

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Yitro EXODUS 18:1–20:23

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Parashat Yitro Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: A Divine Proposal—Israel Prepares to Receive the Covenant


Theme 2: After Israel Says, “We Do”—Stipulations of the Covenant

INTRODUCTION



Parashat Yitro describes the encounter between God and Israel at Mount Sinai that results in an exclusive relationship between God and Israel, sealed by a covenant (*b'rit*). Encamped at the base of the mountain in the midst of the wilderness, the Israelites accept God's proposal: if they obey the terms of the covenant, then they will become God's "treasured possession," "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6). Israel's obligations as a holy nation begin even before God presents the stipulations involved in the covenantal agreement. God commands the people to "stay pure" (19:10), so that they may be in a state of holiness when they receive God's instruction. God descends to Mount Sinai—which is enveloped in a thick cloud, bombarded by thunder and lightning, smoke and loud horn blasts. The people tremble at the foot of the mountain, and God answers Moses in thunder. God then speaks directly to the people—without the mediation of Moses—conveying the rules by which they agree to live. The Decalogue ("Ten Commandments") contains the teachings that will guide the people as they become a nation.

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 407 and/or survey the outline on page 408. 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: A DIVINE PROPOSAL—ISRAEL PREPARES TO RECEIVE THE COVENANT



The encounter between God and Israel at Mount Sinai resembles a marriage proposal in certain respects: God proposes a covenant and Israel accepts the proposal. Although the exact terms of the agreement that binds God and the people are not specified until Exodus 20–23, the Israelites enthusiastically accept and follow God’s instructions for what they must do to prepare themselves to receive God’s teaching. These preparations—which include a three-day prohibition against sexual intercourse—are designed to keep the people in a physically pure state. The Israelites learn that being a “holy nation” begins with the physical actions necessary to be in the presence of God.

1. Read Exodus 19:1–8, which describes God’s proposal and Israel’s acceptance of the covenant.
 - a. What image does verse 4 use to portray how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt? What divine qualities does this metaphor highlight? How does the divine metaphor in this verse compare with the images of God in 14:14 and 15:3? What does the image in 19:4 add to the depiction of God in the prior Exodus verses?
 - b. The word *s’gulah* in 19:5 (translated here as “treasured possession”) usually refers to a private store of valuable property (see Ecclesiastes 2:8). How does the use of *s’gulah* in this verse help you to understand God’s relationship with the Israelites? What might be problematic about the idea of Israel’s exclusive relationship with God for some modern readers? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, how does knowledge of the ancient Near Eastern context of this verse help us understand this idea?
 - c. What do you think it means for Israel to be “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6)? What is the relationship between this designation of Israel and the image of Israel as a “treasured possession” in verse 5?
 - d. According to verses 5–6, what must the Israelites do in order to receive what God promises?
 - e. How does the word *kadosh* (“holy”) in verse 6 help you to understand Israel’s role among the nations?
 - f. According to verse 8, who responds when Moses presents God’s commands? When you read the phrase *kol haam* (“all the people”), what is your understanding about whether or not the verse includes women? How does this verse compare with Deuteronomy 31:10–12, another occasion when the Law is read to the people? What conclusion does

Elaine Goodfriend draw in the Central Commentary on Exodus 19:8 about the presence of women at Sinai?

2. Read Exodus 19:9–15, which describes the Israelites' preparations for the divine revelation.
 - a. What instructions does God give Moses regarding the people in verse 10? What is the relationship between the root *k-d-sh* ("holy") in this verse and what the people must do (v. 6)? In your view, why is it necessary for the people to be in a pure state?
 - b. What does God command Moses to do in verse 12? What are the consequences for those who violate what God asks Moses to do? What does this suggest about being in God's presence?
 - c. What instructions does Moses give the people in verses 14–15? What is the difference between these and the instructions God gives to Moses regarding the people in verses 10–11? According to the Central Commentary on verse 15, what can we understand about the meaning of the additional prohibition? What do we learn from Leviticus 15:18 about the consequences of sexual intercourse for both parties?
 - d. Our translation of Exodus 19:15 indicates that Moses directs the prohibition against sexual intercourse only to men. Why do you think the translator included this insertion? How does the Central Commentary on this verse argue against the inference that Moses addressed only the men and thus women were not present at the revelation at Sinai? How do you interpret this verse?
3. Read the Another View section by Diane M. Sharon (p. 421).
 - a. How does Moses seem to subvert God's commands in 19:15?
 - b. What questions about authority and authenticity does Moses' addition to God's commands raise?
 - c. According to Sharon, how does the ancient literary form of the Command/Performance help us to understand the implications of Moses' action?
 - d. How does Moses' "audacious transformation" of God's words give currency to the tradition of interpretation of sacred texts in Judaism?
 - e. What does Sharon mean when she asserts that Exodus 19:9–15 subverts omniscient authority and gives authority to the reader? What are the potential implications of her analysis for how you read the Torah?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations ("Thus shall you say... to the children of Israel") by Judith R. Baskin on page 422.
 - a. What problem do the Rabbis try to resolve with their interpretations of the phrase "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel" (19:3)?

