

## STUDY GUIDE

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## *Parashat Eikev*

Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25

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### Parashat Eikev Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: It Takes Two—Partners in Covenant

Theme 2: Prolific and Protected— Women in the Promised Land

## Introduction



What is necessary for the Israelites to thrive in the Promised Land? Parashat Eikev aims to answer that question. The parashah contains three speeches by Moses to the people emphasizing that if the people heed, remember, and keep the covenant, God will ensure the blessings of fertility, abundant food, health, and military victory in the good land they are about to enter. Moses stresses that God's loyalty to the Israelites is manifest in the faithful maintenance of the covenant God made with their ancestors; in turn, God demands their obedience, observance, and love. If they obey God's commandments and if they love and serve God with their hearts and souls, God will reward them with abundance in the Promised Land. Although the parashah mentions women directly only a few times in connection with fertility and the protection of widows, it contains feminine imagery and references that broaden our understanding of the text.

## Before Getting Started



Before returning 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 page 1089 and/or survey the outline on page 1090. 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: It Takes Two—Partners in Covenant



The first speech Moses delivers to the people (Deuteronomy 7:12–26) addresses God’s loyalty to the covenant made with the Israelites’ ancestors and the blessings that will flow if the people uphold God’s commandments. The second speech (8:1–20) calls on the people to heed, remember, and obey God. Linking these two speeches is the repetition of the word *eikev* (“if” or “as a consequence of”) and the verbal root *sh-m-a* (“obey” or “heed”) in the opening verse of the first speech (7:12) and in the last verse of the second speech (8:20). Both God and Israel are partners in the covenant, and each party has obligations to ensure its fulfillment. While the biblical text does not specify whether women were included in Moses’ commands to fulfill God’s commandments (*mitzvot*), the later Rabbis raise an important question in response to this parashah: to which *mitzvot* are women obligated?

1. Read Deuteronomy 7:12–16, which begins the first of two speeches in this parashah, and which describes some of the blessings that God will bestow on the Israelites if they follow God’s laws.
  - a. The root *sh-m-r* (“to keep” or “to watch”) appears twice in verse 12, and it applies both to the Israelites (translated here as “observe”) and to God (translated as “maintain”). What are the differences and similarities in how this word applies to God and to the Israelites?
  - b. The words *chesed* (faithfulness, kindness, loyalty) and *b’rit* (covenant, agreement) in verse 12 combine to form a single idea that expresses God’s kindness to the Israelites through God’s faithfulness to the covenant with their ancestors and to the covenant at Sinai. According to Dalit Rom-Shiloni’s Central Commentary to this verse, what are the differences between divine and human *chesed*?
  - c. The word *ahav* (to love) in verse 13 is translated here as “[God] will favor.” Elsewhere, the same verb is used when the Israelites are commanded to “love” God (Deuteronomy 6:5, 11:1) and when the text describes God’s “love” for Israel (Deuteronomy 4:37, 10:15, 23:6). How does the use of the word *ahav* in verse 13 differ from the other uses of this word in Deuteronomy? According to the Central Commentary, how is the use of *ahav* in this verse related to the meaning of this word in the political sphere of the ancient Near East? What does this add to your understanding of the relationship between God and Israel?
  - d. Verse 13 lists the blessings the Israelites will receive if they heed God’s laws. What is the relationship between receiving these blessings and what God requires of the Israelites? What do these blessings have in common?
2. Read Deuteronomy 8:2–10, which reminds the people of two of God’s primary gifts: guiding the Israelites through the wilderness and giving them the Promised Land.
  - a. What reasons do verses 2–3 give for the hardships the Israelites suffer in the wilderness? How do these reasons contrast with those given in verse 16? Why do you think God reminds the Israelites of these hardships at this time? What is the connection between reminding the people of the hardships they suffered and the

