

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Nitzavim DEUTERONOMY 29:9-30:20

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Parashat Nitzavim Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Sinai Redux—We're All in This Together

Theme 2: The People's Choice—To Live or Die in the Promised Land

INTRODUCTION



Moses' words in *parashat Nitzavim* contain the majority of his third and final speech to the Israelites assembled on the steppes of Moab as they make their final preparations for entering the Promised Land. Moses, their leader since the Exodus from Egypt, will not be permitted to enter Canaan with them (Numbers 20:12). Like a parent who wants to make certain that his children have internalized his guidance before venturing out into the world, Moses implores the people to observe the covenant they made with God at Sinai. This covenant, should they heed its teachings, will provide them with life and prosperity. Yet turning away from God and God's Instruction (*mitzvah*) will result in terrible consequences, both for the Israelites and the land. Moses cautions the people not only against overt violations of the covenant, but concealed ones as well. Concealed transgressions, although hidden from others, have the potential to damage the entire community. Moses specifies that Israel's covenant with God includes everyone—tribal leaders, women, children, and even those resident non-Israelites who perform the most menial tasks. Moses depicts this Instruction—so vital for the people's well being—as easily understandable and attainable by all.

It is fitting that *parashat Nitzavim* is the last Torah portion we read prior to Rosh HaShanah. The themes of *t'shuvah*, renewal, choosing life, and a recommitment to the covenant by everyone in the community resonate throughout this parashah. *Parashat Nitzavim*, one of the Torah readings for Yom Kippur in the Reform *machzor*, helps us enter into the spirit of the Days of Awe and reminds us that we, too, stand before God—reflecting on our lives and on how we can better live according to God's Teaching (*torah*).



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 1217–18 and/or survey the outline on page 1218. 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: SINAI REDUX—WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER



Parashat Nitzavim opens with a ceremony that echoes the Israelite's initial acceptance of the covenant (*b'rit*) made with God at Sinai (Exodus 24:1–8). Whereas in the ancient Near East the term “covenant” usually refers to a compact between a monarch and his subjects, in the Bible the word *b'rit* most often refers to a divine charter between God and human beings. Much like a renewal of wedding vows, the covenant ceremony in this parashah reminds each party of its obligations under the terms of the *b'rit*. While the initial ratification of the covenant does not specify who is included in “the people,” the covenant ceremony here makes clear that this charter is binding on everyone, regardless of gender or station in the community. Abiding by the rules of the *b'rit*, including the avoidance of transgressions concealed in the “willful heart” (Deuteronomy 29:18), is critical for the well-being of the people.

1. Read Deuteronomy 29:9–14, which describes the covenant ceremony in which the people participate prior to entering the Promised Land.
 - a. How would you characterize the types of people listed in verses 9–10 as standing before God at the covenant ceremony? How does the description of those standing before God in verses 9–10 differ from the way Exodus 19:9–13, 24:3, and 24:7—verses that also deal with the covenant—describe the people included in the covenantal relationship with God?
 - b. In the Exodus texts (see previous question), the people prepare for and then receive God's revelation at Mount Sinai. The language used in these Exodus texts to describe the Israelites does not explicitly state that women were included in the revelation at Sinai. Although the covenant ceremony in these Deuteronomy verses differs from the revelation at Sinai, how does the phrase “all of you” (Deuteronomy 29:9) address the question of whether women, too, received God's revelation at Sinai?

- c. What do you think is the significance of the order in which the text lists the various groups in Deuteronomy 29:9–10? What does this suggest about the importance of the covenant?
 - d. What do the three groups listed in verse 10 have in common? How does the mention of the two kinds of laborers in this verse help you to understand the scope of the covenant?
 - e. What do verses 13–14 add to your understanding of who is bound by this covenant? In your view, what does it mean to make the covenant with those who are present as well as with those who are not present “this day”? As you think about your own connection to the covenant and to the Jewish people, what do these verses mean to you?
 - f. In your view, why is the relationship between God and the people mentioned in verse 12? What is the role of this relationship in establishing the covenant?
2. Read Deuteronomy 29:15–20, which describes the possibility of the people committing concealed offenses and the judgment that will ensue.
- a. In your view, why does Moses remind the people of the “detestable” (v. 16) practices of other nations that the Israelites witnessed on their journey from Egypt? Why do you think the biblical author mentions these practices at this point in the narrative?
 - b. Compare the list of those who might turn away from God (v. 17) and those who stand before God at the covenant ceremony (vv. 9–10). In your view, what accounts for these differences?
 - c. How do you understand the phrase translated as “whose heart is even now turning away from our God *YHVH*” (v. 17)? Verse 18 describes one who turns against the covenant as following “my own willful heart.” According to the Central Commentary on verse 17, how did the authors of the biblical text understand the heart? Which of these views best fits the context of these verses? Look at verse 28; how does the verse differentiate between those who are responsible for judging concealed versus overt acts? In your opinion, why is the text concerned both with visible transgressions as well as hidden thoughts and intentions?
 - d. The text compares those who commit concealed offenses to “stock sprouting poison weed and wormwood” (v. 17). One of these plants is poisonous; the other has a sharp taste. How does this metaphor help you to understand the concern the biblical author is addressing in this verse?
 - e. According to verses 19–20, who are the recipients of the divine wrath and judgment that follow individual concealed transgressions?

