

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat B'Shalach Exodus 13:17–17:16

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Parashat Vayitzei Study Guide Themes


Theme 1: The Role of Women in the Exodus

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Introduction

 **P**arashat *B'Shalach* recounts the events of the exodus from Egypt, which Carol Meyers describes as “the culmination of the story of the Israelite sojourn [there]” (p. 379). This parashah follows Parashat Bo (Exodus 10:1-13:6), which details the final three signs and wonders (“plagues”), the instructions for the annual Passover sacrifice, the Festival of Matzot (Unleavened Bread) and the hurried flight of the people Israel from Egypt.

Parashat B'shalach presents two accounts of the crossing of the Reed Sea: one in prose (14:1-31) and the other in poetry (15:1-22). While songs of celebration mark the miraculous crossing, escaping the Egyptian army does not immediately result in a happy ending. The people remain far from the Promised Land and will face repeated crises on the lengthy path from redemption to ultimate freedom in the Land of Israel.

At the crossing of the sea women play an important role in the plot of this parashah, just as they have in Moses' life from the beginning. The prophetess Miriam, who stood at the river's edge and protected her baby brother when he was placed into the Nile, now stands alongside the shore of the Sea of Reeds and leads the people in the rejoicing over their victory.

This study guide will explore three main themes of the parashah: the role of women in the Exodus, Redemption, and Israel's response to crisis. Theme one explores the significant roles women play in Israel's transformation from slavery to a freedom. Theme two explores the two different accounts of one of the bible's most well-known narratives, the crossing of the Sea and the redemption from oppression in Egypt. The questions will help the reader approach this well-known story anew. Theme three will explore the complexity of the relationship between God and Israel, particularly in a time of crisis.

Suggestions for Getting Started

Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in the *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.379, and/or survey the outline on p.381. 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: The Role of Women in the Exodus



Throughout the Exodus, women play important roles at key moments in the text. In her introduction to B'shalach, Carol Meyers notes, "Just as women and water began the story of the liberation from Egypt (Exodus 2), so too they bring it to its fulfillment" (p. 379). The Israelite midwives Shiphrah and Puah allowed the Hebrew boy babies to live despite Pharaoh's decree of death (Exodus 1:17-22). In Exodus 2 Miriam stood guard over baby Moses as he floated in the Nile. When he was rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam arranged to have their mother act as Moses' wet-nurse. Now, as the Israelites reach dry land on the far side of the Sea of Reeds, Miriam again plays a prominent role leading the Israelite women's response to the miracle. This theme will explore the roles women played in Israel's transition from "servitude to freedom" (p. 379).

1. Before turning to the text, briefly retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt from memory.
Make a note of your answers.
 - a. Who are the main characters?
 - b. Who are the key players in this story? Who drives the action?
 - c. What role, if any, do women play in this story?
2. Now read Exodus 14:21-29
 - a. Who plays active roles in the Israelite crossing?
 - b. Carol Meyers suggests that, "God's involvement is apparent from the outset" (p. 381). What in the language of the biblical text supports her claim? Why would a shift in leadership be important to note at this stage in Israel's formation?
3. Read Exodus 15:20-22
 - a. What role does Miriam play in the Israelite response to crossing the sea?
 - b. How does Miriam describe the events at the sea?
 - c. How does this response differ from the men's response?
 - d. Note the rabbinic commentary on Exodus 15:20 (p. 401).
 - i. What do the women do to merit the title "the righteous"?
 - ii. What distinguishes the women's response from the men's?
 - e. The rabbinic commentary on Exodus 15:21 (p. 401) notes multiple parallels between Miriam and Moses.

