

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Mikeitz Genesis 41:1–44:17

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Parashat Mikeitz Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Dreamworld

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Introduction



In *parashat Mikeitz* the reader feels the awesome power and pull of family even when parents and siblings are physically far from one another. At the beginning of this portion, Joseph remains as far from his family as one can imagine. Twenty years have passed since his brothers sold him into servitude, bitterly envious and resentful of Joseph's status as favored child. He finds himself in an Egyptian prison, at the mercy of his foreign masters, with only his intellect, his cunning, and his gift of dream interpretation—for which he humbly gives full credit to his God. Where dreams had once inflamed the wrath of his brothers, they now propel Joseph out of prison and launch him on a dizzying ascent to power and leadership in Egyptian society. Far from his home and the traditions of his people, Joseph takes an Egyptian wife, and together they create their own hybrid family. Yet his earliest experiences with his father, his now-deceased mother, and his siblings live on within him. When Joseph's brothers come to Egypt in a desperate search for food, all the feelings are rekindled and a dramatic reunion ensues, culminating in the next parashah, *Vayigash*.

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 page 233 and/or survey the outline on page 234. 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 text, 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: Dreamworld



In this section of the parashah, the biblical text describes an experience common to all human beings: imagery-rich dreams that both intrigue and frighten the dreamer. This part of the study guide poses the following questions: Who determines what a dream “means”? What do differing dream interpretations signify? How can dream interpretation be used (and misused)? Which is more important—the dream itself or its interpretation? How does the relationship between the dreamer and the interpreter affect the dream’s interpretation? Is interpretation an entirely subjective process? If not, what are the limits of a dream’s objective core or essence?

1. Read Genesis 41:1–14. (Background: At the start of this section, Joseph languishes in an Egyptian prison after the wife of his benefactor, Potiphar, accused Joseph of trying to seduce her. Earlier, back home in Canaan, Joseph infuriated his brothers by interpreting his own dreams to mean that he would someday rule over them. Later, imprisoned in Egypt, he interpreted dreams of his fellow inmates, the cupbearer and the baker, who subsequently made a favorable report about Joseph to Pharaoh. Now, Joseph once again plays the role of dream interpreter.)
 - a. Read the Central Commentary by Naomi Steinberg on Genesis 41:2–7, which discusses Joseph’s interpretation of the Pharaoh’s dreams. What do corn and cows symbolize?
 - b. What other symbolism can you find in each of Pharaoh’s dreams? How are these symbols used, and what do they convey? What associations do they evoke in you the reader?
 - c. In 41:13, the cupbearer says to Pharaoh, “And as he interpreted for us, so it came to be.” What ideas does this statement communicate about the range and the limitations of dreams?
 - d. Clothing and appearance are often used to forecast a change in a biblical character’s status. What are the changes that Joseph undergoes in 41:14, and according to Naomi Steinberg, what do they signify? Have you ever made noteworthy changes in your appearance? Why did you do so, and what did these external changes convey about your interior life?
2. In the previous parashah, *Vayeishev*, Joseph evolved from a spoiled, haughty, and insensitive young man to one who, with dignity and humility, resisted the advances of a married seductress. Perhaps to mark this transition in his character, the text tells us, “YHVH was with Joseph” (Genesis 39:21). Now read the Central Commentary on 41:12 in this parashah.
 - a. What was it about Joseph’s character development that led him to credit God with his interpretative abilities?
 - b. How does the biblical text set up the contrast between the ideas held by the cupbearer and those held by Joseph? What theological message does the biblical text convey in this verse, and what purpose does this message serve?

3. Read Genesis 41:15–32.

- a. In 41:16 Joseph demurs when Pharaoh praises his ability to interpret dreams. What personal qualities does Joseph’s response reflect? How does the way Joseph presents himself in this scene compare to how he acts in earlier parts of the story (particularly his interaction with his brothers in Genesis 37)?
- b. How does Joseph explain Pharaoh’s dual dreams in 41:25–32? What theological statements or values are embedded in his explanation?
- c. A theme of this section is nourishment and the threat of its absence. Read the Central Commentary on 41:25–32. Why do you think this particular imagery was employed by the biblical authors in the form of Pharaoh’s dreams? What does the specter of famine evoke for you? If you were to create a dream to symbolize plenty and its loss, what would your “storyline” be?

4. Read Another View by Yairah Amit on page 252.

- a. In this essay, Amit asks, “But if a single dream [of Pharaoh] would have sufficed, why are there two and why do they follow so closely?” According to Amit, what is the traditional explanation of biblical repetitions? What is a “poetic statement,” and in Amit’s view, what “statement” does this section of the parashah make?
- b. Amit lists a number of repetitions in the Joseph saga. Go back and reread Genesis 41:1–14. In addition to Pharaoh’s two dreams, what other dualities can you find embedded in this section of the story?
- c. According to Amit, what is the symbolic difference between a repetition that occurs immediately and one in which there is gap or delay between the two parts? What are the theological implications of each?
- d. How do Amit’s observations enhance your reading of the parashah?

