

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat T'tzaveh Exodus 27:20–30:10

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Parashat T'tzaveh Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: The Presence of Absence: Women's Potential Place in the Tabernacle

Theme 2: Women's Role in the Religious Life of Israel

Introduction



Parashat T'tzaveh (“you shall instruct”) builds on the previous parashah’s instructions regarding the building and furnishing of the Tabernacle, referred to in Hebrew as the *Mishkan*. According to Carol Meyers, the Tabernacle aims to provide the Israelites “assurance of God’s constant accessibility and availability” (p. 451). The Tabernacle represented an earthly residence of God, a way for the people to sense that God “may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8).

Parashat T'tzaveh shifts the focus from the building itself to the priestly garments, especially the clothing of the high priest Aaron. Since Aaron will be physically closest to the invisible presence of God in the Holy of Holies, his clothes must carry the same level of sanctity as the materials used to construct the shrine. The parashah also describes the ordination of the priests, a necessary step before the Tabernacle can begin to function. In addition, the parashah provides information about the sacrifices that will take place there.

This study guide will focus on two themes in *Parashat T'tzaveh*: (1) the role women may have played in outfitting the shrine and its priests and the larger theme of the “presence of absence”; and (2) the exclusion of women from the Israelite priesthood and its ramifications in ancient Israel and in contemporary times.

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 p. 473, and/or survey the outline on p. 474. This will allow you to highlight some of the main themes in this portion and help participants situate the section 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 material in the Central Commentary. This will help you in your efforts to answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.



Theme 1:

The Presence of Absence: Women's Potential Place in the Tabernacle



In her introduction to *Parashat Tzaveh*, Carol Meyers notes that “the wealth of detail about Aaron and his sons provides a stark portrayal of how males dominated the communal sacred lives of the ancient Israelites” (p. 473). Reading through the five Torah portions in the book of Exodus focused on the construction of the Tabernacle and establishment of the priesthood (*T'rumah, Tzaveh, Ki Tisa, Vayak'heil, and P'kudei*), women appear to be largely absent from this aspect of biblical Israel. However, historical, archaeological, and textual evidence suggests various ways in which women may have functioned behind the scenes in the building and functioning of the *Mishkan*. This section of the study guide will explore those roles, as well as the broader topic of the “presence of absence” introduced in the Contemporary Reflection.

1. Read Exodus 27:20–21, which commands the Israelites to provide olive oil for the *ner tamid* that will hang in the Tabernacle. The *ner tamid* in the Tabernacle is a lamp that is kindled “regularly,” as opposed to the perpetually lit lamps of the same name that hang in synagogues today (see the comment on 27:20, “regularly”).
 - a. Read Carol Meyers’s comment on 27:20, “clear oil of . . . olives.”
 - i. What are the qualities of olive trees that make them a fitting symbol of fertility?
 - ii. Psalm 128 promises that the person who fears God and follows God’s ways will receive the following blessing: “Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house; your children, like olive saplings around the table” (Psalm 128:3). What does this psalm mean when it compares a man’s wife and children to vines and olive trees? How would you summarize what this blessing entails?
 - b. Read Carol Meyers’s comment on 27:20, “beaten.”
 - i. If, as Carol Meyers proposes, women produced olive oil in ancient Israel, what does this information suggest about the role women may have played in the provision of oil for the *ner tamid*?
 - ii. Do you find her suggestion convincing? Why or why not?
 - c. Elsewhere in the long details about the design, construction, and maintenance of the shrine, the text explicitly notes that both men and women were expected to contribute (Exodus 35:22, 29, and 36:6), yet here, women are not named. Why do you think women are named in some places, but not in others?
2. Read Carol Meyers’s introduction to the “Instructions about Priestly Vestments (28:1–43)” (p. 476).
 - a. Carol Meyers compares the Tabernacle and its priests to “palaces . . . [that] had coterie[s] of servants.” In what way are the priests like servants? Why were their garments so important?
 - b. While women are not explicitly identified in Exodus 28 as having a role in the making of the priestly vestments, Carol Meyers asserts that “it is likely that they were

responsible for producing the sacral garments.” This idea will be explored further in the following series of questions.

