

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat R'eih Deuteronomy 11:26–16:17

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Parashat R'eih Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Who's in the House(hold)?

Theme 2: What's Cooking?

Introduction



Parashat R'eih begins with a powerful challenge from God to the Israelite people: “See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of your God *YHVH* . . . and curse, if you do not obey the commandments . . .” (Deuteronomy 11:26–28). God’s message is clear and unambiguous. The people have been given laws, instructions, and injunctions—everything they need to live a good life. Now they hold their fate in their own hands. Seemingly, there is no middle ground between blessing and curse, no gray area. The people will either prosper and live or self-destruct and die. The timing of this message is significant, as the people are encamped in the land of Moab on the eastern shore of the Jordan River in preparation for their entry into the Promised Land. The divine communication in this portion is both general and specific. For the former, the overall message of *R'eih* is a reminder of the unique, binding, and mutually obligatory relationship between God and God’s people. For the latter, this portion, like much of the previous three books of the Torah, continues to provide detailed and explicit instruction regarding a wide range of day-to-day activities, including what to eat, how to celebrate and commemorate, where and how to worship, and various other topics, such as contact with the non-Israelite population, payment of debts, tithing, service and servants, the difference between legitimate and false leadership, and more. And what will the people reap in return for their fealty? Only this simple but profound promise: “Thus it will go well with you and with your descendants after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of your God *YHVH*” (Deuteronomy 12:28). Lest the people understand this to mean that in return for their loyalty they themselves will be absolved of responsibility for one another, God makes it clear that this is not so: “You must open your hand and lend. . . . Give readily and have no regrets when you do so. . . . Open your hand to the poor and needy kin in your land” (Deuteronomy 15:8–11). Thus, obligation extends in three directions: from the people to God, from God to the people, and from the people to each other.

Before Getting Started



Before turning to the biblical text and the discussion 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 pages 1115–16 and/or survey the outline on page 1116. 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: Who's in the House(hold)?



In any community, judgments about who counts and who does not determine the social structure of the group and the behavior of its members; age, gender, marital status, and social standing are key factors in any such determination. In this section of *parashat R'eih* the question of social status is explored in the context of commandedness. That is, while God explicitly enjoins the Israelites to observe festivals, make sacrifices, and “appear” regularly at a central location, the text does not always specify who among the community is commanded to engage in these activities. In several places, we find only implicit hints; the reader then must consider historical, textual, and literal clues in order to discern what the text actually means (or meant) to say. This raises several questions: Is inclusion in the community always desirable or even wanted? What are the implications of refusing the “invitation” to be commanded?

1. Read Deuteronomy 12:1–7 and 10–14 in which God gives the Israelites overarching instructions for religious observances in the land they are about to enter. Read the Central Commentary by Beth Alpert Nakhai to verses 7 and 12.
 - a. In these verses, God demands that the Israelites centralize and standardize their worship in the land they are about to inherit. According to these divine instructions, what are the components of acceptable worship? What can the reader discern from these verses about God's priorities and essential premises?
 - b. According to Alpert Nakhai, what are the literal definitions of the Hebrew words *bayit* (singular) and *batim* (plural) in verse 7? In this context, what is the functional definition of these terms? Given this understanding of “households,” what conclusions can we reach regarding to whom these instructions are directed and who is under obligation to observe them?
 - c. In the Central Commentary to verse 12, Alpert Nakhai discusses the explicit mention of several subgroups of Israelites. What are these groups? Why does Alpert Nakhai suggest that they are specified?
2. Read Deuteronomy 16:1–8 and the Central Commentary to these verses.
 - a. Which pilgrimage festival does this section describe?
 - b. What are the required ritual components of the commemoration? What is the rationale for this celebratory remembrance? To whom are these instructions directed?

