

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## Parashat B'haalot'cha

NUMBERS 8:1-12:16

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### *Parashat B'haalot'cha Study Guide Themes*

Theme 1: The Challenge of Sustaining an Ungrateful People


Theme 2: The Challenge of Prophecy—It's All in the Family

### INTRODUCTION



*Parashat B'haalot'cha* opens as the Israelites are about to begin their journey from Mount Sinai to the Promised Land. As they set out on this physical journey, the Israelites continue their psychological passage toward peoplehood. By this point in the narrative, God has redeemed them from Egypt, they have received and accepted God's laws at Mount Sinai, and they have learned the rules necessary for them to become a holy people. The beginning of their journey to the Promised Land raises anxieties and concerns among the people about how their needs for sustenance will be met, as well as about who has the authority to lead them. In a direct challenge to Moses and to God, a group of Israelites voice their discontent. This discontent, which at first is non-specific, becomes focused on the food that God has supplied the people, raising larger concerns about who will care for them. The people's challenges provoke God's anger and drive Moses to despair. The challenge to Moses' leadership continues in the final unit of the *parashah*, when Moses' own siblings, Aaron and Miriam, question his leadership. Throughout these challenges, Moses remains a leader of great patience, caring, and humility.

### BEFORE GETTING STARTED



Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material 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 to the Central Commentary on pages 843–44 and/or survey the outline on page 844. This will help you highlight some of the main themes in this *parashah* and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger portion. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to examine

the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

## THEME 1: THE CHALLENGE OF SUSTAINING AN UNGRATEFUL PEOPLE



The people's discontent begins with bitter complaining before God, complaints that God answers with punishing fire. The Israelites petition Moses for relief, Moses prays to God, and the punishment is withdrawn. This pattern, which repeats each time the people challenge Moses in this parashah, continues as the Israelites lament the lack of meat. Although they have abundant nourishment in the form of manna, the Israelites express nostalgia for the food they claim they had in Egypt. Like fussy children rejecting a meal carefully prepared for them by a nurturing parent, the Israelites turn their noses up at the abundance that God has placed before them. Driven to despair by the people's complaints, Moses voices his frustration to God. God reminds Moses that he does not have to carry the burden of the people alone, providing a divine lesson in leadership.

1. Read Numbers 11:1–9, which describes the Israelites' complaints about the food they have to eat in the wilderness.
  - a. Verse 1 does not tell us the source of the people's complaints. What does this suggest about the reason for God's punishment of the people?
  - b. The word *ha-safsuf* in verse 4 (translated as "the riffraff") is from the verb *asaf* (to gather). In Hebrew, this form is often pejorative. Who are the "riffraff," and how does their gluttony affect the entire community?
  - c. "If only we had meat to eat!" (v. 4) can be literally translated as "Who shall give us meat to eat?" What can we learn from this literal translation about the concern behind the people's overt complaint?
  - d. How do you understand the people's nostalgia for Egypt in verse 5?
  - e. The Hebrew phrase *nafsheinu y'veishah* in verse 6 ("our gullets are shriveled") can be literally translated as "our throats are dried up." How can this translation of *nafsheinu* help you to understand the disconnect between the abundance of manna (see Exodus 16:21) and the Israelites' complaint in this verse?
  - f. Read Exodus 16:13–16 and 16:31–32, which describe the origins of manna. How do these verses help you understand the nature of the people's complaint in Numbers 11:4–6? How does the description of the manna in Numbers 11:7–9 contrast with the people's complaints about the manna in verse 6?
2. Read Numbers 11:10–15, which describes Moses' reaction to the people's complaining.
  - a. What is the difference between Moses' reaction to the people's complaining in verse 11 and his reaction to their complaining in verses

