

STUDY & REFLECTION BOOKLET

SUKKOT

8 Topics for Study & Discussion at the Festive Table

Eight questions drawn from the lectures of Rav Raphaël Benizri on Sukkot: the festival of joy and of the universal, and the sukkah of peace that extends Yom Kippur all the way to Hoshana Rabba — why we leave our house for a hut, why seventy offerings are brought, and why joy is named only here.



Rav Raphaël Benizri

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Themes for reflection and questions to share around the Sukkot table

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SUBJECT 01

Why are the Jewish festivals in the plural?



PRESENTATION

Shavuot is a plural. Sukkot is a plural. Kippurim is a plural. But Pesach is a singular, and so is Hanukkah. Rosh Hashanah too.

THE QUESTION

What is it about freedom and education that demands the singular, where the other festivals speak in the plural?

THE ANSWER

Mishlei, the Proverbs of King Shlomo: “Chanoch lanaar al pi darko” — educate the child according to his way.

As for freedom, there is no collective freedom: each person takes it upon himself to free himself, to tear himself away from his conditioning, outer as well as inner. That is Pesach, and it is a singular. Hanukkah is education, the very foundation of Judaism: and here the mistake we always make is to reduce teaching to something collective. Ideal teaching requires one master for one pupil, like a tutor in charge of a single child, because not all sensitivities are the same, nor all abilities. This is what King Shlomo recommends: educate the child according to his way — that is the best way to succeed in education. From person to person.

On Rosh Hashanah too, each person is judged individually, or judges himself individually: one is personally involved in shaping one's own life, in determining its beginning and its goals. But as soon as it concerns our commitment to the path of the Torah, it is the whole people as one man, with one heart and one will. The Torah is the basic cement: remove it, and nothing remains that can make the unity of the Jewish people — the unity that answers, on its own level, the proclaimed unity of the Creator: You are One, Your Name is One, and Your people too is one.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

What is won alone is said in the singular; what holds only together is said in the plural.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We educate our children as a block, with the same words and the same demands for all. Let each person here name the particular “way” of one of his children — the one that belongs to no one else. And let us ask: to whom at our table do we speak in the plural when we should speak in the singular?

We've won the ticket — why keep waiting?



PRESENTATION

On Yom Kippur, every stream of Jews comes together in the same synagogue, with the same prayer book, the same service, the same aspirations. The day ends with an inscription for life. And yet, until Hoshana Rabba, we keep asking for the pitka tava, the good ticket.

THE QUESTION

If the judgment is sealed on Yom Kippur, why do the people still linger until the last day of Sukkot to claim their ticket?

THE ANSWER

The evening prayer: the blessing of Hashkiveinu, added by the Men of the Great Assembly, and its closing words “Hapores sukkat shalom aleinu”.

We fear that Yom Kippur was only an elevation of the soul within a state of spiritual conditioning — and that, as soon as Kippur is over, it has already passed. We have made commitments, but we have not yet proven that we can keep them. For prayer contains two distinct things: a geulah, a liberation, and a shemira, a preservation. There is no point reaching a state if one does not know how to remain in it.

This is what the structure of the prayer tells us. Around the Shema in the morning there are three blessings: the first universal, a tribute to the G-d of creation; the second for the choice of Israel within humanity; the third for the liberation of Israel. In the evening there is one more: Hashkiveinu, where we ask to be spared all misery and assured of protection, and which ends with He who guards Israel. Our sages asked why this fourth blessing was added, since in principle nothing should come between the blessing of redemption and the Amidah. They answered that it is geulah arichta, a prolonged redemption: protection does not interrupt redemption, it is part of it.

And we need it at night. By day, we are aware of the permanent miracle of this people's existence: how can so small a nation stand up to seventy? But at night, when we face the demons and the worst persecutions, our support is different: in the morning it is emet, an intangible truth, already verified; in the evening, it is a truth that rests above all on faith in a future. And the blessing ends: He who spreads over us His sukkah of peace.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A liberation without preservation is only a beautiful memory.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We all know what we promised ourselves ten days ago. Let each person say what he has already let slip since Yom Kippur ended. Then let us ask: what shemira, what concrete safeguard, should we put in place so that the decision holds until next year?

Seventy offerings for seventy nations



PRESENTATION

During the days of Sukkot, the Jewish people brings seventy offerings on behalf of the seventy nations that make up humanity. And it is said that in the future all the nations will be required to celebrate a single festival: not Pesach, not Shavuot, but Sukkot.

THE QUESTION

Why Sukkot — and why the number seventy, even in the composition of the great court?

THE ANSWER

The seventy offerings of Sukkot for the seventy nations; the seventy members of the great court.

Why seventy? Because man, this microcosm, is structured according to attributes, and these models of existence are set within a structure of ten levels: when seven is set within ten, we obtain these seventy samples of humanity. They are there to judge our development — and that is why the great court itself must have seventy members, representing the sensibilities that exist among the nations and are all contained within the cell of the Jewish people.