What does this suggest about how the biblical text views the relationship between these transgressors and their impact on the community?

3. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Gwynn Kessler on pages 1228–29 (“You stand this day . . .” and “with those who are standing here with us . . .”).
 - a. Midrash *Kohelet Rabbah* 1.12 states that Deuteronomy 29:9–10 should have been placed at the beginning of Deuteronomy (after 1:1), since that section contains the opening of Moses’ first farewell address to the people as they stand poised to enter the Promised Land. What is the impact of placing 29:9–10 here? The authors of this midrash use the rabbinic dictum that the Torah does not follow a chronological order as a basis for suggesting this change. What does this rabbinic dictum bring to our understanding and interpretation of Torah? What challenges does it present for those who prefer to understand Torah in a chronological order?
 - b. How do the Rabbis connect Moses’ words in 29:14 to the revelation at Sinai (Exodus 20)? In your view, why was it necessary to make this connection? What do you think the Rabbis were trying to do in *Sh’mot Rabbah* 28.6 when they address the absence of the verb “standing” in the second part of Deuteronomy 29:14?
 - c. BT *Sh’vuot* 39a uses Deuteronomy 29:13–14 to teach that all future generations of Israel, including converts, were at Sinai. If you—or someone you know—is a convert to Judaism, what does this interpretation mean to you?
 - d. Although rabbinic traditions concerning who stood at Sinai do not explicitly refer to women, how does *Sh’mot Rabbah* 28.2 use Exodus 19:3 to affirm the presence of women there? According to this midrash, why does God address women first in the Exodus text? What are the reasons, in your view, that the authors of this midrash constructed this interpretation?
4. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Dianne Cohler-Esses (pp. 1230–31).
 - a. Over the last half-century, feminist scholarship has shown that the Bible is an androcentric work that reflects a time during which men controlled many central aspects of life. In what ways might these views de-legitimize Torah as a source of meaning and authority for women? In what ways can the potentially redemptive elements in the biblical text highlighted by more recent scholars help make the Torah a sacred book for women as well as for men?
 - b. According to Cohler-Esses, what deep covenantal principles does Deuteronomy 29:9–11 contain that can be used to further the creation of a non-patriarchal, feminist view of Judaism?

- c. How does Cohler-Esses use the traditional concept that “the Torah spoke in the language of human beings” to understand the world in which the biblical authors lived and its impact on the biblical text?
- d. According to Cohler-Esses, how can we use the Torah’s teaching that the covenant is made not only with those who stood with Moses in Moab, but with future generations as well (29:13–14), to forge our own relationship with the Torah?
- e. How does the text gain its *k’dushah* (“holiness”), according to Cohler-Esses? What are the consequences if women fail to participate in the “sacred conversation” about the meaning of Torah?
- f. What challenges do you experience in connecting to the Torah? In your view, how can contemporary women understand and find meaning in a sacred text that reflects the inequities of a patriarchal society?

THEME 2: THE PEOPLE’S CHOICE —TO LIVE OR DIE IN THE PROMISED LAND



Moses emphasizes that God’s teaching (“the Instruction,” or *mitzvah*) is not only easily understandable by the people but readily accessible to them. Rather than being a set of sacred teachings intelligible only to a priestly class, Moses describes this Instruction as so close to the people that it is in their very beings. It is this clarity and nearness that make it possible for the people to observe the Instruction. In placing the Instruction before the people, Moses presents them with a clear choice. Loving God and walking “in God’s ways” will bring life and prosperity. Turning away from God and God’s Instruction will bring death and adversity, both to the people and to the land they are about to enter.