- i. What moments do they use to create this parallel?
 - ii. How is Miriam's status affected by this comparison in the eyes of the rabbis?
4. Miriam receives unusual attention in the account of the crossing (see the comments on v. 15:20, p. 392).
 - a. What about her role is unusual?
 - b. Why might the narrative choose to emphasize a woman at this time?
5. Ask yourself these questions:
 - a. Who are the main characters of the Exodus narrative?
 - b. Who affects the Israelite story?
 - c. What role, if any, do women play in this story?
 - d. How do your answers now compare to your answers to question #1?
6. The Torah text indicates that Moses leads the singing of the poetic composition known as *Shirat HaYam* (Ex. 15:1-19). However, the commentary on 15:1 by Carol Meyers challenges the assumption of male authorship. On what is her argument based, and what would explain the assumption of male authorship?
 - a. See Meyers' discussion of the Song of the Sea on pages 387-386. What role did women play in the composition and performance of songs in the ancient world?
7. What role do Miriam and the women play in this celebration of the exodus?
 - a. Read the associated rabbinic commentary for 15:20 and 15:21 (p. 401).
 - i. How do the rabbis describe Miriam?
 - ii. How do the rabbis characterize the women's roles in the celebration?
8. Read the following sections of Patricia Karlin-Neumann's Contemporary Reflection (pp.402-403) in which she compares Nahshon, Miriam and contemporary women leaders.
 - a. "At the far bank of the sea...leading all of Israel to safety."
 - b. "As she emerges from the water...giddy with gratitude for God's redemption."
 - c. "Like Nahshon and Miriam...we, and our world, are transformed."
 - i. What do Nachshon and Miriam have in common?
 - ii. Does the comparison between them hold up? How is the comparison weak?
9. Read Ruth Sohn's poem "The Song of Miriam" (p.406). How is Miriam represented in this poem? According to this poem, what is Miriam afraid of? What changes once she steps forward into the sea?
10. Muriel Rukeyser imagines Miriam as a stationary figure watching history unfold in her poem "Miriam: The Red Sea."
 - a. What events grab Miriam's attention in this poem?
 - b. What emotions does she experience as she stands rock-like on the edge of the sea?
 - c. How does this poem influence your reading of the Biblical text?

Theme 2: Redemption



The crossing of the Reed Sea is one of the most well-known tales of the Bible. It has been depicted in movies, works of art, and stories and of course, around the Passover table. This section of the study guide will help the reader approach this familiar biblical account anew. The story of the crossing of the Sea is recounted in two forms: narrative and poetry. Carol Meyers notes, “Without the prose version, the sequence and details of the crossing would be unclear. However, without the poetic one—which may be a female composition—the soaring emotion of escape and the realization of God’s role in deliverance would be lost” (p. 379). This theme will involve a close reading of both accounts and a comparison between the two.

1. Exodus 14, the narrative account

- a. Read Exodus 14:1-9, when God orchestrates the climactic confrontation at the Sea.
 - i. What role does God play in ensuring that the Israelites and the Egyptians meet at the Sea?
 - ii. Myers notes that the same Hebrew root *k-v-d* is used both with regard to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart during the signs and wonders (commonly known as the “plagues”) (Genesis 10:1) and God gaining glory through the account of the Egyptians drowning in the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14:4). What connection do you see between these two actions?
- b. Read Exodus 14:10-14, when the Israelites panic at the sight of the approaching Egyptian army.
 - i. How do the Israelites respond to the impending danger of the Egyptian attack?
 - ii. Who do the Israelites hold responsible for their predicament? How do you know? Who else might they have held responsible?
 - iii. The phrase “...will battle for you” (Exodus 14:14) introduces one of the Torah’s most masculine images of God as the divine warrior (see note at v. 14, p. 383-384, as well as the comment on 15:3, p. 386 and 389).
 - (a) What emotions do you imagine this image might have evoked for the Israelites in the desert? How does this image relate to the role of God as redeemer?
 - (b) What does this image evoke for you today?
 - (c) Even though the translators chose to render God in gender-neutral terms in most places in this translation, in 15:1-4 they chose to leave the language specifically male. Why do you think they might have made this choice, and how does it impact on your reading of the text?
- c. Read Exodus 14:15-20, God’s response to the Israelite outcry.
 - i. What does God do in response to the Israelite complaint?
 - ii. Meyers explains that the splitting of the Sea of Reeds marks a change in the level of God’s actions against the Egyptians.

