

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Mas'ei Numbers 33:1-36:13

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Parashat Mas'ei Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Recalling the Journey: It's Been a Long and Winding Road

Theme 2: Ensuring Justice in the Promised Land: Providing Cities of Refuge

Theme 3: Amending God's Law in the Promised Land: The Limits of Individual Freedom

Introduction



Parashat Mas'ei begins with a detailed review of the Israelites' journey to Canaan, from Egypt to the plains of Moab. This parashah, the last in the book of Numbers, concludes with the Israelites poised to enter the Promised Land, their long journey finally at an end. The parashah contains a list of the forty-two places at which the Israelites stopped during their wanderings, an itinerary that reminds the Israelites of just how far they have come: from slavery, through the trials of the wilderness, and on to the threshold of entering Canaan as a free people in their own land. An account of Aaron's death interrupts the narrative, reminding the people that the leaders of their journey will not accompany them as they cross the Jordan. The narrative then shifts from a recollection of the journey to God's directions for how the Israelites will occupy and live in the Promised Land. God's concern is not only with the geographic boundaries of the land, but with the social and legal boundaries that will regulate the interactions of its inhabitants. Which leaders will apportion the land? How can land be kept within its assigned tribes? What are the laws and regulations for someone who kills a fellow Israelite? How can those who kill accidentally be protected from angry, grief-stricken relatives? These questions anticipate the fact that the Israelites' journey to the Promised Land will soon be over, and the reality of living in the land, once a distant dream, will soon be at hand.

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 1013–14 and/or survey the outline on page 1014. This will allow you to highlight

some of the main themes in this portion and give participants a context for the sections they will study within the larger parashah. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical texts, take the time to examine the associated comments in the Central Commentary. This will help you to answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: Recalling the Journey: It's Been a Long and Winding Road



The Israelites' journey from Egypt to Moab has been long and arduous. In Numbers 33, God commands Moses to record the peoples' wanderings in detail from beginning to end, a commandment that suggests that the rigors of their travels will somehow shape their life in the Promised Land. Aaron's death emphasizes that those who have led the people from Egypt to Moab will not enter Canaan with them. Going forward, the Israelites must rely, in part, on the strengths they have gained on their march from Egypt to the Promised Land.

1. Briefly survey Numbers 33:1–37, which describes the journey of the Israelites from when they leave Egypt through their arrival at the plains of Moab.
2. Read Numbers 33:2–3 and 33:5–11, part of the list of places the Israelites encamped on their travels.
 - a. In verse 2 God commands Moses to record the stages of the Israelites' journey through the wilderness. Why do you think it is important to record this journey?
 - b. The verb *vayis'u* (translated here as "they set out") appears repeatedly in this section (see vv. 5–11). The root of this verb (n-s-) means "to pull out," "to pull up tent pegs," "to set out," or "to journey," and the plural noun form of this verb provides the name of this parashah (*mas'ei*, translated here as "marches"). What is the impact on the reader of the repetition of this verb in these verses?
 - c. On what day did the Israelites start their journey (v. 3)? What is the significance of this day as the beginning of the Israelites' trek through the wilderness?
3. Read Numbers 33:38–40, where we learn of the death of Aaron.
 - a. Compare the account of Aaron's death in this parashah to the versions of his death in Numbers 20:24–28 and Deuteronomy 10:6. In what ways are these accounts similar? How do they differ?
 - b. Why do you think the account of Aaron's death here interrupts the record of the Israelites' journey? What might the interruption signify, coming at this point in the narrative?
4. Read the comment on Numbers 33:1 ("These were the marches of the Israelites") in Post-biblical Interpretations (p. 1030).
 - a. What question does Numbers 33:1 raise that Midrash *Tanchuma* then addresses?
 - b. How does recalling your own journeys help you to make meaning out of the various stages of your life?
5. Read "The Sorrow of Night" by Dahlia Ravikovitch, in *Voices*, on page 1034.
 - a. How does the poet describe the journey in the first two stanzas of the poem? How

might those walking “the road so remote and steep” feel?

