

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Va-y'chi Genesis 47:28-50:26

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Parashat Va-y'chi Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Jacob Prepares for Death—Ensuring Legacy through Blessing

Theme 2: Jacob's Burial Instructions—Ensuring Legacy through Place

Introduction



Parashat Va-y'chi, the last parashah in Genesis, marks the end of the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs and foreshadows the Exodus narrative of slavery and freedom. In this portion, Jacob—the last of the patriarchs—nears the end of his life and concerns himself with his legacy and the continuity of his family. Prior to his death, Jacob adopts Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and he bestows a deathbed blessing to his twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin. Ten of his sons, together with Ephraim and Manasseh, will go on to become the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob's focus on the future extends to the land, as seen in his instruction that he be buried with his ancestors in the cave of Machpelah in Canaan, rather than in Egypt, where he and his family have been living for seventeen years. Jacob's blessing of his sons and instructions for his burial in Canaan suggest a future in which the family will be united in the Promised Land.

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 281 and/or survey the outline on page 282. 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: Jacob Prepares for Death—Ensuring Legacy through Blessing



As he nears death, Jacob reiterates God's promises to Abraham of progeny and land (Genesis 12:1–3, 12:7, 15:18), and he incorporates these promises into the blessings he bestows on his sons. These blessings remind Jacob's sons of their connection to their ancestors and their roles in the family's future. Jacob's blessings recall the family's unique relationship with God and its responsibility in carrying out God's promises to Abraham. As the family looks toward an uncertain future in Egypt, Jacob's blessings emphasize the importance of family continuity in making God's promises a reality.

1. Read Genesis 48:1–7, which describes how Joseph brings his sons Ephraim and Manasseh to the bedside of the dying Jacob.
 - a. What is the promise that Jacob reiterates in verse 4? What is the relationship between this promise and Jacob's adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh (v. 5)?
 - b. In your view, why is it necessary to create an etiology for how Ephraim and Manasseh came to be tribes? According to the Central Commentary, what realities does the late retrojection of Genesis 48 reflect?
 - c. In verse 7, Jacob recalls the death of his beloved wife Rachel. In your view, why does the text mention Rachel at this point? What is the relationship between this mention of Rachel and Jacob's moving Ephraim and Manasseh to his own genealogical list? How does later biblical tradition view Rachel (see Jeremiah 31:15–16 and Central Commentary on Genesis 48:5)?
 - d. Compare the description of Rachel's death and burial in Genesis 48:7 to that in Genesis 35:16–20. What additional information about the place of Rachel's burial do we learn in 48:7? What is the significance, in your view, of this additional information?
2. Read Genesis 48:8–20, which describes Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh.
 - a. How is Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh also a blessing of Joseph?
 - b. In your view, how do the words of Jacob's blessing (vv. 15–16) connect Ephraim and Manasseh (and Joseph) to the earlier ancestors (*avot*)? What is the significance of this connection?
 - c. How does Jacob's blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh recall the confusion regarding the bestowal of blessing and birthright on Jacob rather than Esau (Genesis 25:29–34; Genesis 27)? How do Jacob's actions in giving Ephraim the blessing of the first-born son echo the theme of the younger supplanting the older in Genesis? How does the story of Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29:26) reverse this theme?
3. Read Genesis 49:1–12 and 49:22–26, in which Jacob blesses his sons.
 - a. How do verses 3–4 describe Reuben? What is the significance of Jacob's statement that Reuben "mounted your father's bed"? What is the connection between this verse and Reuben's actions earlier in his life (see Genesis 35:22)? How might this explain why Reuben, although the first-born son of Jacob, does not become an important tribe?
 - b. How are Simeon and Levi described in 49:5–7? What accounts for this description? According to the Central Commentary on verse 7, why does Jacob say that he will "disperse" Simeon and Levi "in Jacob"? How does this prediction by Jacob reflect the future of Simeon and Levi as separate tribes?

