

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Vayigash Genesis 44:18–47:27

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Parashat Vayitzei Study Guide Themes


Theme 1: A Study in the Human Capacity for Growth

Theme 2: The Silent Role of Tamar in Judah's Evolution

Theme 3: Sibling Rivalry and Reconciliation

Theme 4: The Role of Women in the Text

Introduction



Parashat Vayigash is the third of four Torah portions in the so-called “Joseph story cycle,” the drama centered on Joseph, his brothers, and their father, Jacob. By the end of the second portion, *parashat Mikeitz*, Joseph has risen to a place of prominence in Pharaoh’s court, due in part to Joseph’s ability to correctly interpret Pharaoh’s dreams and prepare the Egyptian population for the drought. With a famine in Canaan, Joseph’s brothers travel to Egypt to buy food. Joseph recognizes them as soon as they enter the royal court, but they do not recognize him. Joseph, who was powerless to protect himself when his brothers sold him into slavery, now has all the power: his brothers literally are bowed at his feet.

In her introduction to *parashat Mikeitz*, Naomi Steinberg notes that the portion ends with the question, “Is this family doomed to relive a violent past, or will it show that transformation and growth are possible?” (p. 233). *Parashat Vayigash* answers this question with a resounding yes: people can change. While it is true that Jacob seems to have repeated the mistake of choosing a favorite child, his oldest son, Judah, demonstrates a vast shift in character by offering to be imprisoned instead of Benjamin, who stands accused of theft. His actions demonstrate that at this point in his life, he is more concerned for his father’s emotional well-being than he is for his own physical security. Joseph, meanwhile, forgives his brothers’ betrayal, and in an emotional scene of revelation, he invites his brothers to relocate to Egypt and live under his protection. The brothers and their families accept Joseph’s generosity and move down to Egypt.

This study guide will focus on four main themes in *parashat Vayigash*. The first theme explores the biblical texts’ understanding of the capacity for human change. Actors in this biblical narrative demonstrate marked differences in their behavior from earlier biblical narratives and these changes illuminate the biblical understanding of change. The second theme, The Silent Role of Tamar, explores the role of a character not

explicitly mentioned in our *parashah*. The connection between this *parashah* and earlier material is made explicit in this theme. The third theme investigates biblical depictions of a reality that still affects our lives today, namely sibling rivalry. Finally, the fourth theme explores 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 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. 259 and/or survey the outline on p. 260. This will allow you to highlight some of the key themes in this portion and help students to situate the section they are going to study within the larger *parashah*. Also, remember that when the study guide asks you to read biblical text, take the time to read the associated material in the Central Commentary. This will help you in your efforts to answer the questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text. Each theme in this study guide is designed to take 60–90 minutes and is meant to be explored independently. Choose the theme that you find the most compelling.

Theme 1: A Study in the Human Capacity for Growth



Parashat Vayigash narrates the story of a family reunion. Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers years earlier, reappears as a potential savior just when his family faces the crisis of famine. Joseph finds himself in a position of power over his brothers and thus is perfectly positioned to take his revenge. Joseph seems tempted to do so. He insists they bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, into Egypt when they had left him with his father. Once Benjamin arrives, Joseph has him framed for stealing (Genesis 44). The moment of truth is when Joseph has achieved total control over his family's fate. Will he take his revenge? Or will he forgive the past?

Joseph breaks free of the family's pattern of behavior and welcomes them into Egypt. Thus he takes on the role of provider. In her introduction to this *parashah*, Naomi Steinberg quotes Robert Alter, who notes that these role changes help the biblical writer examine "what it is like...to be a human being with divided consciousness—intermittently loving your brother but hating him even more..." (p. 259). Naomi Steinberg notes that events in the *parashah* present "a study in the human capacity for lasting change" (p. 259). This theme will allow the reader to explore the Bible's understanding of the possibility for change and allow for comparison to the reader's life.

1. Read Genesis 44:18–34 in which Judah pleads with Joseph, whom he has not yet recognized, to not imprison Benjamin, the favorite son of his father, Jacob.
 - a. How would you characterize Judah's attitude toward Joseph?
 - b. What does this speech reveal about Joseph's relationship with Benjamin and their father, Jacob?
 - c. Go back and read Genesis 37:25–27, where Judah actively participates in the brothers' plot to get rid of Joseph. What does Judah propose? How do you understand his suggestion?
 - d. Compare the representation of Judah in both of these speeches. How are they similar? In what ways do they differ? How would you characterize the change in

Judah, and to what would you attribute it?