5. In Post-biblical Interpretations by Deborah Green, read the commentaries on 41:8 and 41:13 on pages 252–53.

- a. According to the Rabbis in *B’reishit Rabbah* 89.6, how did Pharaoh’s magicians incorrectly interpret his dreams?
- b. Why do you think the Rabbis “gave” to Pharaoh’s magicians the particular motif of begetting and burying seven daughters?
- c. The Babylonian Talmud, *B’rachat* 55b credits Rabbi Eliezer with the statement, “All dreams follow the mouth.” What has been your experience with the predictive power of dreams? If your dreams have accurately forecasted a part of the future, what factors do you think accounted for this? Have you ever allowed your dreams to guide you? Have you ever changed a planned course of action because of a dream?

6. In Voices, read “Joseph and Pharaoh” by Ruth Brin on page 257.

- a. In Brin’s view, what is Joseph’s essence when he is “stripped of his colored garments” and “stripped of his pride as favorite son”? According to Brin, what is the result of Joseph’s being “exposed to the chilling air of the court”?
- b. How does Brin’s imagery add to your understanding of the biblical text in Genesis 41?

- c. Do you agree with the list of traits that Brin assigns to the “naked” Jew in history? Are there other traits that you would add to her list?
 - d. In your own life, what literal or metaphoric “coverings” have you used to hide or minimize exposure? What did you wish to conceal, and how successful were your efforts?
7. In *Voices*, read “Pharaoh and Joseph” by Else Lasker-Schüler on page 257.
- a. What type of relationship between Pharaoh and Joseph does Lasker-Schüler depict? How does the portrayal of their relationship in the poem compare to the description in the biblical text? In what ways does the poem expand, alter, or contradict your reading of this parashah?
 - b. Lasker-Schüler’s poem has been connected by the editors to Genesis 41:39–40. Go back and reread these verses. How do these verses relate to the way the poet depicts the relationship between these two men?
 - c. Although the relationship between Joseph and Pharaoh later expands greatly and takes on political, economic, and familial dimensions, it begins much more simply, with dreams. What are some of the characteristics of a relationship in which one person interprets the dreams of another? What are the potential pitfalls? What are the opportunities? Are there dreams that you would not share with someone else? Are there dreams that you wish you could share? What stops you from doing so?

Theme 2: From Prison to Palace—Joseph’s Transformation



In this section, Joseph experiences a transformation of status that informs every aspect of his being. It is particularly noteworthy that a woman plays a key role in his profound change, and this woman, Asenath, is a non-Israelite, the daughter of the most powerful Egyptian in the land. Through her, Joseph’s line will continue, and their descendants will become the basis for future Israelite society. Asenath is a relatively minor biblical character, mentioned in only two verses in the entire Torah. Nonetheless, the implications of her role as the foreign wife of an Israelite man have reverberated throughout Jewish history and been explored from prophetic writings, rabbinic commentary, and Hellenistic literature all the way to a historic and groundbreaking 1983 decision by the Central Conference of American Rabbis.

1. Read Genesis 41:33–46. (Background: In the previous section of the parashah, Joseph interpreted Pharaoh’s troubling dreams, and Pharaoh accepted Joseph’s predictions of the future. In this section, Joseph and Pharaoh forge a new relationship.)
 - a. In 41:33–36, Joseph makes his recommendations to Pharaoh, and Pharaoh responds by calling Joseph “a man with the spirit of God in him” (41:38). Turn back and read Genesis 41:25–31. What is it about Joseph’s words that cause Pharaoh to form this opinion?
 - b. What are the signs and symbols of Joseph’s new status? Read the Central Commentary introduction to 41:37–49. What do these signs convey about Joseph now? Why do you think that these particular items were chosen to represent Joseph’s new standing in Egypt?

