

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Naso Numbers 4:21 - 7:89

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Parashat Tzav Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: The Ordeal of the Woman Accused of Adultery (The *Sotah*)

Theme 2: Maintaining Community Sanctity through Religious Leaders

Theme 3: Women, Men, and Communal Impurity

Introduction



Understanding the place of the book of Numbers in the larger biblical narrative helps contextualize the material in *parashat Naso*. In her introduction to the first parashah, *B'midbar*, Rachel Havrelock helps situate the books of the Torah in relation to one another. She notes that “Exodus concludes with a magisterial description of the Tabernacle and the priests” (p. 789). Leviticus follows this description with the laws necessary for the Israelites to safely negotiate the boundaries between Divine and human. Numbers begins with a return to the topic of the Tabernacle. The unifying theme of Numbers is the question of social organization that will allow the people of Israel to function with the Tabernacle at its core. Havrelock remarks that the storyline as a whole “reflects a tension between order and chaos, culture and nature, obedience and rebellion” (p. 789). The stories and laws contained in Numbers reflect that ongoing tension within the Israelite camp as they travel to the Promised Land.

In her introduction to this *parashah*, Amy Kalmanofsky observes that *parashat Naso* “focuses on the Israelite cultic structures” that will maintain the purity of the camp as a whole throughout the journey (p. 815). Among these structures is the service of sanctified people such as the *nazir* and the priest, as well as rituals meant to restore purity to the camp once a threat to proper functioning has been perceived. This includes the ritual of the *sotah*, in which a husband accuses his wife of adultery and a public ordeal ensues. Some interpret this ritual as a way to ensure a return to correct relations between a husband and wife, thereby preserving the continuity of the main family unit in ancient Israel. *Parashat Naso* describes women in two very different positions: the sanctified *nazir*, whose dedication to God maintains the purity of the camp as a whole, and the *sotah*, a woman put through a public ordeal based on nothing more than her husband’s suspicion. Kalmonofsky asserts, “Read together, these figures inform, challenge, and broaden our perceptions of women’s roles within the religion and society of ancient Israel” (p. 815).

Suggestions for 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 on page 815, and/or survey the outline on page 816. 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 a 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 Ordeal of the Woman Accused of Adultery (The *Sotah*)



Numbers 5:11–31 describes the ritual of a wife whose husband accuses her of adultery. Although according to biblical law the punishment for adultery was death (Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22), this ritual does not sentence the accused woman to death, even if she is found guilty. In the situation described in *parashat Naso*, there are no witnesses to the wife's supposed indiscretion. The only evidence against her is her husband's suspicion and the outcome of the ordeal. The trial of the *sotah* (a rabbinic term used to refer to the case) is, as Amy Kalmanofsky notes, one of "the most enigmatic passages in the Torah," with a range of potential interpretations (p. 821). She adds, "The question 'Whom does the ritual protect, the suspicious husband or the accused wife?' receives no easy answer" (p. 822).

1. Read Numbers 5:11–15.

- a. In what situation would the trial of the *sotah* be used?
- b. Amy Kalmanofsky posits that the biblical *sotah* ritual may be an example of a "trial by ordeal" (p. 821).
 - i. What is a "trial by ordeal"?
 - ii. What other evidence in the region exists of this type of trial?
- c. How does the *sotah* ritual account for the possibility of the innocence and guilt of the woman?

2. Read Numbers 5:16–26.

- a. What steps are involved in the process of the *sotah* ritual?
- b. Who are the active participants in the *sotah* ritual?
- c. What role does the woman play in the ritual?

3. Read Numbers 5:27–31.

- a. What is the result of the ritual if the woman is guilty?
- b. What happens to the man with whom the wife committed adultery?
- c. What is the result if the woman is innocent?
- d. Read Kalmanofsky's note on Numbers 5:31. In what ways does she suggest that the ritual actually protects the wife?
- e. In your opinion, does this ritual defend the rights of the husband or the wife? Explain your answer.

4. Read Sharon Keller's *Another View* (p. 836), in which she offers an alternative reading of the *sotah* ritual.
 - a. What does Keller believe is the real issue that would provoke a man to put his wife through the *sotah* ritual?
 - b. What in the text does Keller use to support her assertion?
 - c. How does Keller's interpretation differ from Kalmanofsky's?
 - d. Which interpretation do you find more compelling?
5. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation to Numbers 5:12 (pp. 836–837).
 - a. How did the Rabbis limit the ritual of the *sotah*?
 - b. There is an entire tractate of the Talmud dedicated to the ritual of the *sotah*. What does this fact say about the rabbinic mindset with regard to the ritual of the *sotah*?
6. In the Contemporary Reflection, Lisa J. Grushcow notes that Rabbi Rebecca Alpert offers “a valuable model for confronting such troubling teachings” (p. 838). In Rabbi Alpert's model, the reader can either try to interpret the text within the context of its time, wrest new meaning from the text, or simply acknowledge the pain the text has caused.
 - a. Which of these three approaches does Grushcow take?
 - b. How does this approach shape her reading of the *sotah* ritual?
 - c. Which approach seems to you to be the most fruitful to apply to this particular text? Explain why.
7. Read “I am Accursed” by Lisa Levine (p. 840).
 - a. In what type of relationship does Levine imagine a man would resort to the *sotah* ritual?
 - b. How does Levine understand the effectiveness of the ritual in this type of relationship?
8. Read “The Butcher's Wife” by Shelley Savren (p. 841).
 - a. In what way does this poem relate to the themes found in *parashat Naso*?
 - b. To what extent does the woman in this poem seem repentant? Explain your response.
 - c. How does comparing this poem with the biblical text enhance your understanding of the biblical ritual?