- b. How does *M'chilta, Bachodesh 2* address this problem?
 - c. According to Baskin, what is another way to interpret this verse?
 - d. Which interpretation do you prefer, and why?
5. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Judith Plaskow (pp. 423–24).
- a. What makes 19:15 one of the “most painful” verses in the Torah, according to Plaskow?
 - b. How does this verse serve as a paradigm of the treatment of women as “other” both in this parashah and elsewhere in the Torah?
 - c. How does the tenth commandment (“You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” in 20:14) presuppose a community of male listeners? What are the implications of this observation?
 - d. According to Plaskow, how does the chanting of this parashah in the annual cycle of Torah readings as well as on Shavuot put women in the role of “eavesdropping” on men? To what extent do you agree or disagree with Plaskow’s assertion that this text evokes a continuing sense of “exclusion and disorientation” in women?
 - e. Our tradition teaches that the entire Jewish people stood at Sinai to receive God’s revelation. Based on your reading of the biblical text, how would you answer Plaskow’s question about whether or not women were present at this central event in our people’s history? If women were not at Sinai, how can women reappropriate this experience for their own and subsequent generations?
 - f. According to Plaskow, what is the important difference between the audience for God’s instructions to the people (19:10–11) and Moses’ instructions to the people (19:15)? How does Moses filter and interpret God’s commands through a patriarchal lens? In what way do Moses’ words serve as an example of how Jewish tradition repeatedly excludes women? How do Moses’ instructions distort God’s revelation of Torah?
 - g. What lessons about interpretation can we draw from Plaskow’s concerns about the absence of women from the revelation at Sinai? What are the implications for these lessons regarding how women and men function in Jewish community?
6. Read “We All Stood Together” by Merle Feld, in *Voices* (p. 425).
- a. What is Feld’s view in the first and second stanzas of who was present at Sinai? What regret does she express?
 - b. What is the conflict the poet describes in the third stanza?
 - c. According to Feld, what happens to “hard data” about events as time passes?
 - d. What is the relationship between the feelings with which the poet is left and the record her brother has of events?

- e. How does Feld suggest that she and her brother together could re-create “holy time”?
- f. How would you summarize the main point Feld is trying to make in this poem?
- g. How does the poem compare with your vision of Sinai?
- h. Can you think of an important event in your own life for which you have no record but only feelings? How would your memories of that event be enhanced or changed if you did have a record of what transpired?

THEME 2: AFTER ISRAEL SAYS, “WE DO” — STIPULATIONS OF THE COVENANT



God communicates the rules of the covenant directly to the people. Although Exodus 19–20 does not provide a title for God’s commands, the term “Ten Words” (*aseret had’varim*) is used in Exodus 34:28 and Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4. The Greek-speaking Jewish community of ancient Egypt translated this Hebrew phrase as *deka logoi* (“Decalogue”), which is a more fitting title than the familiar English phrase “Ten Commandments.” The Torah does not use the word “commandment” (*mitzvah*) in connection with God’s words in this passage, nor is every utterance clearly a command; plus, uncertainty remains as to how to divide these verses into distinct commandments. What is clear is that these teachings are to guide the emerging Israelite nation in its relationships with God and other human beings.

1. Read Exodus 20:1, which introduces God’s revelation to the people.
 - a. According to verse 1, how does God communicate the words the people are about to hear? How does this compare with 20:19? In your view, what is the significance of this difference?
 - b. According to the Central Commentary (p. 416), who is the target audience for God’s words? Although God addresses the people as a group, how can we understand the fact that God’s instructions to the people consistently use the second-person singular? Although God’s instructions are grammatically masculine, how can knowledge of biblical Hebrew help us to understand whether God addresses both women and men?
2. Read Exodus 20:2–12, which describes the first five of God’s utterances.
 - a. Why do you think God’s “words” to the people in verse 2 begin with a reminder of what God did for them in the past? What is the relationship between this verse and the commandments that follow?
 - b. Not every one of God’s utterances can be considered a command, as in verse 2. In your view, what reasons are there for us to consider verse 2 to be the first commandment?

