

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Va-eira

Exodus 6:2–9:35

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Parashat Va-eira Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: We Were There—The (Quiet) Women of *Va-eira*


Theme 2: Who Am I? God Defined and Self-Defined

Introduction



Parashat Va-eira contains some of the most dramatic and best-known stories in the Bible. Faced with an unyielding and stubborn Pharaoh, God unleashes seven “signs,” “marvels,” and “wonders” to convince the Egyptian ruler that resistance to God ultimately will be useless. Commonly known as “plagues,” these scourges wreak havoc on the land and its people and demonstrate to Egyptians and Israelites alike God’s ability to bend the laws of nature to the divine will and purpose. (The final and decisive three “plagues”—locusts, darkness, death of the first-born—come in the next parashah, Bo.) Yet behind the fantastic drama lies a story of human beings and their recognizable and very human emotions: Moses, the insecure, reluctant prophet (Exodus 6:12), and Pharaoh, alternately defiant (Exodus 7:13) and chastened and demoralized (Exodus 9:27). An overarching theme is the reassurance of God’s power and God’s eternal protection of the people Israel.

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 331. 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: We Were There—The (Quiet) Women of *Va-eira*



In this parashah, we find four “quiet” women, that is, female characters—two named (Jochebed and Elisheba) and two unnamed (the Canaanite woman and Putiel’s daughter)—whose presence is subtle and whose significance muted. (Yet, interestingly, each is important enough to be the subject of later rabbinic discussion.) A close and careful reading of the biblical text reveals a richness and depth to each of these characters. Neither warriors nor rulers, neither defiers of God nor God’s chosen messengers, each in her own distinctive way makes an essential contribution to the narrative. These women’s presence raises intriguing and important questions: What is the role of mothers in the shaping of a (male) hero? What is the place of foreign women—outsiders—in an ethnic group’s national story? How far can the mixed offspring of such unions rise within a group to which they only partly belong? As both the Jewish and the non-Jewish worlds grapple with these issues today, the contemporary reader is reminded of the enduring challenges and difficulties of these matters, no less important now than they were in the time in which these stories were first told.

1. Read the genealogical listing in Exodus 6:14–25, which follows immediately after God instructs Moses and Aaron to deliver the Israelites from Pharaoh and Egypt.
 - a. Who are the four women mentioned in these verses? To whom is each woman related?
 - b. Read the Central Commentary on Exodus 6:15. According to Rachel Havrelock, what is the challenge presented by “individuals of mixed origins”? What does the mention of Saul in this verse imply about the relationship between Israelites and their neighbors? By giving this character the name of a future king of Israel, what message might the text be conveying?
 - c. Go back to the previous parashah, *Sh’mot*, and read Exodus 2:1–3, the story of Moses’ birth and early infancy. Now read Exodus 6:20. Both sections tell about Moses’ mother, but only in the latter is she mentioned by name. Why do you think her name was omitted in the first story? Read the Central Commentary on Exodus 6:20. What might the name Jochebed signify? Given the meaning of her name, what might be the significance of specifying it here, at this point in the Exodus story?
 - d. Who is Elisheba? According to the Central Commentary on Exodus 6:23, what are some possible meanings of her name, and what significance is suggested by each meaning?
 - e. The Central Commentary on Exodus 6:25 notes that Putiel is an Egyptian name. Now, read Deuteronomy 23:8–9. What is the status of the offspring of the Egyptians? What do you think was the rationale behind this ruling, and what are its implications?
 - f. Read the Central Commentary’s introduction to Exodus 6:14–25 on page 335. According to Carol Meyers, quoted here, what political message is subtly woven into the text here? Who benefits? Who might have been responsible for the inclusion of this information about Aaron’s family members?
2. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein on pages 349–50.
 - a. In the comment on Exodus 6:20, Urowitz-Freudenstein notes that Numbers 26:59 elaborates on the relationship between Moses’ parents, Jochebed and Amram: Jochebed

is Amram's aunt. For the Rabbis, what problem did this relationship pose? How did the Rabbis "resolve" the problem? What does this "resolution" suggest to you about the relationship that the Rabbis had to the biblical text?