- b. What is the transition that occurs in the third stanza? How does this transition change your view of the journey?
 - c. The fourth stanza contains two biblical references: “Lo, the sheaves stand upright in praise” is a reference to Genesis 37:7, and the last two lines of the stanza are from Psalm 116:7. How do these biblical texts enhance your understanding of the “piercing” of the “dread abyss”?
 - d. According to the poet, what is God’s role in this journey?
 - e. The last stanza repeats some of the language from the first stanza. How does the last stanza differ from the first? What, in your view, accounts for these differences?
 - f. How does the poet’s description of this journey add to your understanding of this parashah?
 - g. Can you think of a journey in your own life in which you experienced feelings similar to those in this poem?
6. Read “Not Every Day” by Shifra Alon, in *Voices*, on page 1035.
- a. What is the perspective on God, prayer, and acts of loving-kindness in the first three lines of the poem?
 - b. What do the next three lines of the poem add to the perspective on life expressed in the first part of the poem?
 - c. What is the “forgotten path” for which a person gropes and searches?
 - d. What does the poet mean when she writes that God seeks out “those who search and wander” with candles?
 - e. What is the relationship between this image of God and the view of God in the first line of the poem?
 - f. How does the poet’s view of a person’s journey through life—and God’s role in this journey—relate to the journey of the Israelites? How does this pertain to the course of your own life?

Theme 2: Ensuring Justice in the Promised Land: Providing Cities of Refuge



How will the Israelites build a just infrastructure once they enter the Promised Land? God’s concern is not only with apportioning the land in an equitable fashion, but with ensuring that its inhabitants live together in peace. Numbers 35 establishes rules for how the Israelites should deal with those who kill others and mandates cities of refuge where those who kill someone unintentionally will be safe from the wrath of the victim’s relatives. This chapter recognizes the reality that people sometimes kill each other and that there must be a system in place for dealing with homicides—both intentional and unintentional.

1. Read Numbers 35:2–12, which describes the lands assigned to the Levites and the cities of refuge in those lands.
 - a. According to verse 2, what land will the Levites receive and from whom?

- b. What is the purpose of the cities of refuge? Who is protected by these cities?
2. Read Numbers 35:16–28, which specifies the different categories of homicide and length of time the slayer must remain in the city of refuge.
 - a. What is the difference between the type of homicide in verses 11 and 22–23 and those in verses 16–21?
 - b. What is the role of the assembly in cases of unintentional homicide (v. 12, vv. 24–25)?
 - c. According to the comment on verse 25 by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Elizabeth Goldstein, what is the relationship between the death of the high priest and the length of exile of a killer in a city of refuge? What is your opinion about the idea that one person’s death can atone for someone else’s sin?
3. Read Numbers 35:30–34, which outlines the role of witness testimony in the execution of a killer and makes reference to the biblical principle of bloodguilt.
 - a. What are the reasons for the law regarding the kind of witness testimony necessary to execute a killer?
 - b. What is the root of the principle of bloodguilt (see vv. 18–19 and 31–34)?
4. Read the Post-biblical Interpretations on 35:6, 35:19, and 35:24 by Dvora E. Weisberg on pages 1030–31.
 - a. What parallel does *Tanchuma, Mas’ei* 11 draw between God’s punishment of Adam and the law regarding the person who commits homicide?
 - b. According to Weisberg, why does the Torah emphasize that the blood-avenger himself must put the killer to death? What possible complication does JT *Makot* 2:5 foresee in this situation?
 - c. What limitations does JT *Sanhedrin* 3:9 set on who can comprise the assembly that will decide the fate of the killer? What are your views of these limitations?
 - d. What kind of punishment do you think society should exact from those who intentionally murder others? What role should vengeance play—if any—in the punishment of such individuals? How has studying the biblical view of these topics influenced your perspective?

Theme 3: Amending God’s Law in the Promised Land: The Limits of Individual Freedom



Numbers 36, the last chapter in the book of Numbers, deals with the case of the daughters of Zelophehad and a problem that arises from God’s decision in Numbers 27 that they can inherit their deceased father’s land. God’s promise to the women conflicts with God’s instructions about how the land should be apportioned among the tribes. The concluding chapter of the parashah addresses the intersection between individual and tribal rights in the Promised Land and establishes the principle that God’s laws can be amended.

1. Read Numbers 36:1–4, which describes a problem with God’s decision to grant the daughters of Zelophehad the right to inherit their father’s land (Numbers 27).

