

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

ROSH HASHANAH

10 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Nine questions drawn from the lectures of Rav Raphaël Benizri on Elul and Rosh Hashanah: why the golden calf is a sin we still commit, why growing old and sleeping are written with the same root, and why a word missing from the first Ten Commandments had to be added to the second.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Rosh Hashanah table

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“Nowhere is it written that the first of Tishrei is Rosh Hashanah”



PRESENTATION

We wish one another a happy new year on the first of Tishrei, we blow the shofar, we recite the prayers of the day. Yet open the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, and you will never find the expression Rosh Hashanah applied to that day. In our own prayers we call it Yom Teruah, the day of the shofar's sound, or Yom HaZikaron, the day of remembrance.

THE QUESTION

If the Torah never calls the first of Tishrei “Rosh Hashanah,” to which day is that name applied in Scripture — and why that one?

THE ANSWER

The biblical names of the first of Tishrei: Yom Teruah, Yom HaZikaron. And of Sukkot it is said: “Betzet hashanah,” at the going out of the year.

The term Rosh Hashanah, applied to a festival in Scripture, designates the day of Kippur. This is surprising only if we forget that there is a head of the lunar year and a head of the solar year, and that the festivals are reckoned only by the solar seasons: Pesach is Chag HaAviv, the festival of spring, Shavuot Chag HaKatzir, the festival of harvest, Sukkot Chag HaAsif, the festival of ingathering, and it is of Sukkot that it is said “betzet hashanah,” at the going out of the year. The end of the year is therefore truly at Sukkot, not on the first of Tishrei.

Between the lunar year and the solar year there is a shift, a day of overlap. Throughout this time, two years are superimposed: we are in a phase between past and present. That is why we recite the psalm “Hashem ori veyish'i,” Hashem is my light and my salvation: my light on Rosh Hashanah, my salvation on Kippur, and we go on saying it until Hoshana Rabbah. Until Kippur we say selichot, pleas for forgiveness; from Kippur on, they are calls for G-d's help to be set back on the right path of thought.

And it is on the day of Kippur, at the close of the Jubilee, that every man must be set free and the land returned to its original owners — for the land is never sold in perpetuity, only entrusted to our management. Kippur is thus the day on which we rethink our own liberation. It is not the liberation of others we must think of first: if we remain conditioned by ourselves, enslaved to very relative ideals, dependent on our way of life and of thought, we have not gone out of ourselves.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A year does not begin when the calendar says so, but when a man has stopped being the manager of what he thought he owned.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The Jubilee returns the land to its original owner. And we — what have we been holding for too long as though it were truly ours: a grudge, a position, a role in the family? What should each person around this table give back before the year truly begins?

SUBJECT 02

Forty days to climb back up



PRESENTATION

The month of Elul opens forty days that end on Yom Kippur: these are the last forty days Moshe spent on the mountain to bring back the second tablets. Forty days after the revelation, the people had made the golden calf.

THE QUESTION

Is the golden calf the sin of another age, or one we still commit — and how do we recognize it in ourselves?

THE ANSWER

The forty days of Elul, from Rosh Chodesh Elul to the day of Kippur, corresponding to Moshe's last forty days on the mountain.

The sin of the golden calf is common to us all, says the Rav, because we are incapable of grasping the Divine as it is. We give it a substitute: we take Elohim — that is, a plurality of divine manifestations — and cling to a single aspect of that plurality. And there we are, in the sin of the golden calf.

We are then caught in fixed ideologies, and we can no longer restructure our person: we are as if cast in a mold, with arrested thinking and fixed behavior. Such conduct confuses us with the laws of nature, or rather reduces us to them — and nature is condemned to grow old and die.

But the Creator renews His creation every day. And just as He renews heaven and earth, we are assured that He will always sustain the people through which His own creation is justified.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

To cling to a single face of the infinite is already to have made oneself an idol.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Each of us here holds an idea so tightly that it has stopped being an idea. Which one? And if for years it has kept us from changing our mind about someone in this family, what exactly has it become?