- affirmation of the covenant?
- b. The verb *y-s-r* (“to chastise,” “to rebuke,” or, as translated here, “to discipline”) appears twice in verse 5. What is the effect of this repetition? What does this suggest about the nature of the divine-human relationship?
  - c. The second speech emphasizes the verbs *z-ch-r* (to remember) and *sh-ch-ch* (to forget), which are antonyms (see vv. 2, 11, 14, 18, 19). What is the message of this speech, and how does the repetition of these words reinforce this message?
3. Read Deuteronomy 10:12–15, in which Moses outlines what God demands of the people.
    - a. What are the five primary demands of the Israelites once they enter the Promised Land?
    - b. According to 10:15, with whom—and on what basis—did God make the covenant with the Israelites? What is the significance of reminding the Israelites of this fact at this point in the narrative?
  4. Read Deuteronomy 10:16, in which Moses tells the people that they must cut away the thickening around their hearts (literally, “circumcise the foreskin of your heart”) so that it will be possible for them to observe the terms of God’s covenant.
    - a. What is the meaning of this metaphor in the context of this verse?
    - b. This same expression is used in Leviticus 26:41 and Deuteronomy 30:6. How does the use of this metaphor in Deuteronomy 10:16 compare to its use in those other passages?
    - c. What is the relationship between this metaphor and the idea expressed at the end of this verse that the people have stiffened their necks? In what ways might being “stiff-necked” get in the way of following God’s commandments? How might this connect to your own life?
  5. Read Deuteronomy 11:13–21, which connects the people’s obedience to God with agricultural abundance in the Promised Land.
    - a. What does God require the people to do (v. 13)?
    - b. How does the language of verses 13–15 mirror the language of 7:12–13? What are the differences between these verses?
    - c. What will be the consequence if the people do not heed God’s commandments?
    - d. The Rabbis regarded verses 13–21 as so important that they are included in our daily liturgy and in mezuzot and *t’fillin*. Why, in your view, did the Rabbis place such significance on the connection between obeying God’s commandments and the Land of Israel?
  6. Compare the opening verse of the parashah with its concluding verse. What common assurance does each verse convey? What is the impact of these assurances in light of the severe consequences the people will face if they disobey God’s instruction?
  7. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith Hauptman on Deuteronomy 11:13, on page 1109 (“If, then, you obey the commandments” and “loving your God Adonai and serving [God] with all your heart and soul”). While the parashah does not directly mention women as part of

Moses' charge to obey the commandments (mitzvot), Judith Hauptman addresses the question of whether women were obligated to perform certain mitzvot.

- a. From what obligations are women exempt, according to *Mishnah B'rachot* 3:3? From which obligations are women not exempt?
  - b. How are these rules consistent with the general rule (*Mishnah Kiddushin* 1:7) that women are exempt from positive time-dependent ritual acts but obligated to all others?
  - c. Why are women obligated to pray at fixed times (BT *B'rachot* 20b)?
  - d. According to Hauptman, what meaning did the Rabbis give to the phrase "loving your God Adonai and serving [God] with all your heart and soul"? What is your view of *Torah lishmah* (study for its own sake).
  - e. How does the idea of *Torah lishmah* apply to women?
  - f. What is your reaction to the story of the woman studying Torah (BT *Yoma* 66b and JT *Sotah* 3:3, 19a)? What attitudes towards women does this story reflect?
  - g. In what situations in your own life have you experienced contradictory reactions to performing a role not customarily filled by a woman?
8. Read "Covenant" by Sharon Kessler, in *Voices*, on page 1113.
- a. What kind of journey does the poet describe in the first stanza and the first seven lines of the second stanza?
  - b. What is the relationship between the "old legends" the poet describes in the second line of the first stanza and the "fresh tracks in the sand" in lines 4–5 of the same stanza?
  - c. According to the poet, what are the differences between how women and men responded to hearing "voices in the wilderness"? In your view, how are both expressions necessary in order to fulfill God's covenant?
  - d. What feelings about journey and covenant does the poem express? How do these feelings relate to the Israelites' covenant with God that is about to be actualized as they enter the Promised Land?
  - e. Can you think of a time in your life when you felt impelled to begin a journey that involved making "fresh tracks"? How did you sustain the spark that ignited your journey when you felt lost along the way?

## Theme 2: Prolific and Protected— Women in the Promised Land



Women receive explicit mention only twice in *Parashat Eikev*. In Deuteronomy 7:14, the text states that in return for the people's obedience to God's commandments, there shall be no sterile males or females. Deuteronomy 10:18 identifies the *almanah* (widow) as one of the three classes of disadvantaged people who require legal protection and economic support. This theme will explore what the biblical text and the commentary have to say about these two issues: fertility and infertility, and the status and struggles of being a widow in ancient Israel.