- (1) What do you see as the difference between the ten wonders (plagues) and the parting of the Sea of Reeds?
 - (2) What does Meyers suggest is the difference? (see intro to Splitting the Sea p. 384).
- d. Read Exodus 14:21-31, Israel's crossing the sea to safety and the destruction of the Egyptian army.
- i. Describe the roles of Moses and God in this section. Who is responsible for the Israelite redemption and Egyptian defeat?
 - ii. Describe your own reaction to the details provided by this account. Is there any aspect of the description that is surprising, disturbing, or new? What aspects are those?
 - iii. Meyers notes that the destruction of the entire Egyptian army "is more likely a literary way to emphasize divine might" than a factual account (p. 385). Both Exodus 14:26-31 and Genesis 10:1 emphasize divine might. Meyers notes that it is the modern reader's responsibility to, "confront the reality of a tradition that recounts and even celebrates this extensive loss of human lives" (p. 385). Does Meyers' commentary help you confront this reality? Why or why not?
2. Exodus 15: *Shirat HaYam*, the Poetic Account
- a. Read Exodus 15:1-21
 - (1) Meyers notes that *Shirat HaYam* is, "directed to God alone, human agency in the victory over the enemy disappears" (p. 386).
 - (a) How might this idea help us address the death of the Egyptians?
 - (b) According to the narrative account found in Exodus 14, who is the main actor here? How does this change your reading of the story?
 - ii. What masculine metaphors for God are employed in *Shirat HaYam*? See specifically 15:1-3.
 - (a) How does Meyers compare this to God's representation elsewhere in the Torah and Tanach? (see p. 389).
 - (b) Read Meyers' comment on 15:3. Why do you think the translators might have left the male imagery in this passage as is?
 - b. We sing *Mi Chamocha* (Gen. 15:11) as part of our daily liturgy. What aspects of God's uniqueness are evident in the crossing of the Sea of Reeds?
 - i. Why might the rabbis want to invoke the image of God's redemption daily?
 - ii. Does knowing its original context change how you relate to the prayer?
 - c. Shira Rubenstein, in her poem "The Other Shore," explores the victory song sung by the Israelites on the far side of the Sea. What emotions does the poem address? How do the emotions expressed in the poem seem to fit or not fit with the actions of the Israelites as described by the narrative?

3. The crossing of the sea is recounted in two versions, a prose account and a poetic account. See Carol Meyers' note on p. 379 about the importance of having the poetic and prose versions of this account. How does existence of both accounts impact on your reading of the crossing?

Theme 3: Israel's Response to Crisis



The people Israel who participate in the Exodus from Egypt face immediate and multiple challenges. First, they are set upon by the Egyptian army led by a Pharaoh who regrets his decision to let them go free. Having been miraculously saved by God at the crossing of the sea, the Israelites are still far from secure. They experience military threats as well as shortages of food and water in their travels. This theme will explore the newly reconstituted relationship between God and the people Israel, how trouble affects that relationship, and how the Israelites respond to this trouble.