SUBJECT 03

The curses that have no consolation



PRESENTATION

We close the year by reading the second series of curses. The first, read before Shavuot, correspond to the destruction of the First Temple and end with a consolation. The second announce the destruction of the Second — and have none.

THE QUESTION

How can a text that contains no consolation be the one that contains all the blessings?

THE ANSWER

The two series of curses, one at the end of Leviticus, the other in Ki Tavo. The verse “Ya’alem Hashem” and the answer given to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai.

After the first curses, we returned to Israel at the end of seventy years. The second series we are still living through — and there, there is no consolation. The question was put to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, who was hiding with his son in a cave under the Roman occupation. He did not know what to answer and began to weep. Then the prophet appeared to him and said: know that the second curses contain the seed of all the blessings.

The reason lies in a single word. Every sickness and every plague that Hashem will bring — ya’alem. This does not mean that He will bring them down upon you, nor that He will spread them over you: ya’alem means that He will turn them aside, eclipse them.

When we reach a point of no return, a force comes into play: that of the promise made to this people that it will not disappear, for the future of humanity and the future of creation itself are bound up with its existence. Then these curses recede, and they become a source of blessing.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The darkest text of the year is also the only one that chose not to write its consolation, so that we would go and seek it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

In every family there is an episode whose good outcome no one can yet see. Which one? And who, tonight, needs to hear that his misfortune has not yet had its last word?

Growing old and sleeping: one single root



PRESENTATION

The Torah warns: when you have children and grandchildren, and you have grown old in the land. Three generations, no more. And the word for growing old shares its root with the word for sleep.

THE QUESTION

What is growing old, if it is not a matter of years — and why does the Torah warn against it rather than against death?

THE ANSWER

“Ki tolid banim uvnei vanim venoshantem ba’aretz.” And the Rambam, on the two mitzvot that keep man awake: the mezuzah in space, the shofar in time.

Aging is remaining in a way of life where everything is routine, everything repetitive, everything governed by natural phenomena. In Hebrew, yashan, the old, and yashen, the sleeper, share the same root. To let oneself age, to enter a repetitive system with no novelty, no prospect of new life, no advancement in life — that is the aging that leads to death.

The Rambam mentions two mitzvot that keep man in a state of constant wakefulness. In space, it is the mezuzah: it calls us to change our behavior and attitude as we pass from one space to another. When we stay in the same space, we do not need one; but as soon as we must separate the public domain from the private, or the different stages of our life, one is required — and each time we pass a mezuzah, a change is called for.

In time, this is done through the shofar. And though it is a scriptural decree, there is also an allusion: wake up, you sleepers, from your slumber.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

It is not the number of years that makes us old, but the number of days that resemble one another.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

How many of our days this year were interchangeable? Let each person find one thing he has never done and could do this month. And let us ask who at this table has fallen asleep without anyone telling him.

Elul, or the reversed letters



PRESENTATION

The sages searched for where the month of Elul appears in Scripture. They found it twice: in a verse on the circumcision of the heart, and in a verse of the psalm — but there, with its letters reversed.

THE QUESTION

What does it say about a month that its name reads forwards in the circumcision of the heart, and backwards in a “had I not believed”?

THE ANSWER

The verse of the circumcision of the heart; and “Lulei he’emanti lir’ot betuv Hashem be’eretz chayim” — had I not believed I would see the goodness of Hashem in the land of the living.

Whenever milah is involved, it is a matter of going beyond the natural order, or at least of stepping out of it. We do not want to subject ourselves to the laws of nature; we practice milah to say that we wish to leave that framework. And leaving that framework means ceasing, a little, to keep comparing what we are with what others are, our situation with theirs.

For every time we let ourselves be caught by this desire to be like the other nations, we expose ourselves to the same scourges as they: just as they are threatened with disappearance, we run the same risk.