- c. Compare Jacob's blessings of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi (vv. 3–7) with his blessing of Judah (vv. 8–12). What, in your view, accounts for the differences between the blessings?
 - d. In 49:22–26 Jacob bestows his blessing on Joseph. Note the various names for God in verses 24–25. What aspects of God do these names evoke? What do you think is the effect of the different divine epithets in these verses?
 - e. What is Jacob's message in verses 25–26?
 - f. What is the relationship between the blessing Joseph receives and that of "my parents' blessings" (v. 26)?
4. Read the comment on "blessing each one" in Post-biblical Interpretations by Dvora E. Weisberg on page 298.
- a. Review Genesis 49:5–7, Jacob's blessing of Simeon and Levi.
 - b. According to Weisberg, how can these harsh words be interpreted as a blessing?
 - c. Can you think of an experience in your own life when you were the recipient of criticism or harsh words that turned out to be a blessing?
5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Laura Geller on pages 299–300.
- a. According to Midrash *B'reishit Rabbah* 98:4, what is Jacob's foremost concern as he blesses his twelve sons (Genesis 49)? How do Jacob's sons respond to this concern in the midrash? In Geller's view, how do we relive this moment and to what do we pledge ourselves each time we say the *Sh'ma*?
 - b. According to Geller, what it is about Ephraim and Manasseh that warrants blessing our sons in their names today? What other theories can you offer in addition to Geller's that might explain why we bless our sons in their names?
 - c. Although Jacob has a daughter (see Genesis 30:21), only Jacob's sons receive his blessing. What is your reaction to the fact that Jacob's daughter does not receive a blessing from her father?
 - d. Geller notes that in recent centuries, both girls and boys receive a blessing from their parents every Shabbat evening and on the evenings of holidays. According to Rabbi Richard Levy, how might we explain the different language in the blessings for girls and boys?
 - e. What kinds of blessings did your grandparents give you? If you are a grandparent, what kind of blessings do you hope to give your grandchildren?
6. Read "Jacob Blesses Dinah" by Sue Levi Elwell in Voices on page 301.
- a. How do the blessings Jacob gives Dinah in the last stanza compare with those Jacob gives his sons in Genesis 49?
 - b. What do you think might have motivated the author to write this poem?
 - c. Why, in your view, does Jacob "wrestle" with the words for Dinah's blessing? How does the word "wrestle" call to mind Jacob's wrestling with God in Genesis 32:25–31?
 - d. What is the relationship between "Did you raise your voice" and "Your cries were not heard" in verse 5? How do these two phrases relate to Jacob's wrestling in verse 1?
 - e. In the last two lines of the poem's first stanza, Jacob says that he was afraid when "blood flowed through the streets of Shechem." How does Jacob's reaction here compare with his reaction in Genesis 34:5 and Genesis 34:30?
 - f. In the poem's third stanza, Jacob compares Dinah to her mother, Leah. How is Leah described in Genesis 29:17? How do Dinah and Leah both embody "clarity of vision"?

Theme 2: Jacob's Burial Instructions—Ensuring Legacy through Place



Jacob's desire to be buried with his ancestors in the cave of Machpelah stresses the importance of the family's burial tradition and underscores the family's tie to the land God promised Abraham. It is Jacob's dying wish that his family, with God's help, will return to the land of their ancestors.

1. Read Genesis 47:29–31, which describes Jacob's initial instructions to Joseph regarding his death.
 - a. What two things does Jacob emphasize about his burial in these verses? In your view, why does Jacob emphasize these things?
 - b. To better understand this passage, read Genesis 25:9 and 35:29. What do we learn from these verses regarding who should bury a father? How does Jacob's summons of Joseph contradict this tradition? What do you think accounts for this departure?
 - c. What are the elements of the swearing that Jacob requires of Joseph? How does this compare with the swearing Abraham requires of the servant he sends to find a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:2–3, 24:9)?
2. Read Genesis 49:28–33, in which Jacob gives detailed instructions about where he is to be buried.
 - a. To whom does Jacob address his instructions in 49:28? How does this differ from 47:29–31?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary, what is the significance of the phrase "All these are the twelve tribes of Israel" (49:28)? How does this language, along with Jacob's deathbed blessings, justify or explain the future of each tribe?
 - c. Where does Jacob want to be buried? What is the significance of this place (see Genesis 23:3–20)? What is the connection between this place and Jacob's ancestors?
 - d. Why, in your view, is it important to Jacob that he be buried in the land of Canaan?
 - e. How do Jacob's instructions about where he is to be buried appeal to family continuity and unity?
 - f. What role do the deceased matriarchs play in Jacob's instructions? How do they help provide family continuity?
 - g. What are the promises God makes to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3 and 13:14–17? How does the location of the ancestral burial place serve as the first step in the fulfillment of these promises?
3. Read Genesis 50:1–13, which describes the funeral and burial of Jacob.
 - a. In verses 4–6 Joseph addresses Pharaoh's household regarding Jacob's burial. Compare these verses to 47:29–30 and 49:29–32, which also contain Jacob's burial instructions. What are the differences in the wording in these three sections? What, in your view, accounts for these differences?
 - b. Compare Joseph's language regarding the oath he swears to his father in 49:5 with the language of 47:29–31. What is the effect of the changes in wording in this verse?
 - c. How does the Hebrew word *kariti* in 49:5 (translated here as "acquired"; literally "dug" or "prepared") reflect the importance to Jacob of the location of his grave? What is the significance of Joseph's use of this word in his request to Pharaoh?
 - d. According to the Central Commentary, what was the role of women in the "solemn lamentation" (v. 10)? What are some of the biblical and ancient Near Eastern sources