Theme 2: Maintaining Community Sanctity through Religious Leaders



In her introduction to *parashat Naso*, Amy Kalmanofsky writes, “Whereas Leviticus typically focuses on the ritual purity of the sanctuary, Numbers is concerned with maintaining the purity of the camp as a whole” (p. 815). It is within the context of maintaining the group's purity that the roles of the *nazir* and the priest can be best understood. The *nazir* is an individual who dedicates herself or himself to God. The Bible distinguishes between the lifelong *nazir*, such as Samson (Judges 13–16) and Samuel (I Samuel 1), and the temporary *nazir*, who is discussed in this *parashah*. The priests maintain the Tabernacle, which serves as the physical and spiritual center of the camp. By maintaining a functional sacrificial system, the priests ensure God's continued presence in the Tabernacle and a sense of order by which the Israelites can live. The *nazir*

and the priest are both seen as individuals with great power who enhance and maintain communal sanctity.

1. Read Numbers 6:1–8 and 6:21.

- a. What are the major stipulations of the *nazirite* vow?
- b. Who can take a *nazirite* vow?
 - i. According to the note to Leviticus 6:2 (p. 826), how can a vow that a woman makes be cancelled by her husband or father?
 - ii. What conclusions can you draw about women's position in biblical society in light of the fact that they are able to take the *nazirite* vow, but their vow can be nullified by a father or husband? (For additional information about women and vows, see the commentary on Numbers 30 in *parashat Matot*.)
- c. Amy Kalmanofsky compares the *nazir* and the priest with regard to their prohibitions against imbibing intoxicants and participation in the burial of family members. How do these comparisons highlight the purity necessary for both of these roles?
- d. How could the extra level of purity represented by the *nazirite* vows of only a few people affect the purity of the camp as a whole?

2. Read Numbers 6:13–16.

- a. What steps are necessary for the completion of an individual's term as a *nazir*?
- b. Would you consider the *nazirite* vow a public or private act? Explain.
- c. Amy Kalmanofsky draws a comparison between the role of the priest in the completion of the *nazirite* vow and in the ordeal of the *sotah*, in which a husband accuses his wife of adultery. How do the priestly roles compare in these two situations? What contrast does Kalmanofsky point out between the roles of women in each situation?

3. Read Numbers 6:22–27, the text known as the Priestly Blessing.

- a. What benefactions does this blessing promise to the people?
- b. Analyze the structure of each of the three lines of blessing (verses 24–26).
 - i. What do the three lines have in common?
 - ii. How does their structure support Amy Kalmanofsky's comment that "God's blessing expands" in the course of this passage (p. 829)?
- c. The Priestly Blessing follows the conclusion of the information regarding the *nazir*. What connection do you see between the two?
- d. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation to Numbers 6:23 (p. 837).
 - i. What role does the priest play in transmitting the blessing?
 - ii. Where was the blessing originally recited?
- e. These words are still recited today.
 - i. Have you heard these words recited or recited these words yourself? If so, in what context?
 - ii. When we recite these ancient words today, what do they mean to you? What blessings do you pray that God will bestow upon us?

4. Read "A Blessing" by Leila Gal Berner.

- a. How does the structure of this rewritten blessing compare to the biblical Priestly Blessing? How does it contrast?
- b. To what extent does the name used for God affect how you experience this blessing? Explain.

Theme 3: Women, Men, and Communal Impurity



Numbers 5 contains a list of what appear to be unrelated cases in which a member of the camp contracts impurity. That list reflects “a concern for communal purity” (p. 819) that marks the narrative in Numbers. Kalmanofsky asserts, “In Leviticus and Numbers, women often figure prominently in discussions of impurity. Therefore, it is no surprise that women are mentioned in each of the cases described in Numbers 5” (p. 819). The Israelite community lives with the reality that despite the functioning Tabernacle at the center of the camp, the community is still likely to fall victim to physical and spiritual impurity. We will examine two categories of the impure: the blameless, and the person who betrays another. We will also examine the role gender plays in each of these situations.

1. Read Numbers 5:1–4.
 - a. What sort of impurity does this passage address?
 - b. How is someone with this condition treated?
 - c. Kalmanofsky notes that with this impurity, “individuals . . . are blameless” (p. 819). How does the text reflect this?
 - d. According to the comment on verse 3, what does Kalmanofsky suggest the term “male and female” denotes? What is the difference between sexuality as opposed to gender categories?
2. Read Numbers 5:5–7.
 - a. What is the sin involved in this situation?
 - b. How is the person brought back into a correct relationship with the community and God?
 - c. Amy Kalmanofsky notes that the language “move[s] away from the clinical language used in the preceding section” (p. 820). According to Kalmanofsky, why does the use of “men and women” fit better in this context than “male and female”?
 - d. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation for Numbers 5:6 (p. 836).
 - i. What is unique about verse 5:6?
 - ii. How do the Rabbis expand the meaning of that verse, creating a more general equality for men and women with regard to punishment?
3. Read Lisa J. Grushcow’s Contemporary Reflection, from “Some modern scholars assume” to the end of the piece (pp. 838–839).
 - a. What reason do the Rabbis give to explain the disappearance of the *sotah* ritual?
 - b. How does this reason reflect the rabbinic understanding of the situations that produce change in the world?
 - c. How does this understanding differ from a modern understanding of what produces change?

- d. What situations remain uncomfortable in your religious communities? What changes have been made in order to address those issues? What more is left to be done?

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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