- b. According to the comment on Exodus 6:23, what is unusual—and significant—about the listing of Aaron's wife, Elisheba? What are all the relationships by which she is described in the text? How does *Vayikra Rabbah* 20.2 expand on the depiction of Elisheba in Exodus? Why do you think that this midrash goes to such lengths to place Elisheba by name at the center of such significant biblical events?
- c. The Babylonian Talmud conflates the character of Elisheba with that of one of the heroines of the Exodus story, the midwife Puah (*Sotah* 11b). Urowitz-Freudenstein explains that the midwives Shifrah and Puah described in *parashat Sh'mot* become a team composed of Jochebed and Miriam or Jochebed and Elisheba in other rabbinic writings. In other words, the character of Jochebed is expanded and enlarged in several places in rabbinic writings, but her status is derived through her association with male characters. What examples can you think of in contemporary life of women who are held in high esteem through their husbands/fathers/sons/brothers rather than by virtue of their own achievements? Can you think of examples in which men are accorded high status through their female relatives?
- d. According to Urowitz-Freudenstein's comment on Exodus 6:25, how did the Rabbis explain the unusual description of Eleazar's wife as one of Putiel's daughters (plural) rather than daughter (singular)? Following the rabbinic model, think of a straightforward story about some aspect of your own life. Now, create a midrash on this story by expanding and elaborating on small details, finding subtle connections or relationships within the story, and/or conflating characters with others. What layers of meaning does your midrash add to your story? What lessons or values could you teach from your midrash that you would be unable to do using only your original story? What insight does this exercise give you as to how the Rabbis read biblical texts?

3. Read "Elisheba Speaks" by Sue Levi Elwell in *Voices* on page 354.

- a. How does the poem depict Elisheba? How does this depiction compare to how the biblical text and rabbinic writings describe her?
- b. In the poem, what does Elisheba "know" that Aaron does not? Why do you think that Elisheba keeps this information from him? What does the poem imply about their relationship?
- c. The Elisheba narrator of the poem suggests that both she and Aaron "serve the Source of All" but in separate ways. In the poem, how do they each do so? Can you identify ways in which you "serve the Source of All"?
- d. Think of the poem as a midrash on Exodus 6:23. What does this midrash add to the biblical story?
- e. In the last line of the poem, Elisheba says, "Thus we each serve the Source of All." Write your own last line of the poem and insert it in place of the line above. How does your line change the meaning of Exodus 6:25?

Theme 2: Who Am I? God Defined and Self-Defined



Woven through the Bible is the enduring question: Who or what is God? Here, in this section of *parashat Va-eira*, God provides some answers. This parashah defines God in at least three ways: by name, by deed, and by relationship with both Israelites and non-Israelites. Going well beyond the biblical text, the Kabbalistic notion of the *Shechinah*, discussed in the Contemporary Reflection, significantly expands the ways in which we can perceive and experience God. This section of the study guide also invites students to think about how they themselves are “known.”