1. Read Deuteronomy 10:12–19, which describes the five principal things God requires of the people in order for them to thrive in the Promised Land. This includes the special protections

- to be given to three vulnerable groups: the orphan, the widow, and the stranger.
- a. What are the five things God demands of the people (vv. 12–13)?
  - b. How do verses 17–18 show God to be the ideal ruler?
  - c. What dual role does God play in relation to the three disadvantaged groups in Israelite society?
  - d. What protections are demanded for these groups in Deuteronomy 24:17–18 and 27:19? What kind of support is mandated for these groups in Deuteronomy 14:28–29, 16:11, 16:14, 24:19–21, and 26:12–13?
  - e. What unique dual role does God play in relation to the three disadvantaged groups in Deuteronomy 10:18?
2. Read the Another View section by Lillian Klein Abensohn, on page 1108.
- a. According to Abensohn, what was the status of the widow in Israelite society? What difficulties did the widow face?
  - b. What is the reason for God’s appeal for justice in the case of the widow?
  - c. In your view, why is there particular concern in Deuteronomy for the widow?
  - d. How does the rabbinic attitude toward the widow compare with that of the Hebrew Bible? What is the relationship between these views of the widow and the advent of the *k’tubah* (marriage contract) during the rabbinic period? (See Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith Hauptman on Deuteronomy 10:18, on p. 1109.)
3. Read “Widows” by Rashelle Veprinski, in *Voices for Parashat R’ei*, on page 1139.
- a. How does the physical description of widows in the first stanza serve to illustrate their internal state?
  - b. For what are the widows searching in “buried summers”?
  - c. How does the second stanza reflect the position of widows in society?
  - d. What is the relationship between the women’s status as widows and their wombs, “pinched to silence”?
  - e. What are the “stalks of wheat left behind” from which the widows pick? How does this relate to the verses from Deuteronomy listed above (1d) regarding support required for widows?
  - f. How does the attitude toward widows in this poem compare with the attitude toward widows expressed in this parashah?
  - g. How does the poet’s view of widows compare with your perspective on friends and family members who are widowed? If you are a widow, what are your feelings about this poem?
4. Read Deuteronomy 7:12–15, paying particular attention to images of fertility, both of humans and of the land.
- a. The phrase translated as “issue from the womb” in verse 13 literally means “fruit of the belly.” How does this expression use agriculture as a metaphor for childbirth? How does this phrase fit with the other items listed in this verse as part of God’s blessing? According to the Central Commentary on verse 13, what do children and

- agricultural products have in common?
- b. The Bible repeatedly emphasizes the importance of human fertility. How do Genesis 11:30, 13:16, 15:2–4, 16:1–2, 18:11–14, 21:1–2, 30:1, and 30:22–24 reflect this view? What do these verses suggest about sterility? Compare this to the description of sterility in Exodus 23:26. How do these verses compare with the view of sterility in Deuteronomy 7:14?
5. Read the third paragraph of the Contemporary Reflection by Malka Drucker, on page 1110.
- a. What is interesting about the Hebrew wording of Deuteronomy 7:13?
  - b. According to Drucker, what are the various ways we can interpret “(your) womb”?
  - c. How do you interpret the relationship between the masculine wording of this verse and the use of the word “womb”?
6. Read “The Empress of Imagined Fertility” by Leah Aini, in *Voices*, on page 1112.
- a. What images does the poet describe in the poem’s first ten lines?
  - b. How does the tone of the poem shift in the next line? How does this alter your perception of the first ten lines?
  - c. What is the relationship between the mothers in the yard with “creatures kicking in their bellies” and the poet, “pregnant with pain”?
  - d. What is the poet’s attitude toward her infertility?
  - e. In your view, what impact do society’s attitudes toward fertility have on women? What is the impact of these attitudes on men?
7. Read “For a Child Not Yet Conceived” by Pamela Melnikoff, in *Voices*, on page 1112.
- a. How do the blessings the poet describes in the first stanza compare with the blessings in Deuteronomy 7:14?
  - b. In lines 3–5 of the poem, the poet describes the ancestors of her yet-to-be conceived child. What is the relationship between the way the poet portrays her ancestors and the view of ancestors in Deuteronomy 7:12?
  - c. How does the poet see infertility? How does this attitude compare and contrast with the view of infertility in this parashah and with your own views?
  - d. How does the mood of the poem change in each stanza? Given your own experiences or those of people close to you, to what extent can you relate to the emotions and expectations expressed in this poem?

### *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. What is your reaction to the view in this parashah that there is a direct relationship between obedience to God's commandments and how the Israelites will fare in the Promised Land? In your opinion, what is the relationship—if any—between human action and divine consequences?
2. What is your reaction to the view in rabbinic tradition that women are exempt from time-bound obligations but obligated for all others?

### **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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