2. When Judah pleads for his brother's freedom, he provides possible insight into his father, Jacob's, character. He states, "We have an aged father and a young boy of his old age, whose [full] brother is dead. He alone was left of his mother, and so his father loves him [all the more]" (Genesis 44:20). Note that the words in brackets are translator's additions meant to help clarify the Hebrew. Naomi Steinberg's commentary offers a challenge to the translator's reading, arguing, "the Hebrew can be understood to suggest that Jacob loves only Benjamin" (p. 261) and that Judah's acceptance of this state of affairs is the crux of the biblical drama.
 - a. What are the implications of the two different translations with regard to Jacob's relationships with his sons?
 - b. How does each translation affect how you understand Judah's offer to stay in the place of his brother?
 - c. How does Jacob's repeated behavior of choosing a favorite among his sons complicate the idea that lasting change is possible?
 - d. How would you characterize Judah's behavior toward his father? How would you explain his behavior, especially in light of Jacob's limitations as Judah's father?
3. Go back and read Genesis 37:5–11.
 - a. How does Joseph dream he will one day relate to his brothers?
 - b. How would you characterize the relationship amongst the siblings at that moment in the text?
4. Compare Joseph's dream in Genesis 37:5–11 to the reunion in chapter 44.
 - a. In what ways did the dream come true?
 - b. What about the dream has not come true?
 - c. What does Joseph do to demonstrate a fundamental shift in the relationship?
5. Summarize what you have discussed thus far in your studies.
 - a. What indications have you seen that the brothers have matured, both in relationship to each other and their father?
 - b. Are these changes marked more by speech or by action?
 - c. Is it through speech or action that true change is more visible in this *parashah*?
6. Miriyam Glazer's Contemporary Reflection questions the assumptions that change is always for the better and that closure is possible. Read from "Thanks to the 'self-help' industry" through "If we are lucky, life 'tenderizes' the heart, gives us hearts not of stone but of flesh" (p. 277).
 - a. What is Miriyam Glazer's definition of change?
 - b. How is it different from simply moving on or getting over an incident?
 - c. How does this compare to the type of change you see characterized by the brothers in *Vayigash*?
7. In her introduction to the *parashah* Naomi Stenberg argues that the *parashah* "presents a study in the human capacity for lasting change" (p. 259).

- a. What do you believe about the possibility for lasting change in human behavior?
 - b. What reasoning leads you to this understanding?
8. Reflect on your initial answer to question 7.
- a. What is the biblical text's message about the possibility for change?
 - b. How does the biblical portrayal of change compare to your own initial answer about change?
 - c. Has your answer changed at all as a result of this study?

Theme 2: The Silent Role of Tamar in Judah's Evolution



In this *parashah*, Judah demonstrates a true change of character. Initially he was the brother who recommended selling Joseph into slavery (Genesis 37:25–27) in order to rid the brothers of their father's favorite son and make some money. Now faced with the possibility that Jacob's second favorite son will be imprisoned, Judah selflessly offers to serve in Benjamin's place. Judah seems to have grown in his capacity to love, empathize with his father's pain, and act on others' behalf regardless of the personal cost. Naomi Steinberg points out that "while not mentioned in this *parashah*, Tamar has been a pivotal figure in Judah's own growth. Their encounter in Genesis 38 best accounts for Judah's new capacity to sympathize with his father" (p. 259). This section will explore the effect Tamar has had on Judah, which will in turn shed light on the role unnamed characters often play in biblical narrative. Exploring this theme will involve comparing different sections of the *parashah*. The texts will include those that focus on Judah's current relationship with his father and brothers, with a look back at his earlier relationships with them, and then the ways in which the narrative account of Tamar interrupts these two sections and helps explain the drastic change in Judah's relationships.