- c. What does verse 3 suggest about the relationship between Israel's God and other gods? How does Deuteronomy 6:4 help you to understand Exodus 20:3? According to the Central Commentary on Exodus 20:3, what do texts from the ancient Near East help us understand about fidelity to one god and relationships to other gods?
- d. How do you understand God's commands to the people in verses 4–6? What is the relationship between the plain understanding (*p'shat*) of these verses and how prevailing Jewish tradition understands them? What does this view assume about the relationship between verse 3 and verses 4–6? How does your perspective of verse 4 change if we interpret verse 3 as God's first stipulation?
- e. According to the Central Commentary, what is the reason for the prohibition in verse 4? How are idols incompatible with the way in which the Torah presents God's nature? How does the worship of idols limit the range of God's attributes?
- f. How does the word translated as "impassioned" in verse 5 help you to understand the relationship between God and Israel? (See the Central Commentary on Deuteronomy 5:9, p. 1073.)
- g. According to the Central Commentary on Exodus 20:5, how can we interpret the word *avot* (translated here as "parents")? How does this commandment serve as a bridge between the first and second halves of God's utterances?
- h. What prohibition is stated in verse 7? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, what are the different interpretations of the behavior this command prohibits?
- i. Verses 8–11 contain instructions related to the Sabbath, an institution unique to ancient Israel. According to verse 10, who is not supposed to work on the Sabbath? Who is omitted from this group? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, how can we understand this omission?
- j. The first five precepts primarily concern proper behavior toward God. In your view, why is the command in verse 12 included in this group? How does this commandment serve as a bridge between the first and second halves of God's utterances? What is the reward for observing this command? According to the Central Commentary on this verse, how does this reward reflect a legal custom found in other ancient Near Eastern texts? What offenses against parents does the Torah outline? In your view, why are both the mother and father included in all of these commandments?

- k. How are the first five utterances arranged in terms of degree of severity? What can we learn from this arrangement?
3. Read Exodus 20:13–14, which describes God’s next five instructions.
 - a. According to the Central Commentary on verse 13 (“You shall not commit adultery”), how was adultery defined in Israel and the ancient Near East? What concerns does the Torah’s harsh punishment for adultery reflect?
 - b. What prohibitions are contained in verse 14? In your view, why are these prohibitions grouped together?
 - c. How does the traditional paragraphing of verse 14 in a Torah scroll help you to understand the relationship between the word translated as “house” and the rest of the verse? How does the absence of a prohibition addressed to women regarding coveting their neighbors’ husbands reflect the reality of marriage in ancient Israel?
4. Read Post-biblical Interpretations (“Honor your father and your mother”) by Judith R. Baskin on page 422.
 - a. How does *M’chilta, Bachodesh* 8 interpret Exodus 20:12?
 - b. How do the Rabbis explain the difference between Exodus 20:12 and Leviticus 19:3?
 - c. In your view, what is the significance of the command in Exodus 20:12, and why is it included in the Decalogue?
5. Read “Mother” by Alicia Suskin Ostriker, in *Voices* (p. 426).
 - a. What are the reasons for the “ocean” the poet has put between herself and her mother?
 - b. How does the poet’s description of her mother’s physical surroundings help you to understand her mother’s condition?
 - c. What are the poet’s concerns now that her mother is old?
 - d. What tortures the poet?
 - e. How do you understand the poet’s statement that she does not love her mother enough? What is the relationship between not loving her mother “enough” and the poet’s last line?
 - f. What does this poem add to your understanding of the command in Exodus 20:12 to “honor your father and your mother”?
 - g. What are the challenges in observing the command to honor one’s father and mother in this situation?
 - h. Do you know someone like the mother or daughter described in this poem? To what extent can you personally relate to the experiences and emotions expressed in this poem? What questions or insights does the poem leave you with?

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. In Exodus 19:8 the people agree to God's covenant before they hear its terms ("All that *YHVH* has spoken we will do!"). In your view, what factors contribute to the people's response? Can you think of a time in your own life when you agreed to something important without knowing the full details? Why did you do so? What were the results? What is the balance in your own life between "head" versus "heart" in making significant decisions?
2. God commands the people in Exodus 20:4, "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image." Jewish tradition understands this as prohibiting the worship of images, or idols. In a contemporary context, an idol can be defined more broadly as a person or thing that is treated with absolute and unquestioning admiration, adoration, or devotion. In your view, what things do we today sometimes regard in this way? How can Exodus 20:4 help us understand the dangers of this kind of idol worship? What can we learn from this biblical text that might influence our attitudes or behavior toward these modern-day "idols"?

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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