1. Read Exodus 14:10-22
 - a. What is the Israelite response to the approaching Egyptian army?
 - i. Against whom do they complain?
 - ii. How does Moses' response show great attention to the exact Israelite complaint?
 - b. How would you characterize God's response to the Egyptian threat?
 - i. Who does God's response benefit?
 - ii. What compels God to take action?
2. Exodus 15:22-17:16 recounts the beginning of the Israelite journey in the wilderness, and the troubles that plague them during that journey.
 - a. Read Exodus 15:22-27 and 17:1-7, which feature Israel facing a lack of drinkable water.
 - i. Against whom do the Israelites complain in each episode? What do they say that makes it clear whom they hold responsible?
 - ii. Who responds in each episode? Is this fitting given their complaints? Why?
 - iii. The Central Commentary focuses on the theological conundrum surrounding the lack of water (see Meyers' note on 17:7, p. 398).
 - (a) What is the theological problem created by the lack of water?
 - (b) How does the text address this problem?
 - iv. Read Kadya Molodowsky's poem "Thirst IV" (p. 406).
 - (a) What does the poem focus on?
 - (b) What affect does Molodowsky's poem have on your reading of the Israelite response to difficulty? Go back to question about the theological problem of God's presence in Exodus 15:22, above. After reading Molodowsky's poem, how would you now answer this question differently?
 - b. In Exodus 16:1-36 the Israelites face a lack of food in the desert.

- i. Read 16:1-8
 - (a) Who do the Israelites hold responsible for the lack of food? How do they voice their complaint?
 - (b) According to Carol Meyers, providing bread for the family was a woman's role in the ancient world (see comment on v. 3, p. 394).
 - (1) How do Meyers' comments on women and bread impact on your understanding of the centrality of women's work in the biblical age?
 - (2) What insight do Meyers' comments provide in terms of understanding the reality of women's lives in the biblical age?
 - (3) Compare the roles of God as the provider of bread with that of women. How the roles similar and how are they different?
 - (4) What is the theological significance of the differences between human and divine production of food? God as a provider of bread versus human
 - ii. Read 16:8-20
 - (a) Who "solves" the crisis for the Israelites?
 - (b) What is the solution?
 - (c) Meyers discusses the etymology for Manna (Exodus 16:15) that emphasizes its miraculous nature (see p. 395).
 - (1) What does Meyer's insight add to your understanding of manna?
 - (2) How does Meyer's insight help you differentiate between God's ability to produce food, and human ability to do so?
 - iii. According to Rachel Havrelock's *Another View* (p. 400), "food can be called Israel's national obsession."
 - (a) In Havrelock's interpretation, what does food represent to Israel?
 - (b) How has this "obsession with food" played a role in Jewish history? What is the connection between a crisis mentality and a concern about food?
 - c. Read Exodus 17:8-16 (Military Crisis)
 - i. The crises in the desert, whether they are militaristic or related to sustenance, all respond to the same theological question: Is a crisis or a threat to Israel's existence a sign of God's absence?
 - (a) How do the Israelites respond each time?
 - ii. Have you seen any development in the Israelite response to crisis throughout the parashah? Where is the evidence in the text to support your answer?
3. Read Merle Feld's poem "Leaving Egypt" (p. 404) in which the poet explores the Exodus from a point of view not related in the narrative.

- a. Whose view is expressed in this poem? How does this poem relate to the themes of crisis?
- b. What becomes the center of the Exodus story when viewed through this lens? How does the primary relationship in this poem shed new light or reflect on the relationship between Israel and God?
- c. What emotions does this poem evoke in you? In what way does it enhance your reading of the biblical text?

For Further Discussion:

1. Later commentators have drawn connections to women from material in this parashah, even where the Torah text itself is not overtly focused on women. Rachel Havrelock's *Another View* (p. 400) compares the passage through the Sea of Reeds to a birth.
 - a. How does she understand Israel and God to fulfill the roles of mother and baby?
 - b. How does this comparison affect your understanding of the text?
2. Read the rabbinic commentary to Exodus 15:1 (p. 400). The rabbis also use a birth metaphor to understand Israel's passage through the sea but with very different implications than the one used by Havrelock.
 - a. How do they envision birth, and how is their reading different from Havrelock's?
 - b. Who is the focus?
 - c. How does this reflect the rabbinic view of women's status?
 - d. Does the rabbinic metaphor of birth hold true to Israel's story in any other ways? Explain.

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 are you left with?



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