1. Go back to Genesis 37:25–27.
 - a. What role did Judah play in Joseph being sold into slavery?
 - b. Describe Judah's character in this part of the narrative. (Make a list.)
2. Read Genesis 38:1–11, in which Judah marries a Canaanite woman and finds appropriate matches for his children.
 - a. To whom does Judah marry his first child, Er, and what happens in that marriage?
 - b. Why does Judah marry his second child, Onan, to Tamar once his oldest son has died? (See the commentary on Genesis 38:8 for background that will be helpful in answering this question.)
 - c. Why does Onan refuse to impregnate Tamar? What happens to him as a result?
 - d. What does Judah do to prevent his third son, Shelah, from having the same fate as his older brothers? What does this refusal tell you about Judah's personality? (Make a list.)
3. Read Genesis 38:12–23.
 - a. What does Tamar do once she realizes that she is not being given to Judah's youngest son, Shelah, to marry?
 - b. What does she take from Judah as a guarantee of his future payment? Read the

Central Commentary on verse 18 (p. 218). What do these items represent?

4. Read Genesis 38:24–30.

- a. Why does Judah demand that Tamar be burned when it is discovered she is pregnant?
- b. How would you characterize the way Judah initially responds to the revelation of Tamar’s pregnancy? (Add your answers to the list you are keeping of Judah’s character traits.)
- c. How does Tamar challenge her father-in-law’s charge against her?
- d. Judah recounts his demand to have Tamar burned saying, “She is more in the right than I, for certainly I did not give her to my son Shelah” (Genesis 38:26).
 - i. What does Judah acknowledge in this statement? What does he mean by these words?
 - ii. In what way does Judah’s statement represent a shift in his character? (Add these characteristics to your list.)

5. Read Genesis 44:18–34, in which Judah pleads for the release of his youngest brother, Benjamin, offering himself as a substitute prisoner.

- a. Judah, in describing his father’s love for Benjamin says, “a young boy of his old age, whose [full] brother is dead. He alone was left of his mother, and so his father loves him [all the more]” (Genesis 44:20).
 - i. What do you think Judah means when he says, “so his father loves him [all the more]”?
 - (1) Does this necessarily make Benjamin his favorite son? Why or why not?
 - (2) Does Judah express any animosity towards his father regarding his apparently close relationship with Benjamin?
 - (3) The Hebrew of 44:20 contains some ambiguity. In an attempt to try to provide a clear reading, the translator has inserted words in brackets that are meant to clarify the Hebrew. Naomi Steinberg challenges the translator’s reading, commenting “the Hebrew can be understood to suggest that Jacob loves only Benjamin” (p. 261).
 - (a) If Judah was in fact saying that his father loved only Benjamin, how would this affect your understanding of Judah’s decision to offer to be imprisoned in Benjamin’s place?
 - ii. Compare Judah’s statement of Jacob’s love to Jacob’s own words in Genesis 44:29, “If you take this one too from me and some calamity befalls him, you will lower my gray head in woe to Sheol,” which is a close approximation of Jacob’s own words in Genesis 42:38.
 - (1) What does Jacob threaten will happen if Benjamin is lost?
 - (2) What reasons does he give for such a close attachment to Benjamin?

- (3) How does Judah react in the face of his father's fierce love of Benjamin?
 - (4) How is Judah's newfound empathy for his father's position demonstrated in his reaction to the possible imprisonment of Benjamin?
 - b. Read Genesis 44:30–34, in which Judah continues to plead for Benjamin.
 - i. What has Judah promised his father regarding Benjamin's safety?
 - ii. Summarize the reasons Judah has provided Joseph, still unrecognized and acting as Pharaoh's vizier, for releasing Benjamin.
 - iii. What insight do these reasons provide into Judah's relationship with his father?
 - iv. What insight do they provide into Judah's character? (Make a list.)
6. Compare the lists you have made about Judah's personality in the three stories you have read: the story where Joseph is sold into slavery, the story of Judah's two children's marriages to Tamar, and Judah's pleading for Benjamin's freedom.
 - a. How would you describe the change in Judah's behavior?
 - b. What might account for that change?
 - c. Do you know people who have undergone such change in their lives? What accounted for it?
7. Naomi Steinberg sees the story of Tamar as playing a role in the reunion between Joseph and his family. See her introductory comments in the third paragraph on p. 259.
 - a. How does she understand the relationship between the Tamar narrative and the present account?
 - i. How might the death of his sons help Judah relate to Jacob?
 - ii. What lessons has he learned that would affect his reaction to Benjamin's imprisonment?
 - b. Miriyam Glazer, in her Contemporary Reflection, also contends there is a relationship between Tamar and Judah's plea to be imprisoned on Benjamin's behalf. Read from "Reflecting the Torah's brilliant narrative strategy" to "That is why he is now able to plead for compassion before the seeming might of Egypt" (pp. 277–78).
 - i. What aspects of the Tamar tale does Miriyam Glazer believe affect Judah's change of heart in how he relates to his father's favorite child?
 - ii. Does this connection seem strong to you? Why or why not?
 - iii. Do you see a difference between Miriyam Glazer's understanding of Tamar's role and Naomi Steinberg's? How would you characterize that difference?
8. How has an exploration of Tamar's role in this tale changed your perspective on the relationship between Joseph and his brothers?