3. Read Exodus 28:1–8.
 - a. According to this passage, who is responsible for making the priestly garments?
 - b. Read the comment on 28:3 (“all who are skillful”).
 - c. To further explore who is considered “skillful,” read Exodus 35:25–26 and Carol Meyers’s comment on “skilled women” and “spun with their own hands...spun” (p. 527).
 - i. Do you think this biblical passage and the archaeological evidence from ancient Israel and the ancient Near East supports Carol Meyers’s assertion about Exodus 28? Why or why not?
 - ii. What are some examples of women playing unseen roles in the functioning of the synagogue in more recent times? How does this compare and contrast with their role in the Tabernacle’s functioning?
4. Just as women’s role in the fabrication of the priestly garments is hidden in Exodus 28, Lisa D. Grant’s Contemporary Reflection points out that “*T’tzaveh* is the only parashah from the beginning of the book of Exodus until the end of Deuteronomy where the name of Moses does not appear” (p. 491). Lisa D. Grant links this to God’s apparent absence in the book of Esther, which we usually read the week following *Parashat T’tzaveh*.
 - a. Read from “Regardless of the reaction that Moses may or may not have experienced” to “can step forward to serve the broader needs of the community” (the last paragraph on p. 491 through its completion p. 492).
 - i. How does Lisa D. Grant argue that Moses was present despite his name’s absence from the text?
 - ii. Why does she suggest it was necessary for Moses to temporarily step out of the limelight?
 - iii. How is Moses’ absence comparable to the women’s unnamed activities in the Tabernacle? How is it different?
 - b. Read from “*Parashat T’tzaveh* paints a picture” through “the constant striving to live in its light” (last paragraph on p. 492).
 - i. How does Lisa D. Grant interpret the details provided for the Tabernacle and its priests?
 - ii. To what extent can we transfer the lessons Lisa D. Grant teaches about “the presence of absence” to how we read, or do not read, women’s roles in our people’s history?
 - iii. According to Grant, what reminds us of God’s constancy despite God’s invisibility? How does this relate to your personal experience?
5. Laura Lieber notes in the Post-biblical Interpretations that, “over time the ritual of the Temple lamp was transferred to the home. Thus, Mishnah *Shabbat* 2:1 offers instructions for

kindling Shabbat lights, which 2:6 then characterizes as a specifically female commandment. Yannai read those Mishnaic passages back into Exodus, linking the priestly rules for maintaining the Tabernacle's lights with women's command of *hadlakat nerot*, kindling lamps" (p. 490).

- a. Select one of the Voices poems about lighting candles (p. 493) to read and discuss.
- b. How do these poems counter the absence of women in this parashah and make women present?
- c. To what extent do these poems help you link your own personal experiences to the biblical text?

Theme 2: Women's Role in the Religious Life of Israel

The biblical text is unambiguous in its instructions: "They shall make those sacral vestments for your brother Aaron and his sons, for priestly service to Me" (Exodus 28:4). Only Aaron and his sons will serve as priests to



God in the Tabernacle, not men from any other familial line and not women. This section of the study guide will explore possible reasons for this rule, what religious roles were left in the hands of women, and how women's status was affected by this rule.

1. Read Hilary Lipka's Another View (p. 489).
 - a. Summarize the five theories that have been used to explain the absence of female priests in the Israelite shrine.
 - b. Upon what basis does Hilary Lipka challenge each of these theories?
 - c. Do you find any of these theories to be compelling? Why or why not?
2. Hilary Lipka concludes, "Women probably had more roles in local sanctuaries than the Bible records." To understand how she reaches this conclusion, read Exodus 38:1–8 (from *Parashat Vayak'heil*), which discusses the building of the Tabernacle courtyard, and Carol Meyers's commentary on v. 8 (p. 536).
 - a. Exodus 38:8 is translated as "women who performed tasks at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting." Even though the Hebrew does not contain the word "women," Carol Meyers asserts that "those who were doing service" were in fact women. What types of role might women have fulfilled in the Tabernacle?
 - b. What evidence does Carol Meyers cite to back up her assertion?
 - c. If women may have performed various functions in the Tabernacle, why do you think the Torah does not elaborate on those roles?
 - d. How does this information about the potential place of women in the sacred service color your reading of this parashah?
3. The Temple has not functioned for over two thousand years. The religious leaders of the people of Israel are now rabbis, a position that was reserved for men until not much more than a generation ago.
 - a. Do you remember a time when women could not be clergy? How did that reality

- shape your understanding of women's leadership or the role of women in the Jewish community?
- b. Read "from Letter to Mala Laaser, 1938" (p. 494) by Regina Jonas, the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi.
 - i. What drove Regina to be ordained?
 - ii. Why does she believe that "as long as there are questions, something is wrong"?
 - iii. How does Laaser see her becoming a rabbi as a fulfillment of God's will?
 - c. Read "from Women Who Would be Rabbis," by Pamela S. Nadell, about the ordination of Sally Priesand, the first woman ordained by a seminary.
 - i. In what ways does Sally Priesand's ordination represent a "benchmark for those crusading for gender equality in Judaism"?
 - d. Do you believe that the role of clergy, both male and female, has changed since women have been ordained? How so?
 - e. Do you believe that the status of women in the Jewish community has changed since the ordination of women? Why and how so, or why not? What remains left to be accomplished?

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 are you left with?



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