

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Acharei Mot Leviticus 16:1–18:30

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Parashat Tzav Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Priestly Purity

Theme 2: Sexuality and Holiness

Introduction



Parashat Acharei Mot begins as a conversation between God and Moses. This conversation is tied by the opening words “after the death of” to the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron’s sons. Leviticus 10:1–3 narrates the disturbing story of Nadab and Abihu, ordained priests of God, who offer unsolicited “alien fire” (Leviticus 10:1) on the altar. In response to this apparently inappropriate deed, a divine fire reaches out and kills them. At the end of this short episode, Moses enigmatically tells his bereaved brother, “That is what *YHWH* meant by saying: “Through those near to Me I show Myself holy, and gain glory before all the people” (Leviticus 10:3). In her commentary to that verse, Lisbeth S. Fried suggests that “these deaths evince God’s power as awesome and the Tabernacle’s status as holy” (p. 620). In order to maintain the appropriate relationship between the priests and the Tabernacle, Leviticus 16 details the appropriate way for the priests to approach the sanctuary, thus ensuring their safety.

In Leviticus 17, the focus shifts from the holiness of the sanctuary to holiness in one’s diet, through adhering to laws about eating meat. This chapter looks at the holiness of the people in the camp as compared to the priests. Everyone in the camp needed to maintain a certain level of purity. While Leviticus 17 focuses on how the people should introduce purity into their diet, Leviticus 18 broadens the topic to how the Israelites should behave sexually. Leviticus 18 is the only part of the parashah that explicitly mentions women, as the topic shifts to the dangerous and potentially contaminating force of women’s sexuality. The parashah concentrates on how households can police women, thereby preventing the spread of the contamination.

This study guide will concentrate on two main themes: priestly purity, which is discussed at length in Leviticus 16, and sexuality and holiness, discussed in Leviticus 18. These themes can each be studied on their own, although if time permits, studying them in contrast to one another will provide the participants greater insight into the priestly ideal of purity and how it played out in ancient Israelite society.

Suggestions for Getting Started

Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material at the start of the Central Commentary in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* to provide an overview of the parashah as a whole. Draw attention to a few key quotations from the introduction on p. 679 and/or survey the outline on p. 680. This will allow you to highlight some of the key themes in this portion and help participants to situate the section they are going to study within the larger parashah. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to read the associated material in the Central Commentary. This will help you in your efforts to answer the questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: Priestly Purity



In order to understand the biblical emphasis on priestly purity, we must situate the ideas in the larger biblical notions of purity. In the introduction to *parashat Tazria*, Elaine Goodfriend explains the Israelite understanding of purity and impurity in which “physical conditions can produce a pollution that affects not only the party afflicted but also the sanctuary—the abode of the divine Presence” (p. 637). In biblical thinking, there is a nexus between God’s laws, which give life, and the Israelite people. When the people experience certain physical states, the result is an estrangement from God, or impurity. Therefore, the careful maintenance of purity among the Israelite people ensures an ongoing healthy proximity between God and Israel. In the cultic system, the priests literally “came near” (Leviticus 10:1 and 16:1) to God in order to offer the sacrifices. The priests, who are nearer to God than are nonpriests, had to ensure a higher level of purity in order to maintain security when nearing the Divine.

1. Read Leviticus 16:1–6.
 - a. What boundaries are created in order to protect Aaron and the other priests from drawing “too close to the presence of *YHVH*” (Leviticus 16:2)?
 - b. What levels of holiness exist in the shrine structure? Who can enter each level?
 - c. What does Aaron do to prepare himself to make an offering on behalf of the community?
 - d. Explain the process by which Aaron is “to make expiation for himself and for his household” (Leviticus 16:6)? What does this tell you about the biblical understanding of transgression?
 - i. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation to Leviticus 16:3 (pp. 694–695). How do the Rabbis understand the sacrifices made by Aaron? What new dimensions are they adding to the biblical understanding?
 - ii. How relevant to you is the rabbinic belief that the merit of others affects our own lives?
2. Read Leviticus 16:29–34, on the biblical foundation of Yom Kippur.
 - a. What are the biblically commanded practices that make up Yom Kippur? What purpose do the rituals of Yom Kippur serve?
 - b. How is the people’s ability to stand in relation to God affected by Aaron’s actions on Yom Kippur?

- c. What does it mean to stand “pure before” God (Leviticus 16:30)? How does the biblical notion compare with your own?
3. Read Leviticus 17:1–5 and 17:15–16.
 - a. What is the difference between the two sins? What is the difference between the punishments for the two different sins? What do you think accounts for the differing degree with regard to a person’s ability to make expiation for his or her sin?
 - b. Do you believe there are sins for which no repentance is possible? Explain your response.
4. Read the excerpt from “yom kippur” by Alicia Suskin Ostriker (p. 698).
 - a. This poem brings up the ongoing question of how much of our future is in our control or out of our control. What does the poem suggest is the balance?
 - b. How does this compare to your own beliefs?
 - c. How do both of these ideas compare to the emphasis on Yom Kippur that people must take responsibility for their own mistakes?
5. Read “For the Sin . . .” by Shirley Kaufman (p. 699).
 - a. What is the emotional tone of the poem? Does Yom Kippur leave the author with a sense of comfort or discomfort?
 - b. According to the poem, does Yom Kippur work? What does it do? How does this compare with your own understanding of the purpose or experience of Yom Kippur?
6. Read “Yom Kippur Prayer” by Shirley Blumberg (p. 698).
 - a. How does the poet’s sensitivity to nature make her more sensitive to how she treats others?
 - b. What does the poem suggest is the relationship between our motives and our actions?