Theme 3: Sibling Rivalry and Reconciliation



Parashat Vayigash tells the tale of the family that will become the people of Israel. Jacob has struggled with a messenger of God and been renamed Israel (Genesis 32). He and his sons are forced to flee Canaan in a drought and to travel to Egypt, which is well supplied to survive the drought. Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his brothers, has become vizier to Pharaoh due to his ability to correctly interpret Pharaoh's dreams. He has risen to a position of power over his impoverished brothers and is poised to take his revenge. Instead, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers and moves his whole family to Egypt to live under his protection. Jacob, his sons, and Joseph's sons and their descendants will eventually be enslaved in Egypt. This theme explores the dynamics in the family that becomes the seed of the people of Israel.

1. Jacob's relationship with his sons

a. The early years:

i. Read Genesis 37:1–4, which makes it clear that Jacob favors Joseph over his other sons.

- (1) What reason does the text provide for Jacob's preference for Joseph?
- (2) What does Joseph do or not do to merit this love?

ii. Read Genesis 37:5–11.

- (1) How does Joseph interact with his brothers?
- (2) What do Joseph's dreams symbolize?
- (3) What can you gauge about the effect Jacob's favoritism is having on his sons?

b. Jacob and his adult son Judah:

i. Read Genesis 44:18–34, in which Judah pleads for the release of his youngest brother, Benjamin.

(1) There is some ambiguity in Judah's description of Benjamin, "He alone was left of his mother, and so his father loves him [all the more]" (Genesis 44:20). Note that the words in the brackets are the translator's interpretation of ambiguity in the Hebrew text. Naomi Steinberg challenges the translator's reading, arguing that it could also be translated to mean that Jacob loves only Benjamin.

- (a) What is the difference in meaning between the two translations?
 - (b) Is Benjamin Jacob's new favorite child? Explain what in the text supports your opinion.
- (2) What reasons does Judah give in pleading for Benjamin's release?
- (a) What does this reveal about Judah's relationship with his father?
 - (b) How is Judah's reaction to Jacob's love for Benjamin different than his earlier reaction to Jacob's love for Joseph?

c. The foundation of Jacob and Joseph's relationship

- i. Read Genesis 45:4–8.
 - (1) According to Joseph, what role did God have in his being sold into slavery?
 - (2) How does this belief make it possible for the family to move forward into the next stage of its life?
- ii. Read Genesis 46:1–6.
 - (1) What does Jacob dream?
 - (2) What does the dream accomplish?
 - (3) What does this reveal about Jacob’s hopes and fears for his family?
- iii. Where do you see any commonalities between Jacob’s and Joseph’s belief in God?

2. Joseph’s Relationship with His Brothers

- a. Read Genesis 37:4–11.
 - i. What characterizes Joseph’s early relationship with his brothers?
 - ii. How does this compare to what you would consider “normal” sibling relationships?
- b. Read Genesis 45:1–7.
 - i. What is Joseph’s reaction to his brothers’ presence in Egypt?
 - (1) How would you characterize his emotional state?
 - (2) What other emotions might Joseph have had to his brothers’ appearance?
 - (3) What has happened to Joseph in the intervening years that makes it possible for him to reveal himself to his brothers and be willing to reconcile with them?
 - ii. How do the brothers react when Joseph reveals himself? What accounts for this reaction?
- c. Clothing plays a prominent role in Joseph’s life. As a young man his father gave him the coat of many colors (37:3). In Genesis 45:22 we read that he provides each member of his family with a set of clothes.
 - i. Compare what the clothing represents in each situation.
 - ii. Read Naomi Steinberg’s comments on 45:22. In light of her comments, how does Joseph’s provision of clothes for his family provide closure to the tale?
- d. Compare the genealogies provided in Genesis 37:2 and 46:5–34. Steinberg refers to one as vertical and one as horizontal.
 - i. What does Steinberg mean by vertical and horizontal?
 - ii. What are the differences between the two types of genealogies? What information is provided as a result of each type of genealogy?
 - iii. Why do you think that at this moment in the narrative a horizontal genealogy would be inserted?