The second allusion is in the psalm: had I not believed I would see the goodness of Hashem in the land of the living, I would have found myself among violent men. These are the letters of Elul, but reversed. The course of this month obliges us to position ourselves in relation to these words of the prophets, which assure us of another status and another language. Indeed, the prophet is told: raise your voice like the shofar. That is, recast your language each time, so that it does not sink into vulgarity.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is a certain discretion in biblical language: the intimate organs of the human being have no name in it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The month asks us to recast our language. What are three expressions we commonly use that diminish the person we are speaking about? And who here would agree to do without them until Kippur?

A servant does not expect a reward



PRESENTATION

The twelve months of the year correspond to twelve combinations of the Tetragrammaton, drawn from the initial or final letters of a verse. That of Elul is taken from a verse that speaks of tzedakah.

THE QUESTION

If we are only doing our duty, what do we have to claim on Rosh Hashanah — and why does what we hope for bear the name of charity?

THE ANSWER

The combination of the Tetragrammaton for the month of Elul, drawn from “utzedakah tihyeh lanu.”

A servant need not expect a wage or a reward from his master: he is paid for this, he is hired for this work, and on the contrary he must do it well. We are bound to fulfil our mission in this world — and ours carries many responsibilities, since on it depend the balance of the world and the very health of the universe. But what do we put into it?

The month of Elul answers with its combination: utzedakah tihyeh lanu. We fulfil our duty as we should, but the wage we must expect is tzedakah: a charity, a gesture toward us. That is why the month opens with rachamim, with selichot, with the invocation of divine mercy — it is mercy that made it possible to receive the second tablets of the Law.

And when we put ourselves on the same level as others, we call upon the attribute of justice. Yet before strict justice it is said: these are My creatures, and those are My creatures. We are on the same scale — why should we be favored?

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We claim nothing: we do toward the whole universe what we do toward our children and our home.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all keep a secret account of what we are owed — in the family, at work, even in our prayers. What is written in that account? And what would happen if we decided tonight to close it?

SUBJECT 07

Why is life spoken of in the plural?

PRESENTATION

All the blessings of the day revolve around a single request: to be inscribed for life. Remember us for life, inscribe us in the book of life. And the Hebrew word for life is never used in the singular.

THE QUESTION

What does this dual form say about the life we ask for — and why must we know how to come down as well as to go up?

THE ANSWER

The additions to the Rosh Hashanah Amidah: “Zokhrenu le-chayim, Melekh chafetz ba-chayim.” And Yaakov's ladder, on which the angels go up and down.

Judaism does not call life a renunciation of the world or of any enjoyment, but rather the enjoyment of life in its full measure, provided that heaven and earth are joined to it. Chayim is a dual word: there is not one life. We always live a double life — inner and outer, a life in this world and a life in the world beyond, a life in reality and a life in dream.

We always live by the measure of Yaakov's ladder: the angels going up and coming down are us; we are those angels who people the ladder. We must know how to rise, but we must also know how to come down, have the wisdom to come down and take life as a gift, desire it in this world — for life is the greatest of blessings, the perfect blessing.

Life is indeed what allows us to enjoy closeness to the Divine, since the Divine is Elohim chayim: source of life, essence of life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is not an artist's life and, beside it, another life: it is one single life that crowns everything, and the same breath of the shofar runs through it.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We readily say: later, when I have the time, I will take care of what matters. Where, in our home, does this division between the two lives run? And what have we relegated to the life to come that should have been lived this year?

The word missing from the first Ten Commandments



PRESENTATION

The commandment about parents appears in both versions of the Ten Commandments. In the first: that your days may be lengthened. In the second, a promise is added: and that it may go well with you. One more word, and a whole question.

THE QUESTION

Why is the word “good” missing from the first Ten Commandments — and what does its absence say about those to whom it had to be promised?

THE ANSWER

Tractate Bava Kamma: Rabbi Chanina ben Agil asks Rabbi Chiya bar Abba about the absence of the word “tov” in the first Ten Commandments.

Rabbi Chiya bar Abba does not know what to answer, and sends his questioner to the master of aggadah. The answer reported to him is this: the word is not written in the first Ten Commandments because those tablets were destined to be broken — and since they would be, they did not merit this qualifier. But then, it is objected, did Israel lack the good?