- c. How does this topic fit with the passages we read in chapter 12?
 - d. In the Central Commentary, Alpert Nakhai notes that the location stipulated for this festival's observance presents two problems. What are they and what are the gender differences and similarities in each?
3. Read Deuteronomy 16:9–12 and the Central Commentary to verse 11.
- a. What is the festival commanded here? When does it take place in the calendar year? Where is it to be observed?
 - b. According to Alpert Nakhai, to whom are the commandments in these verses addressed? How do the recipients of the instructions here differ from the recipients in verses 1–8?
4. Read Deuteronomy 16:13–15 and the Central Commentary to verses 13–15.
- a. When does the commemoration described in these verses occur? What is its duration? What are the essential features of this festival?
 - b. Who is commanded to “rejoice” in this festival?
5. Finally, read Deuteronomy 16:16–17 and the Central Commentary to these verses.
- a. According to the biblical text, who is commanded to “appear” three times a year? What else must they do besides just “appear”? What do you think is the reason for this requirement?
 - b. What is the gender inequality noted by Alpert Nakhai here?
 - c. Review Deuteronomy 12:7 and 12:12, which names members of “your households,” “daughters,” and “female slaves” among those obligated to rejoice and feast before God. How does this compare to the list of those addressed by 16:11 and 16:14, as well as those addressed in 16:1–8 (where singular male pronouns are utilized)? What problem becomes apparent when considering these verses together?
6. Read *Another View* by Carol Meyers on page 1134.
- a. Meyers notes that daughters, female slaves, widows, and orphans are enjoined to observe the pilgrimage festivals of Shavuot (Deuteronomy 16:11) and Sukkot (Deuteronomy 16:14), although not Passover. According to Meyers, why are wives not specifically mentioned with this group? Do you find her explanation convincing? Why or why not? What other reason might there be for omitting this particular group of women?
 - b. Meyers suggests that as “chief household manager,” women would have been accorded respect and deference. What is the reasoning behind this assertion? To what extent does Meyers’s theory challenge your assumptions about women’s roles in ancient Israel? Why or why not?
 - c. Meyers asserts that “although women often are not addressed explicitly in the pilgrimage regulations, they are not forbidden to participate.” She thus makes a distinction between being *commanded* and being *permitted* to engage in ritual acts. In contemporary times, can you think of a comparable situation in which you feel religiously permitted but not commanded? What accounts for the discrepancy? By whose authority? Is this situation something you would change if you could, and if so,

how would you go about doing so?

7. Read Post-biblical Interpretations by Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert on pages 1134–36.

- a. In the Deuteronomy text, the word bayit is translated as “household.” By contrast, how did the early rabbinic commentators interpret the word? How did this reading reflect their understanding of the domestic role of women?
- b. Fonrobert explains that sometimes the Rabbis referred to parts of women’s bodies, including sexual organs, as metaphors for different divisions of a house. How might the use of women’s physicality and sexuality in this way have had an impact on how women were perceived by men, as well as by other women?
- c. Commenting on Deuteronomy 16:14, Fonrobert explains that according to the Babylonian Talmud, wives were made “joyous” in the holiday observance by being given new clothes. What might this reflect about men’s understanding of and sensitivity to women’s needs?

8. Read “Merciful God” in Voices on page 1138.

- a. In this poem by Kadya Molodowsky, the author asks God to “choose another people.” What does this poem seem to be saying about the special status of the Jewish people vis-à-vis God? How does this poem present a challenge to the idea of being a people “consecrated” to God, as stated in Deuteronomy 14:2 in this parashah, “You are a people consecrated to your God”? In the biblical text, the God-Israel relationship is depicted to be one of great privilege and honor. By contrast, what is the tenor of that relationship in “Merciful God”?
- b. Four times, the poet addresses the Divine partner as “Merciful God.” What is implicit in her choice of an adjective for God? By what other means does the poet reveal her opinion of this “merciful” God?
- c. In the third stanza, the poet describes God’s word as being “babbled in every language.” What do you think the poet intends to convey by the use of the word “babbled”? What associations does the word evoke for you?
- d. Think about both the explicit and implicit characterizations of God in this poem as well as the writer’s feelings conveyed by it. If you were given the task of crafting an alternative title for this work, what would your title be?

9. Read “The Journey” in Voices on page 1140.

- a. In this poem by Anna Ziegler, who or what determines whether the festival is to be observed? Who or what determines whether or not the poet observes Passover “this year”? How is this determination of observance the same or different from the biblical text of Deuteronomy 16:1–8?
- b. “Fast forward[ing] twenty years,” what does the poet’s Passover observance look like? What is her role in it? How does this connect to the questions raised by the biblical text about the inclusion of women in the festival observances?
- c. The poet writes of a “desert,” “forty years,” and “starvation.” What do these terms mean when applied to the contemporary orientation of the poem? What was the “desert”? Who was experiencing “starvation”?

- d. Does this contemporary poem feel familiar in any way to you, and if so, what and how? When have you experienced a personal spiritual journey? Have you ever had such an experience related to the observance of Passover or another Jewish holiday? Have you ever experienced a sense of dissonance between a traditional observance of a Jewish holiday and the reality of your life? In what ways have you experienced a sense of spiritual “starvation,” and how have you made it through to freedom and liberation?

Theme 2: What’s Cooking?



This section of *parashat R'ei* provides the foundational principles of kashrut, the Jewish system of permitted and forbidden eating. The instructions are quite straightforward, and the delineation of animals acceptable and unacceptable for consumption is unambiguous. However, despite this specificity, questions abound: What does it mean for a people to eat differently than their neighbors? Why are certain animals suitable but not others? Are ethical or moral messages implied or embedded in the dietary laws? If so, what are they? What does it mean to follow laws one does not or cannot fully understand? What is the place of appetite and desire, and when—and under what circumstances—ought it to be controlled?