Theme 2: Sexuality and Holiness



Rachel Havrelock explains that “the book of Leviticus maps an elaborate terrain of states and objects both pure and impure, placing clear borders between them” (p. 688). The discussion of the need to police women’s sexuality in Leviticus 18 should be understood as part of the ongoing attempt to keep these boundaries solid. Rachel Havrelock notes that when women are mentioned, “it is in terms of the dangerous and potentially contaminating force of their sexuality” (p. 679). Even though women are understood as dangerous, their impurity is not considered to be a moral category but rather an indication of “how close a particular body can draw to the spaces demarcated as repositories of the holy” (p. 688). See the introduction to Theme 1: Priestly Purity for further discussion of how purity is related to physical proximity to God.

1. Skim all of Leviticus 18:6–23. Do not yet focus on the specific content of the laws. Instead try to get a sense of the structure of this part of the Bible. In your review, make sure to note the outline on page 680, which provides a thematic overview of the section. Notice the repetitive nature of the language in this portion.
2. Now return to the text and carefully read Leviticus 18:6–11 and 18:18, which contain the list of forbidden sexual partners.

- a. To whom are these laws addressed? Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Leviticus 18:6 (p. 695). How do the rabbis of the *Sifra* determine that this verse is addressed to more than just Israelite men? What do you think is the significance of their interpretation of the audience to whom these rules were addressed?
 - b. What does the Bible mean by the phrase “uncover nakedness”? Havrelock reminds the reader that the phrase is used when Ham, the son of Noah, “saw his ‘father’s nakedness’ and related the observation to his brothers” (p. 689). What is the relationship Havrelock notes between these two uses?
 - c. What obvious relationship is omitted from this list?
 - i. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation (p. 695) on Leviticus 18:17. How do the Rabbis read the verse as inclusive of the prohibition between a man and his daughter, even though it is not explicitly mentioned?
 - ii. Read the three numbered paragraphs in Another View by S. Tamar Kamionkowski (p. 694). What reasons have been given for the omission? How do you evaluate these reasons? Read the last paragraph. What conclusions about this issue does Tamar Kamionkowski reach?
3. In her introduction to Leviticus 18:6–23 (p. 689), Havrelock notes that “this section outlines who an Israelite man cannot have sexual relations with because they are too close, while at the same time it points out bodies that are forbidden because they are too far from being Israelite.” How do these internal and external borders help maintain Israel’s integrity as a single unit?
4. Read Leviticus 18:19–23, which contains the list of forbidden sexual acts.
- a. According to Havrelock’s comment on verse 19, what are two reasons the Torah forbids sexual acts with a menstruating woman?
 - b. What do the kinds of forbidden sexual acts contained in these five verses have in common?
 - c. Rachel Havrelock comments that verse 22 “is one of the most misinterpreted, abused, and decontextualized verses in the Torah” (p. 692).
 - i. What information does Havrelock bring to contextualize the apparent ban on homosexual sex?
 - ii. Read Leviticus 20:13.
 - 1) What is difference between this verse and Leviticus 18:22?
 - 2) What does S. Tamar Kamionkowski believe is being condemned by the biblical prohibition on male homosexual sex (p. 713)?
 - iii. Read the fourth and fifth paragraphs in Judith Plaskow’s Contemporary Reflection (pp. 696–697) from “Fourth, the passage in Leviticus 18 most often cited today . . .” through “. . . an ethic of sexual holiness appropriate for the 21st century.”
 - 1) According to Plaskow, how does Leviticus 18:22 demonstrate

assumptions that are “remote from—and in some cases even abhorrent to—contemporary sensibilities” (p. 696)?

- 2) What insights does Judith Plaskow think we can gain from the list of forbidden sexual acts in Leviticus 18?
5. Read “White Petticoats” by Chana Bloch (p. 700).
 - a. How does the poet relate to the idea of purity in sexual relations?
 - b. What emotion does she believe marks the beginning of a sexual relationship? How does this compare to the priestly concern? How does this compare to your own experience?
6. Read “[When this old body]” by Grace Paley (p. 700). How does the poem understand the changing human body in relation to its sexuality?
7. What does Paley’s poem understand to be the place of perfection in human sexuality? Return to the final paragraph in Judith Plaskow’s Contemporary Reflection (p. 697). What does Plaskow assert needs to be part of a responsible response to these texts? Do you think the poems in the Voices section are part of that response? What form does your response take?

Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today’s study?
2. What other new insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions remain?



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