- 1–3? What, in your view, accounts for this difference?
- b. The word *hariti* in verse 12 (translated here as “produce”) literally means “to conceive” or “to become pregnant.” The word *yalad’ti*, in the same verse (translated here as “engender”), literally means “to bear children.” According to Masha Turner’s comment on this verse, how does this metaphor operate? In other words, to whom does Moses compare himself? The editorial comment in brackets introduces a different reading of this verse. According to the editorial note, how does Moses depict his role, and how does he envision God’s role? What do Moses’ rhetorical questions to God suggest about his feelings toward the Israelites and God at this point in the narrative?
  - c. What does Moses’ language in verse 15 reveal about his state of mind?
3. Read Numbers 11:16–23, which describes God’s instructions to Moses in response to the people’s complaints to Moses and Moses’ complaints to God.
    - a. What is the reason, in your view, that God instructs Moses to “gather for Me seventy of Israel’s elders” (v. 16)? How can Exodus 18:17–23 help us to understand this command? What is the difference between the role of the elders in Numbers 11:17 and their role in the Exodus text?
    - b. What is the nature of God’s response to Moses in Numbers 11:18–20? In your view, why does God view the people’s complaining as a rejection? How does God (v. 23) interpret the concerns Moses raises in verses 21–22?
  4. Read Numbers 11:31–35, which describes God’s response to the people’s and Moses’ complaints.
    - a. How does the text characterize the people’s behavior in verses 32–33? What do you think is the effect of including the detail about the meat between their teeth?
    - b. In your view, is the punishment the people receive commensurate with the sin they committed?
    - c. According to the Central Commentary, how does the name of the place where the plague’s victims are buried reflect the people’s sin?
    - d. The Torah’s attitude toward the consumption of meat is multifaceted. In some places the Torah seems to favor vegetarianism (see Genesis 1:29), while in other places meat consumption is permitted as long as it does not include the consumption of blood (see Genesis 9:4 and Deuteronomy 12:16). Other sections of the Torah limit the types of animals whose meat can be eaten (see Leviticus 11:1–8 and Deuteronomy 14:3–21). The verb “crave” is only used in the Torah in reference to eating meat. Priests and other Israelites are expected to share the meat that they have consecrated as sacrifices. How is the Torah’s multifaceted view of eating meat reflected

in this parashah? How can the Torah's views toward eating meat help us understand our own attitudes about the consumption of meat?

- e. In your view, why does God supply the people with meat, and in such massive quantities, if their cravings anger God?

5. Read "Mother to Mother" by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, in *Voices* (p. 866).

- a. What images does the poet use in the first stanza to describe God's creation of Israel? How do these images relate to those in Numbers 11:12?
- b. How does the poet use human pregnancy to understand God's creation of Israel?
- c. How does the poet use thoughts and fantasies common to pregnant women to imagine God's role as the One who "gives birth" to Israel? If you have been pregnant, what is your reaction to these thoughts and fantasies? Are there any thoughts you would add to those of the poet?
- d. How do the images of maternal love as expressed in nurturing behaviors in the poem help you to understand God's relationship to Israel?
- e. What is the impact of the last four lines of the poem? What is the relationship of the poem's ending to the rest of the poem?
- f. What insights did you gain, if any, about God's creation of Israel from this poem?

## THEME 2: THE CHALLENGE OF PROPHECY—IT'S ALL IN THE FAMILY



The challenge to Moses' leadership in this parashah comes not only from the people, but from his own family. Moses' siblings, Aaron and Miriam, begin by criticizing their brother's marriage to a Cushite woman. They escalate their criticism by challenging Moses' role as the person through whom God speaks, noting that they, too, are conduits of God's word. Moses' special status as a prophet to whom God speaks directly is reaffirmed when God commands the siblings to present themselves at the Tent of Meeting, where God appears in a pillar of cloud. As God's presence withdraws, Miriam—not Aaron—is stricken with snow-white scales as a punishment. Demonstrating both caring and humility, Moses prays to God for his sister's recovery.

1. Read Numbers 12:1–2, which describes Miriam and Aaron's challenge to Moses' leadership.
  - a. Verse 1 tells us that "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses." The verb "spoke" is in the feminine singular form, indicating that one person (Miriam) is the primary actor. In your view, what is the significance of establishing this at the beginning of this section of the parashah?
  - b. Why do Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses (v. 1)?
  - c. Moses' wife, Zipporah, is the daughter of the Midianite priest Jethro (see

Exodus 2:21, 4:20, 4:24–26, 18:2). In light of what we know about Zipporah, what question does the phrase “he had married” (v. 1) raise? What are some of the possible explanations for this woman’s identity if she is not Zipporah?