It is the festival of the universal. A cause limited to my little self, my little family, my nation, would not be a cause. And if all the nations are required to celebrate Sukkot and not the other festivals, it is because Sukkot is the one within their reach: what they seek is this joy of living, this complementarity of life. In the future, the nations will come forward saying: we too carry the love of humanity, we have philosophies in the service of man, we too have our sukkot. But when it comes to putting those philosophies into practice, and their immediate interests come into play, we see their failure. The Jewish people, for its part, has preserved its values as best it could, and it gives them back.

This is exactly what the ritual of the altar represents, around which hakafot were once made, as we make them today around the Torah for lack of a Sanctuary: it brings together the mineral — water, ash, stone —, the vegetable — flour, oil —, the animal, and finally man, endowed with speech, who gives meaning to it all and draws sustenance from it in order to serve an ideal of life.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We can be the challah of humanity — but the challah is blessed only if it continues to sanctify the rest of the dough.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

A table where people speak only of themselves, their family and their own has already missed Sukkot. For which part of the world, this year, have we declared ourselves not responsible? And whom, outside our circle, should we invite before the festival ends?

A sukkah that clothes, as a wife clothes her husband



PRESENTATION

Our sages point out two mitzvot that a man enters with his whole being, and which surround him: the ritual bath, belonging to the feminine more than the masculine, and the sukkah, belonging to the masculine more than the feminine. On the night of the chuppah, the bride circles around her husband.

THE QUESTION

Why is the feminine exempt from the mitzvah of sukkah — and what does this exemption say about the sukkah itself?

THE ANSWER

The bride's hakafot around her husband under the chuppah; the two mitzvot in which a man is immersed: the ritual bath and the sukkah.

My true home is not the one I live in permanently, the one I go into debt for all my life to give myself the best comfort. My true home is my sukkah: the one at the threshold of my house, on the roof, on the balcony. It adjoins my house; it is vulnerable, fragile on the outside but how solid on the inside. It surrounds me, it clothes me, as a wife clothes her husband. For the feminine is man's protecting wall — that is the meaning of the circles made under the chuppah — and the sukkah is of the same nature. The inwardness of the sukkah is the feminine: that is why the feminine is exempt from it. It is not an exclusion; it is a recognition.

And this hut places us in a strange position. On Sukkot we are at once in the arai, the temporary, and in the keva, the fixed: make your sukkah fixed and your house temporary. The fixed becomes the ephemeral, and the ephemeral becomes where we settle. This is true in space, and it is true in time: the whole month of Tishrei is a bubble of time, like bein hashmashot, the waning of the day between evening and nightfall, of which we do not know whether it belongs to the day gone by or the day to come. It hangs in the balance between the two.

So it is with people: we share our years with our grandparents, the past, and with our grandchildren, the future, and our own years — those that encroach neither on our parents' past nor on our children's future — are this fleeting present, without real substance, at the crossroads of past and future. But that is where I stand, and that is my well of joy.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Leaving one's house is not giving up a roof: it is discovering which of the two roofs truly protected us.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

The sukkah is fragile outside and solid inside; our homes are often the reverse. What have we made solid on the outside this year, and what have we let crumble within? And if we had to choose one single thing to strengthen in the home, what would each of us name?

Why pour water on the altar?



PRESENTATION

On the altar, with the daily offering, wine was poured. On Sukkot, and only on Sukkot, water was poured. They went down to the spring, drew water, and came back up singing and sounding trumpets, along the fifteen degrees that correspond to the fifteen steps. This was called the joy of the water-drawing.

THE QUESTION

What exactly is being drawn, if not water — and why was this joy the summit of all joys?

THE ANSWER

The nisuch hamayim, the pouring of water on the altar on Sukkot, and the Simchat Beit HaShoevah, the joy of the water-drawing; the fifteen degrees of the Shir hamaalot corresponding to the fifteen steps.

Water does not appear in the inventory of creation: we do not know when water was created. From the outset we are already in a world where water exists, since the divine spirit hovers over the waters. These waters, essential to all life, exist concurrently, simultaneously, with the manifestation of the divine spirit. And the lower waters, left for man's needs here below, were separated from the upper waters, called shamayim.

So what we draw is not water: it is the divine spirit through this water, and that is what we pour on the altar, as if to consecrate it. It is the return to the water that generated all of creation, for it is at once purifying, germinating and nourishing. Nothing can happen without it.

Today we try to reproduce this joy throughout the festival, with dancing in synagogues and halls, but always in circles, that ideal geometric figure that holds not only the Jewish people but all of humanity, whose representatives we are. We join hands to dance, and to dance is to lift the foot: the foot that is content to scrape the ground, to stay sunk in its matter, in its shoes, here makes an effort of levitation.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

We do not dance because the harvest is good: we dance because the foot has agreed to leave the ground.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

To dance is to lift the foot — to agree, just once, no longer to be planted in one's matter. What in each of us refuses to leave the ground: a habit, a calculation, a caution? What are we really drawing, when we think we are drawing water?

Why “the sukkah of David” and not “the house of David”?



PRESENTATION

We pray for the fallen sukkah of David to be raised up. Not David's empire, nor his vast kingdom; his hut. And every evening we ask G-d to spread over us His sukkat shalom, His sukkah of peace.