1. Read Deuteronomy 14:3–10.
 - a. What are the two characteristics that render an animal acceptable for consumption by God’s covenanted people?
 - b. Read Beth Alpert Nakhai’s Central Commentary on verses 3–8. What is the relationship between the *accessibility* of certain animals and the *permissibility* of eating them? What are the religious, social, and nutritional implications of having common animals on the “approved” list?
 - c. In verses 7–9, Moses tells the people that animals that have no true hooves, do not bring up their cud, or have no fins or scales are “impure for you.” What is the significance of the inclusion of the words “for you” in these instructions? How would the meaning of this commandment change if it read simply, “They are impure”? What is the relationship between the dietary laws and preserving a distinctive separateness?
 - d. Read the Central Commentary on verse 7. How does Nakhai’s interpretation of the word “impure” compare with your own understanding of the meaning and/or purpose of the Jewish dietary laws?
2. Read Deuteronomy 14:11–18 and the Central Commentary on these verses.
 - a. What is similar about all of the forbidden birds?
 - b. What is it about this group that renders them “impure,” and how would consuming them endanger the Israelites or compromise their covenant with God?
3. Read Deuteronomy 14:21.
 - a. Who may eat “anything that has died a natural death”? What are the Israelites to do with such an animal?
 - b. What is the rationale or explanation given for this commandment? What is the connection between the explanation and the commandment? That is, what does the former have to do with the latter?
 - c. The commentary on the prohibition “You shall not boil a kid in its mother’s milk”

- offers several possible reasons for this injunction. What are they?
- d. In terms of the meaning of the dietary laws for yourself, which, if any, of the reasons listed here do you find most compelling?
4. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Ruth H. Sohn on pages 1136–37.
- a. How does Sohn debunk the common belief that the dietary laws (the system of kashrut) were originally and primarily promulgated for health reasons?
 - b. Sohn argues that dietary restrictions are meant to be a path to spiritual rather than physical purity or well-being. According to this proposition, how does the way we eat impact our spiritual selves?
 - c. In this essay, Sohn also suggests that the most powerful aspect of kashrut may be simply the act of obedience, that is, adhering to a list of dos and don'ts. What is your reaction to this idea? Have you ever followed or do you now follow a religious discipline out of a sense of being “commanded”? If so, what were or are the circumstances, and what was your reason for doing so in the past or why do you observe such a discipline now? Did you find this to be a positive experience or a negative one? What accounts for your assessment? Were there other reasons for your discipline? If this has not been your practice to date, can you imagine a scenario in which your experience of spiritual fulfillment might be enhanced by disciplined, conscious acts?
 - d. Sohn writes, “Kashrut . . . teaches us that Jewish spiritual practice is about taking the most ordinary of experiences—in all aspects of our lives—and transforming them into moments of meaning, moments of connection. Kashrut provides a model for doing just that” (p. 1137). Are there any parts of your “ordinary” experiences that you infuse with particular meaning or elevate to a higher plane? If you have not previously done so, in what areas do you imagine that you could, and what would be necessary for you to do in order to put this into practice?
 - e. Do you keep kosher now? Have you ever done so? If you do or have, what were the components of your kashrut observance? Would you consider it in the future? To what extent do your experiences with keeping some form of kashrut fit with Sohn's approach?
5. Read the excerpt from “The Primal Feast” by Kim Chernin in *Voices* on page 1138.
- a. Like Ruth Sohn in the Contemporary Reflection, Chernin contends that eating is infused with meaning well beyond the physical act of consumption. According to Chernin, how is eating a statement about identity? With whom does every eater identify? Why is the struggle particularly significant in adolescence?
 - b. Do you recall anyone ever saying to you, “You'll sit there until you finish your meal,” or something similar? What was your reaction? How did you respond? Do those memories inform any of the choices or behaviors related to eating that you make today?
 - c. How do Chernin's ideas reflect and expand on your understanding of the biblical text and its commandments regarding what may and may not be eaten by Jews?

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. Think of a collection of people of which you are a member. This could be a family, work, or social group. Are some members more “valuable” than others? If so, what are the factors that make them so and why are they significant? What might this imply about the ways in which people have traditionally organized themselves along a social hierarchy?
2. How do you assess human “value”? What are some ways that such value can be determined? Do you agree with them? What other ways can you suggest to evaluate human beings?
3. What “appetites” do you consider to be constructive or positive forces for good, and which do you think are dangerous or destructive? Can some appetites or desires fit into both categories? If so, how ought they to be regulated for the good? And by whom?

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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