- d. According to the Central Commentary, what are the meanings of the word *cushit* in the Bible and to whom does the term apply? What are the possible reasons why Miriam and Aaron might object to this marriage?
  - e. In your view, how do Miriam and Aaron’s critique of Moses’ marriage relate to their claim to have a prophetic role along with their brother? Read Numbers 16:1–3. How do these verses help you to understand Miriam and Aaron’s complaint?
2. Read Numbers 12:3–9, which describes God’s response to Miriam and Aaron’s criticism of Moses.
- a. What can we learn from the description of Moses in verse 3 about how the Torah views Moses? How does this compare with the behavior of Miriam and Aaron? What does this verse suggest about the way Moses may have responded (which is not mentioned in the biblical text)?
  - b. In verse 6, God addresses Miriam and Aaron in the second person plural, as if they are both to be punished, but only Miriam is in fact punished. What, in your view, accounts for this discrepancy?
  - c. How would you summarize what God says to Miriam and Aaron? What is the difference between how God communicates with prophets according to verse 6 as compared to Moses’ role as a prophet (vv. 7–8)? What is the relationship between Moses’ status as a prophet and Miriam and Aaron’s prophetic claims in verse 2?
  - d. How does verse 8 describe the relationship between God and Moses? What unique qualities does this relationship possess?
3. Read Numbers 12:10–16, which describes God’s punishment of Miriam.
- a. In your view, why is Miriam—and not Aaron—punished for the siblings’ criticism of Moses? What is your reaction to the views in the Central Commentary (on 12:10, “there was Miriam”) about the possible reasons for Miriam being singled out for punishment?
  - b. How does Aaron respond to Miriam’s punishment (vv. 11–12)?
  - c. What can we learn about Moses from his reaction to Miriam’s punishment (v. 13)?
  - d. How do you understand the possible reasons behind God’s symbolic punishment of Miriam and the language God uses in issuing this punishment (v. 14)?

- e. In your view, what can we learn from verse 15 about how the community viewed Miriam and her punishment?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Tal Ilan, on pages 862–64.
    - a. How do rabbinic sources view Miriam’s punishment in this parashah?
    - b. What is the relationship (as explored in *Sifra, M’tzora* 5.7) between Miriam’s contraction of *tzaraat* and slander? Can you think of a situation in your own life in which you or someone else used language that was destructive? What was the impact?
    - c. What contradiction in Numbers 12:1 do the sages endeavor to resolve? How does *Sifrei B’midbar* 99 address this question?
    - d. How do rabbinic interpretations of Miriam and Aaron’s challenge to Moses’ leadership demonstrate the Rabbis’ concern with correct hierarchy and gender ordering? What can we learn from the interpretations in *Sifrei D’varim* 1 and *D’varim Rabbah* 6.12 about how to lodge a complaint or protest?
    - e. How does Mishnah *Sotah* 1:7 use Miriam as proof that “a human being is treated according to how that person treats others”?
  5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Patricia Karlin-Neumann, on pages 864–65.
    - a. How does the language of Moses’ plea “*El na r’fa na lah*” (“O God, pray heal her!”) in Numbers 12:13 convey what Karlin-Neumann calls “an unending cry”?
    - b. How do these words capture the emotions of the loved ones of someone beset by catastrophic illness or injury? Can you think of a time in your own life when you felt similarly?
    - c. What type of darkness do we face when a loved one faces a serious medical difficulty?
    - d. According to Karlin-Neumann, how can prayer provide us with “a blessed moment of calm in an otherwise turbulent time”? How have you found such moments of calm when helping to care for a family member or friend who is seriously ill?
    - e. How are “time and space altered” when someone we love faces a medical crisis?
    - f. What is your reaction to the view that there is both blessing and curse, opportunity and danger during such difficult times?
  6. Read “For Days Miriam Sat Outside” by Wendy Zierler, in *Voices* (p. 868).
    - a. How does Zierler interpret Moses’ feelings as he approaches Miriam outside the camp? In your view, what accounts for these feelings?

- b. How does Moses describe his reaction to his commission by God in Exodus 3:1–10?
- c. What connection does Moses make in Zierler’s midrash between his own arm being covered by white scales (Exodus 4:6–8) and Miriam’s scale-covered arm?
- d. What has Miriam asked for, according to Zierler, and what has she received?
- e. What does it mean, according to this midrash, to be etched by God with “the power of prophecy”?
- f. What is your reaction to the differences, according to Zierler’s midrash, between the way God speaks to Moses and to Miriam?
- g. Can you think of a situation in your own life when you reached out to someone whose behavior resulted in them being “banished from the camp”? What were your reasons for reaching out to this person? How were your actions received?



## OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, keep in mind the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the class with these broader questions:

1. The Israelites' complaints about the food they receive in the wilderness seem, at first glance, to be petty. In reality, they have more than enough to eat. Can you think of a time in your own life when, although you had adequate resources, you did not feel secure? How does this parashah help you to understand this reaction?
2. How can Miriam and Aaron's challenge to their brother's leadership help you to understand the role of jealousy among your own siblings or between your children? What realities does this narrative suggest about siblings and their relationships, not only to each other, but to their parents?

## 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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