1. Read the beginning of parashat Va-eira, Exodus 6:2–9, and then go back and read the end of the preceding parashah, Sh’mot, Exodus 5:19–6:1, in which Moses complains to God about what is happening to his people.
 - a. What is the situation in Exodus 5:19–6:1 that prompts God’s address to Moses in 6:2–9?
 - b. Read the Central Commentary on 6:2 by Rachel Havrelock. What is the difference between how God self-identified to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and how God addresses Moses in this section? What do you think might account for this difference?
 - c. Havrelock points out that Genesis 14:22, 15:2, and 16:5 contradict God’s statement here to Moses (“But I did not make Myself known to them by My name”). Why would God misrepresent this information to Moses? What theological messages might be derived from God’s statement to Moses?
 - d. What are the different meanings of El Shaddai? What divine qualities or traits does each name convey? Which do you prefer and why?
 - e. How does one of these meanings—breast—influence your own conception of God? Does it enhance or expand it, or constrict or disturb it?
 - f. In addition to revealing the divine name to Moses, God self-identifies by means of a list of divine actions, past, present, and future. What are these actions? Can you identify any themes that run through and unify these various acts?
 - g. Read the Central Commentary on Exodus 6:7. Havrelock explains that the biblical language used to describe the relationship between God and Israel is similar to that used in the Bible to describe marriage. What are some words or phrases that you would use to describe a marriage between two people? In what ways might they also reflect your ideas about the God-human relationship? How might you use these words or phrases to enhance or enrich how you feel about your own relationship with God?
2. Read the Another View section by Naomi Steinberg on page 349.
 - a. Steinberg notes that in *parashat Va-eira* God reveals God’s self in two ways: by disclosure of the divine name and through acts that determine human history. According to Steinberg, what are the implications of the divine name here, and what do they tell Moses—and the reader—about God?

- b. What do the “signs and wonders” suggest about Israel’s God, especially vis-à-vis Pharaoh? According to Steinberg, what is the significance of ten “plagues,” as opposed to just one or two?
 - c. Imagine that you have been asked to write a midrash on this part of the parashah in which you ascribe both another name and different actions by which God becomes known to the Israelites and the Egyptians. What would your name for God be, and what qualities does it ascribe to God? In your midrash, how does God act in history, and what do these events reveal about God’s power and priorities?
 - d. Think about the ways that you “reveal” yourself. What does your name tell about you? Do you think that your name is an accurate reflection of who you are? Have you ever wanted to change your name? If so, what name do you think would better represent you and why?
 - e. Now think about your actions. What do your characteristic behaviors or activities reflect about you? Do you think that there are parts of yourself that remain undisclosed? What are they? Would you like these qualities to be better known? If so, what would you need to do to accomplish this?
3. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Sharon Koren on pages 351–52.
- a. What is the *Shechinah*? According to Koren, in the first paragraph of this essay, what are the *Shechinah*’s distinctive qualities? How do they compare to those ascribed to God in *parashat Va-eira* (Exodus 6:2–9)?
 - b. How does the *Zohar* expand and enhance the relationship of the *Shechinah* and human women, particularly mothers? How does the *Zohar* use the symbol of the *gufa* (the body) to facilitate and justify this connection?
 - c. Koren notes that “many Jews understand Kabbalah to be the only haven for gender equality in rabbinic Judaism. Unfortunately, this is not the case.” What does Koren point to as the ways in which the Kabbalistic depiction of the *Shechinah* belies the notion of such gender equality?
 - d. According to Koren, there are a few places in Kabbalistic thought that lend themselves to a more sympathetic feminist reading, specifically the depiction of the *Shechinah* as a caring mother who gives birth to the Torah tablets. How does this picture of a lactating *Shechinah* affect your ideas about God?
 - e. What other female qualities or characteristics would you ascribe to the *Shechinah* in order to develop and enhance your sense of comfort or connection with her—and, therefore, with God?
4. Read “I Spread Out God’s Names in Front of Me” by Rivka Miriam in *Voices* on page 353.
- a. The poet cites ten significant times in her life, each of which called forth from her a different name for God. Think of ten similarly significant events in your life, and then create a name for God appropriate to each of those times. What do the names you chose for God reflect about the meaning of those events in your life?

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. Who are the people in your life who are “quiet”? That is, are there individuals who exert an influence on you but in nondramatic, less than obvious ways? What is the nature of their influence, and how is it made manifest? Who are the people for whom you are a “quiet” influence?
2. What are names, manifestations, or images of God that “work” for you? What images of God are off-putting, distancing, or a source of estrangement?

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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