- c. Imagine that you have been asked to write a contemporary version of Joseph's rise to power. In your version of the story, how would Joseph's ascent be publicly marked and made known? In contemporary society, what are the possessions that denote power, authority, or influence? Why do you think that these particular items do so?
 - d. Name changing is a motif that runs throughout the Torah: Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 17:5, 17:15); Jacob takes on the additional name of Israel (Genesis 32:29). In these cases, either God or a presumed divine messenger bestows the new names as acknowledgment and recognition of the character's new status. Read the Central Commentary on Genesis 41:45 on Zaphenath-paneah. Why do you think that in this parashah, it is another biblical character, not God, who gives this story's protagonist, Joseph, his new name? Joseph's name-giver is an Egyptian, not a fellow Israelite. Why do you think that Pharaoh gives Joseph this particular Egyptian name? What theological messages does the text express by the choice of this name?
 - e. According to the Central Commentary on 41:45 on the name of Joseph's wife, what is the meaning of "Asenath"? What images or impressions about Asenath does her name convey? How is Joseph's marriage linked to his ascent to power?
 - f. In the previous parashah, *Vayeishev*, the wife of Joseph's master (known in the text only by the name of her husband, Potiphar) attempts to seduce Joseph. Here in *parashat Mikeitz*, Joseph marries a "daughter of Potiphara." Read the Central Commentary on 41:45 on "daughter of Potiphara" and "Potiphara." Think of the arc of Joseph's life so far as the biblical text describes it. According to Naomi Steinberg, how does the text employ the very similar Egyptian names Potiphar and Potiphara? Why would the text wish to show Joseph's progression from being associated with an "evil woman" to a "good woman"?
 - g. Joseph's marriage to Asenath is one of several stories of exogamous marriage (marrying out of one's people) in the Bible, similar to Moses' marriage to a Midianite, Zipporah. Elsewhere, the Torah expresses the importance of endogamy, marrying within the family's kinship group (see Genesis 28:1 and the citations mentioned in the Central Commentary there). How do you reconcile these two views on marriage? What messages do these texts convey to the contemporary reader? What do they say to you?
 - h. Steinberg notes that female characters in the Bible are often presented in pairs. Can you think of other female pairings from art, literature, or contemporary culture? What do these pairings connote about women? About the cultures of which they are a part?
2. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Deborah Green on Genesis 41:45 on page 253.
 - a. List all of the ways in which the Hellenistic romance Joseph and Asenath significantly alters the story found here in *parashat Mikeitz*. What parts of the story remain true to the biblical text? How does this "new and improved" story portray Joseph and Asenath's

- characters? Why do you think that Jews of the Hellenistic period felt compelled to change the story?
- b. According to Green’s summary of the Hellenistic story, how does Joseph learn of Asenath’s transformation? Why would this updated story include this piece of information? By adding the angel to the story, what message(s) would the tale’s authors convey to those hearing the story, and why would they want to do so?
 - c. Green notes that later midrashic traditions also modified the Joseph and Asenath story. What is the midrashic version of this tale? Genesis 34 portrays Dinah, son of Jacob, as having been raped by the Canaanite Shechem. What moral and theological messages can you “unpack” from the midrash? What sociological and tribal messages as well? What purpose(s) are served by their presence in the midrashic version of the story?
3. Read *Another Contemporary Reflection* by Judy Schindler on pages 255–56.
- a. Review the history of patrilineal and matrilineal descent in Judaism, as explained by Schindler in this essay. How does Schindler’s take on this history add to or challenge what you already knew about the determination of a child’s Jewish status throughout Jewish history?
 - b. Although Judy Schindler does not elaborate, why do you imagine that in the post-biblical era children no longer received Jewish status through their fathers but through their mothers? What would such a halachic change have accomplished or made possible? Who would be most affected by this legal change and why?
 - c. Summarize the reasons and rationale behind the 1983 Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) decision. What are the criticisms of this decision? What arguments support this decision?
 - d. The 1983 vote essentially took a number of important factors—history, tradition, egalitarianism, and demographic reality—and created a new prioritization of them. By implication, which factors are now privileged? Which have become less important? In your view, how do you weigh these factors and compare them to one another? Are there other factors that you would add to the list? How would you prioritize them and why?
 - e. What personal experiences have you had with the issue of patrilineal versus matrilineal descent? What consequences have you seen of this CCAR decision? In what ways do you think that they have had an impact on individuals, families, or congregations/ Jewish communities with which you are familiar?
4. In *Voices*, read “Asenath’s Plea to Her Husband Joseph” by Sherry Blumberg on page 258. (In this poem, Blumberg references the previous parashah, *Vayeishev*, in which Joseph’s jealous brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. In the next parashah, *Vayigash*, the brothers are joyfully reunited, and Joseph forgives them for their actions of twenty years earlier.)
- a. This poem can be read as a midrash on Genesis 41:45, that is, a reading into and an

expansion of the biblical text. What does this midrash-poem add to the Genesis story? To your opinion of Asenath? List all of the character motivations, thoughts, and emotions expressed in the poem that expand the original tale.

- b. Given what you know of the biblical characters as they are described in the biblical text, do you find the poem “convincing”?
- c. In the poem Asenath says, “When in the future / Your sons are remembered / Please do not deny me” and “I am the daughter of a priest / And I am your wife.” Do these lines impact your thinking about the CCAR resolution on patrilineal descent? If so, how and in what ways?
- d. Think of an event in your life that you expanded or elaborated upon in a later retelling, by creating a “midrash” on it. What was the original event? Why did you add your own midrash to it? What changed as a result of your doing so? Under what circumstances do you think that creating a midrash is a useful thing to do? In your view, are there—or ought there to be—any limitations on doing so? If so, what are they?

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. Everyone dreams. What does it mean to you to have a part of yourself so out of your conscious will and control? How much and in what ways do you think that people should use this human phenomenon? What are the potential benefits? What are the dangers?
2. When you were growing up, were you exposed to individuals not like you, people of different races, religions, ethnic groups, or socioeconomic status? Looking back, what do you think the impact was on you of having either little contact or a great deal of contact with “others”? How did your experiences shape you as the person you are today? How have you chosen to manage such contacts in your adult life?

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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