for a seven-day mourning period? What is the relationship between this ancient mourning period and the custom of shivah still practiced today?

4. Read the Another View section by Elizabeth Bloch-Smith on page 297.
 - a. What functions did the ancestral tomb at the cave of Machpelah serve in addition to providing a burial place for the matriarchs and patriarchs?
 - b. How does the ancestral burial cave of Machpelah conform to interment practices in the Hebron region in pre-Israelite times? What do we know about these burial practices?
 - c. According to Bloch-Smith, what does the presence of grave goods in pre-Israelite times suggest about beliefs about what happens to the dead? What is the possible role of female figurines associated with the fertility goddess Asherah found in pre-Israelite interment sites?
 - d. What do we learn from Deuteronomy 18:11 and 26:14 and I Samuel 28 about ancient Israelite beliefs in the continuing powers of the dead?
5. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Dvora E. Weisberg on pages 297–98.
 - a. According to the comment on 47:29, what question does the phrase “treat me with faithful kindness” (*chesed v’emet*) raise? How does *B’reishit Rabbah* 96:5 interpret this phrase? What meaning does Jewish tradition give *chesed v’emet* in our actions toward the dead?
 - b. Read the comments on 48:7, “Rachel died . . . on the road.” In verse 7 Jacob mentions that he buried Rachel on the roadside, rather than in the ancestral burial cave of Machpelah. Earlier in this parashah (47:29–30) Jacob insists that Joseph bury him in the ancestral burial plot, but he does not mention Rachel. How do the commentators answer the question of why Jacob does not mention Rachel’s burial until 48:7?
 - c. How does rabbinic tradition interpret the Hebrew phrase *metah alai Rachel* (literally “Rachel died on me” or “. . . upon me”) in 48:7?
6. Read “Leah’s Last Words” by Sherry Blumberg in *Voices* on page 302.
 - a. In the poem’s first stanza, how does the poet imagine Leah’s feelings about the ancestral burial cave?
 - b. To what does Leah refer in the poem’s third stanza when she states that Joseph will return Jacob “not to Rachel’s side, but to mine” (see Genesis 29:15–28)?
 - c. In the poem’s third stanza Leah thinks of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah. These women bear the children of patriarchs (Abraham and Jacob) but are not part of the family’s continuity. Leah states that “death puts to rest all jealousy and fear.” Can you think of a situation in your own family that gave rise to such emotions? To what extent was this situation then “put to rest” when the individuals involved died?
 - d. How is the cave of Machpelah “holy ground,” according to the poet?
 - e. How do the graves of your loved ones become “holy ground” for you?

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. Jacob's deathbed blessings of his sons (Genesis 49:1–33), along with Moses' final instructions to the Israelites before his death (Deuteronomy 32:46–47), are the biblical bases for the Jewish tradition of writing an ethical will. An ethical will gives parents an opportunity to pass on to their children the lessons they have learned in life and the values by which they hope their children will live their lives. What are your reactions to the idea of writing an ethical will? What values did your parents pass on to you? How have you transmitted these values to your children?
2. The death of a grandparent or parent often raises concerns about family continuity and traditional practice, as we see in this *parashah*. How have these concerns come up in your own family around the death of a grandparent or parent?

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?



The Torah: A Women's Commentary

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