- a. Who appeals to Moses in verse 1? What is their relationship to the five daughters of Zelophehad?
 - b. What is the source of the conflict in verse 2? What problems does this raise for the family heads?
 - c. According to Eskenazi and Goldstein in their comment on verse 3, what are the possible ways to understand the clan's concern about the loss of their land? Which reason seems most plausible to you?
2. Read Numbers 36:5–9, which explains how Moses resolves the conflict.
- a. What is the significance of Moses' statement in verse 5?
 - b. What has God previously commanded regarding the daughters of Zelophehad?
 - c. What provision does Moses add in verse 6? Why does Moses add this provision, according to verse 7? According to the Central Commentary, what is the reason for amending the law in this way?
 - d. What additional information do we learn about this provision in verses 8–9?
3. Read Numbers 36:10–12, which describes the resolution of the problem raised by the family heads.
- a. How does the text refer to the daughters of Zelophehad in verse 11? Why, in your view, is this the first listing of the sisters' names in this parashah?
 - b. We learn in verse 11 that the sisters are married to sons of their uncles. According to Eskenazi and Goldstein's comment on page 1028, what evidence is there that women in ancient Israel may have retained property after marriage and were able to inherit property?
 - c. What does the Central Commentary on verse 12 tell us about how the story of the daughters of Zelophehad concludes in Joshua 17? From where do we learn the persistence of the sisters' names in Israelite tradition?
4. Read the Another View section, by Masha Turner, on page 1030.
- a. How do the two narratives regarding who may inherit land (this parashah and Numbers 27) demonstrate that some laws in the Torah were created through the cooperative efforts of God and human beings? What problem does this raise regarding the nature of the Torah's laws?
 - b. What are the three cases, other than the one in this parashah, that require God's intervention and that result in new laws and amendments?
 - c. According to Turner, why does the Torah preserve and highlight the dialogue between human beings and God regarding divine legislation?
 - d. How does ongoing exegesis of the Torah help us to find new responses to never-ending questions?
5. Read from the comment on Numbers 36:6 ("This is what") to the end of Post-biblical Interpretations, by Dvora E. Weisberg, on page 1031.
- a. According to BT *Taanit* 30b and *Bava Batra* 120a, why do you think the Rabbis might have limited the Torah's version of this law to the generation of the wilderness?

- b. How does BT *Bava Batra* 120a resolve the apparent contradiction in Numbers 36:6?
 - c. According to Weisberg, what are some of the explanations for the different order in which the names of Zelophehad's daughters are listed in this parashah and in Numbers 27?
 - d. What is your view of the reason given by the wife of Rabbi Saul of Amsterdam for abandoning her studies after her marriage? If you are married, what challenges do you face in continuing your own interests and pursuits in the light of your responsibilities to your family? How do these challenges compare to those faced by men?
6. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Lisa Edwards and Jill Berkson Zimmerman on pages 1032–33.
- a. How does the story of Zelophehad's daughters encourage us to reflect on our individual decisions and commitments? What is the relationship between seemingly personal decisions and the potential impact of these decisions on the community?
 - b. What does this parashah teach us about the complexity of balancing our individual needs and wants against those of others?
 - c. How does this parashah demonstrate that lawmaking in the Torah is an inexact science?
7. Read "The New Egypt" by Robin Becker, in *Voices*, on page 1035.
- a. How is the poet the beneficiary of her father's belief that "a Jew can outwit fate by owning land"?
 - b. What are her feelings about this inheritance?
 - c. What does the poet learn from her father about exile and acquisition?
 - d. How does this poem relate to the importance the family heads place on their ancestral portions of land in this parashah?
 - e. How does the view expressed in this poem compare to your opinion about owning land? To what extent did your father or mother influence your perspective?
8. Read "The Girls That Are Wanted" by Marie Odium, in *Voices*, on page 1036.
- a. According to the poet, what kind of girls "are wanted"?
 - b. What behaviors do these girls demonstrate, and what roles do they serve?
 - c. What is the difference between the "wise girls" and the "clever, the witty, the brilliant girl"? Why is the latter in less demand, according to the poet?
 - d. What do you think the poet is trying to say about whether it is possible for girls and women to be wise and loving as well as clever, witty, and brilliant? What role, if any, has this question played in your life and sense of self?
 - e. Where do you think the daughters of Zelophehad fit in the poet's scheme of things?
 - f. Do you know women like the ones the poet describes? Where do you see yourself in this model of "girls that are wanted"?

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 the value of reviewing our own journey through life? What can we learn from reflecting on our wanderings that can be useful in going forward?
2. How do you view the balance between individual and communal needs in the Jewish community of which you are a part? Can you think of an example of when these needs did not seem in balance? What guidance does this *parashah* give us about achieving the proper balance between individual and communal needs?

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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