- iv. What information about the family is gained by emphasizing the horizontal nature of family interactions?
3. The relationships in this *parashah* explore the ambiguities inherent in each person and their relationships. Reflect how one of these biblical descriptions hold true in your life.

Theme 4: The Role of Women in the Text



Women have a small role in this *parashah*, appearing infrequently. Despite not being the focus of the narrative, they do however have a position in the narrative. This theme explores the reality that women have largely not been the focus of our Jewish history. Instead of abandoning the text by calling it unsalvageable and andocentric, this theme will help the reader approach the text as a tool in helping recover the untold stories of women.

1. Naomi Steinberg notes, “Women appear infrequently in this *parashah*” (p. 259). However, despite their small role, they do play a part in the narrative. Later rabbinic interpretation of the *parashah* offers women additional roles.
 - a. Reread Genesis 46:7–27.
 - i. Who is listed in the genealogy?
 - ii. Judith Baskin in the Post-biblical Interpretation to Genesis 46:7 (p. 276), draws attention to the ways the rabbinic mind understood this *parashah* in light of their own reality.
 - (1) How do the Rabbis explain Genesis 46:7 as a reflection of the economic reality of the rabbinic era?
 - (2) How is your reality different from the rabbinic reality?
 - (3) Can you imagine a way in which the phrase, “His sons and his sons’ sons were with him, his daughters and his sons’ daughters,” could have meaning that reflects a reality today?
2. Read Genesis 45:1–15.
 - a. In Genesis 45:2 Joseph cries aloud while making himself known to his brothers.
 - i. Why do you think the text points out that Joseph cries?
 - ii. Given the rest of his speech, what emotions may lie behind this outcry?
 - b. Read Genesis 42:24 and 43:30, two earlier instances in which Jacob cries with emotion over his brothers.
 - i. What would you characterize as the commonality between these events?
 - ii. Steinberg notes that “the Hebrew root b-k-h is often used for female emotional distress” (p. 263). How does this comment impact on your initial reading of Joseph’s behavior?
 - (1) Is Steinberg suggesting that Joseph’s character is being “feminized”? How does that enhance your understanding of him?
 - (2) Do you agree with Steinberg that crying is still seen as more of a women’s behavior today? Why or why not?

- c. Read “She Is Joseph” by Nurit Zarchi (p. 232), “Pharaoh and Joseph” by Else Lasker-Schuler (p. 257), and “Joseph and Pharaoh” by Ruth Brin (p. 257).
 - i. How do these poets depict Joseph?
 - ii. How do their imaginative portrayals of Joseph compare to the biblical texts you read above?
 - iii. How do they compare to your own vision of Joseph?
3. See the rabbinic commentary of Genesis 46:17 (p. 276). The Rabbis pay close attention to Serah, the only named daughter of Asher. They note that she is named going down into Egypt and, four hundred years later, participating in the Exodus.
- a. What roles and blessings do they assign her? Why?
 - b. How does Hara Person’s poem “Serah Bat Asher” (p. 280) complicate the “blessing” bestowed on Serah for her role in the Joseph tale?
 - i. What are the implications of change in Person’s interpretation?
 - ii. How does Serah’s experience compare and contrast to other family members’ experiences of change?
 - iii. Which experience resonates more with your experience of change? Why?
4. In the poem “Zilpah Speaks to Gad” (p. 279), Elaine Glickman gives voice to the lost memory of the handmaids who bore sons who became the tribes of Israel.
- a. What does she imagine Zilpah would want to say?
 - b. To whom does it seem that Zilpah is speaking? What emotions does she express?
 - c. What is lost because our tradition does not have a record of Zilpah’s voice?
 - d. What do you believe Tamar would “say” if her voice was made explicit in this *parashah*?

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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