

# STUDY GUIDE

## *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

### *Parashat Noach*

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#### *Parashat Noach* Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Transgression and Divine Response

Theme 2: Renewal Following the Flood

Theme 3: The Role of Women in *Parashat Noach*

## Introduction



*Parashat Noach* is part of the ongoing story of the first eleven chapters of Genesis that focuses on humanity and its potential. In the introduction to *Parashat Noach* in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Tamara Eskenazi observes: “The stories express a conviction that God persists—despite repeated disappointments—in (re)adjusting expectations in response to human limitation.” She aptly titles this parashah, “Beginning Again.”

When the narrative commences, human behavior has become so corrupt that God has decided to bring a flood to destroy the earth and then to start again with Noach, a man “righteous in his generation,” and his wife and children. After the waters recede, the people disobey God, building the tower of Babel in an attempt to reach heaven. Again God punishes the people, creating linguistic divisions between them. These stories of rebellion and divine rebuke provide a backdrop for the ancestral stories of Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah, the progenitors of Israel introduced at the end of the parashah. Immediately we learn of Sarai's barrenness, which poses a threat to God's promise that Abraham will spawn a great nation.

This study guide will explore three main themes in this parashah: the relationship between human transgression and divine response, renewal following the Flood, and the role of women in this parashah.

## Suggestions for Getting Started

Before turning to the biblical text and the questions presented below, use the introductory material in the *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 p. 35, and/or survey the outline on p. 36. 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.

# Theme 1: Transgression and Divine Response



## A. What Prompted God to Bring the Flood?

1. From what you can recall of the biblical story, what prompted God to bring about the Flood?
2. Read Genesis 6:9–13; also see Genesis 6:5–8, at the conclusion of the prior parashah. According to these verses, why did God decide to wipe all flesh from the earth?
3. According to the comment on Genesis 6:11, what types of actions are implied by the word “violence”? For examples of this type of behavior, see Genesis 4:8, 23–24; 6:1–4.
4. Tamara Eskenazi draws out a number of parallels between the biblical flood story and similar ancient Near Eastern tales (see the introduction to Genesis 6:9–9:29 on p. 37 and her comment on 6:11–7:23). How does the reason for the Flood in Genesis compare with the Babylonian flood stories? How does the comparison influence your own understanding of the flood story?
5. If God asked for your opinion before opening up the floodgates, what advice would you give? How might you have responded to “the wickedness of human beings on earth” (Genesis 6:5)?
6. Read paragraphs 2–3 of Carol Ochs’s Contemporary Reflection, on p. 55.
  - a. What are some of the answers that have been proposed to why God flooded the earth?
  - b. How does Carol Ochs answer the question, “What sin had the people committed to warrant the Flood”?
  - c. How does Carol Ochs’s answer compare to Tamara Eskenazi’s explanation in the Central Commentary (see the introduction to Genesis 6:9–9:29 and the comments on Genesis 6:11–13)?
  - d. Do you agree with these understandings of the cause of the Flood? Why or why not?

## B. The Tower of Babel

1. Read Genesis 11:1–9, which contains the second account of human rebellion in this parashah.
  - a. What motivated the people to build a tower (see vv. 3–4)?
  - b. Why did the tower displease God (see v. 6)?
  - c. How does the punishment (vv. 8–9) relate to the crime (vv. 2–4)?
  - d. According to Tamara Eskenazi, what does this story accomplish (see the introduction to 11:1–9 on p. 49)?
  - e. What other lessons do you draw from this story?

2. In the outline for *Parashat Noach* (p. 36), Tamara Eskenazi labels both the Tower of Babel

and the Flood “Transgression and Divine Response.” In what ways are these two episodes similar? How do they differ?

3. Read “Scatter Us in the Sea” by Zoë Klein (p. 58).
  - a. According to the excerpt by Zoë Klein, why did the people build the tower?
  - b. How does her interpretation compare to the reason given in the biblical text?
  - c. How does the story of the Flood shape her reading of the Tower of Babel?
  - d. In what way does Zoë Klein defend the building of the Tower of Babel? Do you agree or disagree with her?
  - e. Can you give an example of another generation that revolted in response to a disaster in the prior generation?

