudi, from Yehudah, and then as a man of Binyamin. Our sages say there were two tribes bordering the sanctuary, and that his father was from Yehudah, his mother from Binyamin. The kingdom of Israel had asserted itself through a will to secularism, even setting up two idolatrous centers, and it was destroyed first; the kingdom of Yehudah remained faithful to the teaching centered on the Mishkan. It is both together that make this man's strength.

But above all, Mordechai is the one who kept his roots present in the way he defined himself: he did not cut the moorings that tied him to his ancestors.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Misplaced pity does not do away with the enemy: it makes an appointment with him a few centuries later.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are indulgences our children will pay for: something left unsaid, behavior let slide to avoid a fuss. Which one, in our family, has been dragging on too long? And who is going to take it up?

## “If You Keep Silent, Deliverance Will Come From Elsewhere”



### PRESENTATION

Esther hesitates: one does not appear before the king without being summoned. Mordechai neither reassures her nor pleads with her. He answers that deliverance will come in any case, but from another place.

### THE QUESTION

*If the people will be saved in any case, why should Esther risk her life — and what does “from another place” mean?*

### THE ANSWER

**“Revach ve-hatzalah ya'amod la-Yehudim mi-makom acher”; and Esther's answer: “Ka'asher avadeti avadeti.”**

Mordechai tells her: beware — if you do not come forward of your own accord, if you do not do the work yourself, know that the deliverance of the Jewish people will come from another place. What does that mean? That it will come from the nations, from the other side. And from the other side, how does it happen? Through a Shoah: a threat that cuts away most of the people, leaving only a few alive.

It is at that moment that Esther overcomes her reservations, her doubts and her fears, and says: since one must sacrifice oneself for this people — ka'asher avadeti avadeti, as Moshe did. I will disappear in this world, I will sacrifice my share of the world to come to save the Jewish people.

No event can come about in history without mesirut nefesh, without an act of total self-denial, of giving oneself. Without Moshe, there would have been no Exodus from Egypt; without Esther, there would have been no deliverance from Haman's sworn antisemitism.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*Deliverance will come; the only question is at what price, and by whose hand.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We often say: someone else will take care of it. It is true — and that is precisely the problem. What is the one thing each person here knows he must do and keeps putting off, counting on someone else? What will happen if no one stands up?

## We Are Still the Servants of Achashverosh



### PRESENTATION

On Pesach we went out of Egypt and became free. On Purim, the people is saved, Mordechai becomes second to the king — and we remain the subjects of Achashverosh. Yet our sages say that if all the festivals were to disappear, Purim would not disappear.

### THE QUESTION

*How can a festival that leaves us servants of an emperor take precedence over the festival of our liberation?*

### THE ANSWER

***“Avdei Achashverosh anachnu”; and the rule of Purim: “ad de-lo yada” — until one no longer distinguishes between cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordechai.***

There is something we attained on Purim that we had not acquired on Pesach. On Pesach, we left foreign worship behind and gained freedom. On Purim, we went beyond the stage of knowledge, into what lies beyond knowledge. There, the divine presence is present as much in good as in evil, as much in the impure as in the pure. Which means that Haman himself is an actor placed on the stage by the One who directs this whole play — and that the great tyrants of this world are actors too.

How do we celebrate this access to what lies beyond knowledge? Through a state of intoxication. We set reason aside, we no longer make divisions of thought, we no longer dissect. That is also why, when we proclaim the unity of G-d, we put our hand over our face and close our eyes: this unity we are unable to grasp; it lies beyond knowledge.

And if we wear disguises on the day of Purim, it is because they are our disguises of the whole year, our disguises of our whole life.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*One day a year, we are asked to stop sorting the world into good and wicked.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We spend the year separating: good people and the others, those in our camp and those across the way. Whom, at this table, have we placed once and for all on the wrong side? And what would we see in him if, tonight, we could no longer tell the difference?

## The Two Men in the Market Who Made People Laugh



### PRESENTATION

The prophet Eliyahu is walking through a crowded market with a sage. The sage asks who, in this crowd, has a share in the world to come. The answer: no one. Then Eliyahu thinks again and points out two men.

### THE QUESTION

*Two public entertainers in the middle of a market are worth more than everyone else. What did they do that the serious people did not?*

### THE ANSWER

***The prophet Eliyahu in the market; and the first child of Israel, Yitzchak, the one who laughs; “Az yimalei sechok pinu.”***

There was no one, then Eliyahu shows him two men who entertain the crowd in the middle of the market and give hope, joy in living, to people who are afflicted, crushed by daily worries. These, he says, are bnei olam haba: not merely that they have a share in it — that is not in question for the others either — but they already live in that world to come; they prepare it here, through this will to rise above the constraints of life.

The first Jewish child is Yitzchak, the one who laughs. Sarah, told of a child at ninety, laughs: because that laughter lies beyond the reality she is in, where she can no longer expect anything. Joy lies beyond da’at, beyond the tree of knowledge: when I am surprised by something that defies everything I rationally expected, I am happy.

Our sages were known for studying in joy: when they grew tired, they would begin to laugh, to tell funny stories — because it opened other horizons for them and took them beyond their limits of interpretation. But it is a constructive laughter, never the laughter of contempt, derision or mockery.

### THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

*To make a burdened man laugh is to give him back a horizon no reasoning could restore.*

### LESSON FOR THE TABLE

There are those who are right and those who do good; the market remembered only the latter. Who, among those around us, carries others by sheer cheerfulness — and have we ever told him so? And what kind of laughter do we laugh at this table: the kind that opens, or the kind that wounds?