THE QUESTION

Why do our prayers ask for a hut to be raised up rather than a house to be rebuilt?

THE ANSWER

“HaRachaman, hu yakim lanu et sukkat David hanofelet”; “Hapores sukkat shalom aleinu” in the evening prayer.

When a house falls into ruin, it must be built anew — and building anew is never the same thing: the plans change, the infrastructure changes. But a hut that falls is put back up: it is simply a dismantled piece that is reassembled, and it is always the same hut. That is why the sukkah of peace is a protection that always remains identical to itself. Outwardly it looks tragic; inwardly it is very solid.

And what David was is not an empire: it is a spirit, a house that is not a prison-like shelter for man but an open house — open to nature, open to people, open to every outlook, able to combine all the ingredients in a single service. This is what we do with the four species: the etrog, which has taste and fragrance, the image of the accomplished person; the lulav, which asserts itself by its uprightness; the hadas, which has only its fragrance; and the arava, which has neither fragrance nor flavor, yet is there and has its say — so much so that on Hoshana Rabba we take it alone. Yesterday these branches were worth nothing; after the festival they will be worth nothing; during the festival they serve G-d and man. And the etrog, which might tend toward independence, toward living apart, is there too to spread its fragrance and share it with the others.

This peace is no ordinary peace. It is noted that Esav has the same numerical value as shalom, peace. When Esav comes before Yaakov, he offers precisely peace: let us walk together. This is what the nations offer us — don't worry, we will cover you, we will ensure your protection. That is the greatest danger, because it is an illusion, and Yaakov answers: we cannot go together; peace as you conceive it is not mine. So the man who carried true peace was Aharon, who sought to negotiate peace within the people, and it is by his merit that we were surrounded by the clouds of glory. The emblem of the sukkah is Aharon.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

A house that is rebuilt changes its plan; a hut that is raised up stays the same — that is why we pray for a hut.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

We are often offered a peace that covers us in exchange for who we are. Where, this year, have we accepted a convenient peace rather than a true one — in the family, at work, with ourselves? And who at this table has Aharon's courage: to go and negotiate a reconciliation that no one else will attempt?

“Huts are nothing anymore”



PRESENTATION

When Yom Kippur ends, we do not rest: we take boards and build a structure worth nothing, walls that barely stand and a roof that lets the sky through. Then we leave the house to live in it for eight days.

THE QUESTION

Why is the first thing asked of us after the highest day of the year to leave home and live in something worth nothing?

THE ANSWER

Because we leave our cocoon. We leave our house, we leave our conditioning, we leave our box, we leave our convictions — and we lay them out in broad daylight, we put them into practice. We open our door, we open our home. And we all find ourselves under the same shade, sheltered by G-d, where no one can be turned away.

For we must not remain in the world of theory; there must be daily application. When Yom Kippur ends, we must check whether we took the right measure, or whether we saw ourselves as tzaddikim gemurim, complete righteous people with nothing left to correct. Nor is it enough to ask forgiveness in general: when we have wronged our fellow, we must tell him how we wronged him, lay out our own faults. That is how we renew our commitment toward our fellow.

And the proof is given in bareness. These four species we take in hand were worth absolutely nothing yesterday; after the festival they will be worth nothing. But during the festival they serve G-d and man. The hut is of the same fabric: what is worth nothing becomes, for eight days, the place where we prove what we promised.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

On Sukkot, what is truly valuable is never what is costly.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Leaving one's box is easily said. Let each person name a conviction he has never had to defend outside his home, because at his table no one contradicts him. And another question: whom have we asked for forgiveness without ever saying for what?

Why was Sarah also called Yiskah?



PRESENTATION

The word *sukkah* comes from a root that speaks of covering, the covering of the schach laid over the hut. But the same root says something quite different: to see, to see beyond. Sarah bore a second name, Yiskah.

THE QUESTION

What does a hut have to do with vision — and what exactly does one see who has agreed to cover his fellow?

THE ANSWER

Sarah called Yiskah, because she saw beyond things; the word *sukkah*, from the root that speaks of covering.

We want this covering for ourselves, and we want to share it with everyone: we are responsible, we are a covering for one another. And when we are imbued with this duty to cover one another, we attain a vision — a prophetic vision. That is the meaning of Sarah's second name: she could see beyond things, the other side, the holiness in every approach and every movement of life.

For the risk is to sink into daily worries and problems, and to brood over them every day with their share of disappointments and annoyances. Then we lose the beyond of everything, we are left with a very narrow vision, and we have given in to defeat and despair. The hut, by contrast, opens our gaze: it is open to nature, open to people, open to every outlook.

Holding the lulav on the day of the festival says exactly the opposite of despair: we have won. Not that our life is ideal, without fault — that is impossible. But we have overcome the obstacles, and we lift our heads.

THE RAV'S CONCLUSION

Whoever covers no one ends up seeing nothing but his own worries.

LESSON FOR THE TABLE

Every evening we brood over the same annoyances, and our horizon shrinks accordingly. Let each person name the worry that consumed most of his vision this year. And whom around us would we truly have seen, had we agreed to cover him?