## Theme 2: Renewal Following the Flood



1. Read Genesis 8:15–22.
  - a. The biblical text does not tell us how the survivors felt when they disembarked from the ark. How do you think Noah and his family felt at this point?
  - b. Read “Family Reunion” by Shirley Blumberg (p. 57). What emotions does Shirley Blumberg fill in for those who came ashore?
2. Read “Noah” by Rivka Miriam (p. 58).
  - a. According to this poem, what does Noah do with the ark after the Flood?
  - b. What insight does the poem give as to how Noah may have felt after the Flood?
  - c. To what extent can you relate personally to Noah’s impulse to keep the ark close at hand after the Flood?
  - d. How does Rivka Miriam’s understanding of the emotions attached to surviving the Flood compare to Shirley Blumberg’s?
3. Read Genesis 9:1–17.
  - a. List the commandments God gives to the survivors of the Flood.
  - b. What patterns or themes can you detect in this list?
  - c. According to Tamara Eskenazi’s comment on 9:1–7, what is the aim of these new instructions?
  - d. Tamara Eskenazi points out that “later rabbinic tradition expanded the laws in this section into seven ‘Noachite laws’ that are binding upon all humankind” (p. 44). These laws are generally thought to include: prohibitions against (1) idolatry, (2) blasphemy, (3) bloodshed, (4) incest and adultery, (5) robbery, (6) eating flesh cut from a living animal, and (7) the injunction to establish courts of law. How does your list compare to that created by the Rabbis?
4. Read “How Much Water Is Inside a Tear” by Zoë Klein (p. 58).

- a. Zoë Klein compares the biblical flood to the modern disaster of Hurricane Katrina. In what ways can you relate the biblical story to modern catastrophes like Katrina?
  - b. How do these modern examples help you relate to the biblical story?
  - c. What are some of the potential limitations of this comparison?
5. Read “Open Earth” by Clarisse Nicoïdski (p. 58).
- a. How does Clarisse Nicoïdski envision the earth in this poem?
  - b. To what extent does this poem expand your understanding of the effects of the biblical flood?
  - c. How might this poem contribute to contemporary discussions about the earth?

## Theme 3: The Role of Women in *Parashat Noach*

### A. Unnamed and Named Biblical Women



1. Read Genesis 6:9–10.
  - a. What do you notice about who is mentioned in these verses and who is not mentioned?
  - b. Read Tamara Eskenazi’s comment on v. 10.
  - c. According to Tamara Eskenazi, why is the mother of Noah’s three sons not mentioned?
  - d. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Genesis 6:18 (pp. 53–54). According to the Rabbis, what was Noah’s wife’s name? What evidence do they cite to reach this conclusion? What name might you give her and why?
  - e. Who are some of the other unnamed women in the Torah?
  - f. How does the fact that these women remain unnamed affect how you read or respond to the Bible?
2. Read Genesis 7:7; 8:15, 18.
  - a. How does the description of Noah and his family compare in these three verses?
  - b. See Tamara Eskenazi’s comment on Genesis 8:15. What observation does she make about the difference between the list in 8:15 and in 8:18 and 7:7?
  - c. What are the implications of the different ways the wives are listed in these verses?
  - d. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Genesis 7:7 (p. 54). What do the Rabbis conclude about the relationships between men and women during and after the Flood based on the different wording in these verses?
3. Read Genesis 10:1–7 and the comment on Genesis 10:1.
  - a. According to Tamara Eskenazi, why do biblical genealogies usually list only the men?
  - b. Compare Genesis 10 to Exodus 6:14–25. What is different about the genealogy in Exodus?

- c. What evidence does Tamara Eskenazi cite to prove that “women must have been integral to Israelite kinship” (p. 47)?
4. Read “Parashat Noach” by Elaine Glickman (p. 57).
- a. Who is the speaker in this poem?
  - b. What female characters does the poet add that we do not read about in the biblical account?
  - c. How does the poet’s description of the nine-year-old girl influence your impression of what it might have been like for Noah’s family as they prepared for the Flood?

## B. Sarah’s Barrenness

1. Read Genesis 11:27–32 and the comment on this unit (p. 51).
- a. What do we learn about Abram and Sarai in this passage?
  - b. According to Tamara Eskenazi, what is the significance of the fact that in v. 31 the text identifies Sarai as both “daughter-in-law” and “wife of Abraham”?
  - c. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Genesis 11:29 (p. 54). Who is Yisrah? Why do the Rabbis link her with Sarai?
  - d. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Genesis 11:30 (p. 54). The Rabbis believe that no word in the Bible is superfluous. Therefore, what meaning do they draw from the fact that Sarah’s barrenness is mentioned twice in Genesis 11:30? Why is this important to our understanding of the problem of barrenness shared by so many of the women in Genesis?
2. Sarai is one of several barren women in the Bible (also see Genesis 25:20–21 and Genesis 29:31).
- a. Read Tamara Eskenazi’s comment on Genesis 11:30. What role does God play in Sarah’s condition? How does the present verse compare to the description of Sarah in Isaiah 51:2?
  - b. Read Carol Meyers’s “Another View” essay on p. 53.
    - i. According to Carol Meyers, why would a woman’s inability to produce children have been particularly threatening in the ancient world?
    - ii. What were some of the solutions used by the ancient Israelites when faced with infertility? What do you think would have been the emotional implications of each solution?
    - iii. Infertility persists as an important issue today. To what extent is the problem—and its potential solutions—similar to and different from that faced by our biblical ancestors?

## Closing Questions

1. What new insight into the Torah did you gain from today's study?
2. What new personal insights did you gain from this study?
3. What questions are you left with?



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