The Rav's answer is simple: life in itself is a source of blessing, and it needs no other qualifier. Through life, man is given the opportunity to bring about this encounter with the Divine and to accomplish a mission. But is everyone capable of grasping this? No. A people that, after the revelation, found a way to bow down before a calf proved that it was not there yet. It needed life to be sweetened, needed promises of good things.

So in the second version, G-d came back down to the level of the human being: not only that your days may be lengthened, but that it may go well with you.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We are not capable of grasping life as a full and complete blessing: we need sweetness and promises — and we admit it ourselves when we ask for a good life.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To whom, this year, did we have to promise a reward to obtain what should have gone without saying? And we ourselves: what would we have stopped doing if no one had promised us anything in return?

The covenant G-d did not ask for



PRESENTATION

Three covenants were made with man: that of Noah, that of Avraham, that of Sinai. And just before Rosh Hashanah, we read a parashah in which the covenant is renewed once more — but this time it is not G-d who asks for it.

THE QUESTION

Who feels the need to renew the covenant on the eve of entering the Promised Land, and what does it mean that this time it comes from below?

THE ANSWER

The three covenants: Noah and the seven laws, Avraham and the milah, Sinai. And “Atem nitzavim ha-yom kulkhem,” which our sages understand as referring to the day of Rosh Hashanah.

With Noah, the Creator commits never again to bring a flood or destroy His work; but He sets a condition, the seven laws, and this time He asks for no consent from man: the world cannot stand without them, and Noah is obliged to subscribe to them. With Avraham, the covenant requires a physical mark, the milah, at the very place of the foundation of the being in its creation and procreation. At Sinai, paradoxically, the people is asked to adhere voluntarily, and three times it says: all that Hashem says, we will do.

And then comes “Atem nitzavim” — you are all standing here today — which our sages understand as the day of Rosh Hashanah. But the covenant is no longer requested by G-d: it is Moshe who feels the need to renew it, and to bind to it the present generation as well as the one not yet here.

What has happened? We were in gestation, we were children, we needed a somewhat restrictive education. Here we are on the threshold of the Promised Land, after forty years in the desert of the nations. We have reached such maturity that our faith no longer consists in waiting for G-d to act on our behalf to meet our needs, but in answering His expectation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

The sign of maturity is not that we are asked to commit, but that the commitment comes from us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We keep our promises when someone demands them of us. What is the promise no one asks of us that we should nonetheless make this year? And to whom will we say it tonight, so that it exists?

SUBJECT 10

The small root that does not follow



PRESENTATION

In every collective commitment, there is a stray element. A root that holds back and, little by little, eats away at the vital forces of the whole. The Rav says this holds for a people, and just as much for a single person.

THE QUESTION

If our free will is always missing a part we do not control, what is the point of making resolutions on Rosh Hashanah?

THE ANSWER

The parashah of Nitzavim, on the solidarity of the whole people. And the invocation of the Akedat Yitzchak and the Thirteen Attributes in the prayers of the day.

In a community, however hard I try to fulfil my duty, I cannot be sure the other will follow and do so in the same way. And that small root which does not fully adhere, or holds back, ends up eating away at the vital forces of the whole nation: we all find ourselves condemned to a fate we did not want, paying for those who neglected their obligation.

This happens at the individual level too. We may want to be righteous, to build an unshakable family, to succeed in life: we do not have full command of our free will. There is always an element that escapes us. Even today, when I say my prayer and make good resolutions for the future, I know that tomorrow I will not change from one extreme to the other; there will always remain something I cannot control.

Our wish, on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, is therefore to receive the help that will allow us to integrate that part, so that it does not drag us down. And if we recite the Thirteen Attributes, it is in the awareness that we can do nothing else but turn to the One who holds them all, at the moment we feel ourselves faltering.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

There is always a third partner in what we undertake: not only our neighbor, nor our spouse — it is the Divine.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know what our small root is: the weakness we cannot control and never speak about. Should we tear it out, or learn to integrate it? And what would we ask for tonight, if we dared to name it aloud?