1. Read Deuteronomy 30:11–14, which describes the proximity of God’s teaching.
 - a. How would you characterize the language used to describe “this Instruction” (*hamitzvah hazot*) in verses 11–14? What do these depictions have in common? How does the biblical author’s choice of language emphasize the proximity of God’s teaching?
 - b. How does the description of God’s “Instruction” (v. 11) contrast with the idea of wisdom as “hidden from the eyes of all living” (Job 28:21, 42:2–3) or “elusive and deep” (Ecclesiastes 7:24; Proverbs 30:2–4, 30:18–20)?
 - c. In your view, what does it mean that “this Instruction” is not “beyond reach” (Deuteronomy 30:11)?
 - d. The heavens, according to the biblical perspective as well as Mesopotamian literature, are the abode of God and therefore beyond human ability to reach. How does verse 12, therefore, reinforce the accessibility of God’s Instruction? What do you think is the intent behind the use of the

first-person plural in the questions in verses 12–13? What impact does it have on you?

- e. What does it mean for God’s Instruction to be “very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart” (v. 14)? What is the relationship between the Teaching (torah) being in one’s mouth and heart and observing it? How does this phrase amplify the immediacy of God’s teaching in the text? For you today?

2. Read Deuteronomy 30:15–20, which contains Moses’ final words on the covenant and the consequences of abiding by or turning away from its teachings.

- a. What are the choices that Moses places before the people in verse 15? How do you understand Moses’ pairing of life with prosperity and death with adversity?
- b. What are the three things Moses commands the people to do (v. 16)? In your view, why are all three necessary?
- c. In verses 16 and 18 Moses links the people’s actions to the land they are about to enter. What do you think is the reason for making this connection? How does this association relate to the covenant God makes with the people?
- d. What is the relationship between the people’s stance toward God and the kind of life they will have in the Promised Land?
- e. How do the phrases “Choose life” and “For thereby you shall have life” in verses 19–20 demonstrate the close connection between action and reward?
- f. The verb “to live” (*ch-y-h*) and the noun “life” (*chayim*) occur six times in this passage (vv. 15, 16, 19, 20). How does this repetition emphasize Moses’ message to the people?
- g. The verbal root *d-b-k*, translated in verse 20 as “holding fast,” also appears in Genesis 2:24, where it describes the close bond between the first man and woman. What does the use of this verbal root here suggest about the relationship between God and Israel?
- h. How does this passage present the consequences of obedience versus disobedience to God’s Teaching and what will ensue from each choice?

3. Read the Another View section by Elsie R. Stern (p. 1228).

- a. According to Stern, how does the free-will paradigm of Deuteronomy 30:15–20 lead the biblical authors and modern historians to different conclusions about historical events such as the conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel and the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah?
- b. Stern points out that the notion of free will in these verses is mostly theoretical, as its exilic or post-exilic authors already knew what choices

the people made. If Israel was in exile, then Israel had made the wrong choice—disobeying God. How does this perspective change the choices and challenges that face the people? What is the other view of history that this generates?

- c. How do Deuteronomy and other biblical texts understand free will, according to Stern? How does this differ from contemporary understandings of free will?
4. Read “Mikveh Mayim” by Ona Siporin, in *Voices* (p. 1234).
 - a. What is the connection between the image of the island in the poem’s first line and the action in the poem’s second line? In your view, what does the island represent in relationship to Deuteronomy 30:19–20?
 - b. What is the connection between diving so deeply that “no grasp is possible” and the phrase “you know what you own”?
 - c. Can you describe moments in your own life when you were “close, close to the knowledge beyond you”? What was the significance of those moments for you?
 - d. How do you think the images of water and heavens in this poem compare with those in Deuteronomy 30:11–14 that describe the proximity of God’s Instruction?
 5. Read “Torah” by Barbara D. Holender, in *Voices* (p. 1234).
 - a. What prevents the poet from fully grasping, seeing, tasting, and breathing in Torah in the poem’s first four stanzas?
 - b. What transpires in the poet’s heart and mind in the fifth stanza that makes her able to begin to understand Torah?
 - c. What does Holender teach us we must do in order to begin to understand Torah?
 - d. If you have held or helped wrap and dress a Torah scroll, what were these experiences like for you? What feelings did you have when you first looked at the words in the Torah scroll? If you have chanted Torah, what impact did this experience have on you?
 - e. What do you think is the connection between Holender’s poem and Deuteronomy 30:11–14? What role does the heart play in this connection?

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

As you study these parts of the *parashah*, consider the following overarching questions. If time permits, conclude the study session with these broad questions:

1. *Parashat Nitzavim* stresses that transgressions that are concealed are just as much God's concern as those committed overtly and just as destructive to the community. Can you think of contemporary examples of the deleterious impact on society of those whose hearts "turn away from our God" to follow their own "willful" hearts (Deuteronomy 29:17–18)? In what ways can the biblical text's emphasis on concealed transgressions guide our own lives?
2. Moses describes God's Instruction as "not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach" (30:11). Which aspects of Torah are most comprehensible to you and within your reach? Which parts of Torah are difficult for you to understand? What do you do with these sections of the Torah?

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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