

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Ki Tavo Deuteronomy 26:1 - 29:8

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Parashat Ki Tavo Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: When Blessings and Curses Abound

Theme 2: Giving Thanks and Starting Over

Introduction



Parashat Ki Tavo focuses on the Israelites' entrance into the Promised Land: the ceremonies they will follow once they arrive and then get settled, and the consequences of obeying or disobeying God's laws in their new home. This *parashah* concludes the laws given in Deuteronomy 12–26, spelling out the blessings and curses that will follow, depending on how the Israelites fulfill their covenantal obligations. Moses calls upon the people to walk in God's ways and observe God's commandments (26:17) and reassures them of God's promise to make Israel a treasured, holy people (26:18). At the end of the *parashah*, Moses' last speech to the Israelites begins, which focuses on the wonders they have witnessed since fleeing Egypt. Once again, Moses recalls the events of the past in order to positively influence the people's behavior in the future.

This study guide will focus on two themes. In "When Blessings and Curses Abound," participants will compare the equivalent section of the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 26, where gender plays a prominent role. The second theme, "Giving Thanks and Starting Over," will explore the rituals assigned to the Israelites upon their entrance into the land, with attention given to the role women played in this ceremony.

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 pages 1191–1192, and/or survey the outline on page 1192. This will allow you to highlight some of the main themes in this portion and help participants situate the section 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 material in the Central Commentary. This will help you to answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

Theme 1: When Blessings and Curses Abound



Adele Berlin notes that “the blessings and curses in this unit constitute promises or punishments that will befall Israel depending on whether the people obey or disobey God’s commandments” (p. 1199). This emphasis on divine reward or punishment reflects the language and belief that mark Deuteronomy.

This study guide will explore the role gender plays both in terms of who constitutes the “Israel” that will earn the divine reaction and in the consequences that ensue. Women’s multifaceted roles in ancient Israelite and rabbinic society will also be explored, along with modern women’s responses to the blessings and curses that abound in their lives, looking at how they compare to the Deuteronomic understanding of reward and punishment.

1. Read Deuteronomy 28:1–6, which enumerates the blessings the Israelites will receive if they follow God’s commandments.
 - a. Look at Deuteronomy 27:1 and Deuteronomy 29:9–14 (in the next *parashah*). Framed by those verses, to whom do these verses seem to be addressed? Who is responsible for the actions taken, and who will receive the consequences?
 - b. What is the nature of the relationship between God and Israel as described in these verses?
 - c. What role does fertility play in these blessings? Does it seem to fall into the male or female realm, or both?
 - d. How does women’s work get credited to the community at large?
2. Read the commentary on Deuteronomy 28:3 in the Post-biblical Interpretations by Claudia Setzer (p. 1211).
 - a. For the Rabbis, which mitzvot fell into the category of those that are “in the city”?
 - b. Which *mitzvot* were performed by men and which by women?
 - c. According to Judith Hauptman, what type of relationship existed between the men and the women so that all of the *mitzvot* performed “in the city” could be fulfilled?
3. Read Deuteronomy 28:15–19, which warns that God will call upon nature and foreign enemies to bring Israel to ruin if they disobey God’s commandments.
 - a. Compare the structure of the blessings to the curses studied above.
 - i. What is the same about both texts? What is different?
 - ii. What is significant about the parallel language found in Deuteronomy 28:15–19 and Deuteronomy 28:1–6? What meaning do you draw from the links between these two texts?
 - b. What role does fertility play in these curses? Does it seem to fall into the male or female realm, or both?
 - c. Compare these verses on infertility to Deuteronomy 7:14. Read the accompanying note on page 1092.
 - i. What is similar, and what is different, about these references to infertility?
 - ii. From these similarities and differences, what insights can you glean about attitudes toward fertility in the biblical world?

4. Read Deuteronomy 28:30–35.
 - a. Who seems to be the intended audience of this section of curses? How does the language of verse 30 shape your reading of this section of text?
 - b. Read the comment on verse 30.
 - i. What is the significance of paying the bride-price for a wife? What is the implication of not doing so?
 - ii. What is the significance of this verse as a curse?
 - iii. What insights can you glean about women’s lives in the biblical period from this verse?
 - c. What is the role of women in this section of curses?
 - d. How does that differ from the earlier sections of this *parashah*?
5. From a modern perspective, how are you challenged by the biblical concept of blessings and curses?
 - a. How do you deal with the issue of blessings and curses in your life? In the life of your community?
 - b. What rituals or communal institutions exist to help us acknowledge the blessings in our lives and cope with the curses?
6. Read “Prayer for my Son” by Elaine Feinstein (p. 1216).
 - a. How would you summarize what this poem is about? What has happened to the poet’s son?
 - b. What does Feinstein seem to have learned from that experience?
 - c. What relationship does Feinstein experience between being blessed and cursed?
 - d. How does Feinstein’s poem relate to the conception of reward and punishment seen in this *parashah*?
7. Read “Requests” by Esther Raab (p. 1215).
 - a. What is Raab’s request as expressed in this poem?
 - b. How does Raab’s poem connect to the idea of blessings and curses described in this *parashah*?
 - c. What blessings do you want?

Theme 2: Giving Thanks and Starting Over



Upon their entrance into the land of Canaan, the Israelites are commanded to participate in a ceremony demonstrating their gratitude for having arrived at the Promised Land. In this section of the study guide, participants will explore the emotions behind the language the ancient Israelites used at this moment of transition. Times of personal transition are often when we turn to the tradition and to the community, seeking to connect our individual experiences to those of our ancestors. Participants will examine their own lives in light of the biblical ceremony of the first fruits.

1. Read Deuteronomy 26:1–11, which describes the ceremony by which the people will show their gratitude for possession of the land.

- a. What are the different parts of the ceremony of the first fruits?
 - b. The language of this section is in the masculine singular. Read Berlin's comment on Deuteronomy 26:2. How does this affect your understanding of who is expected to fulfill the commandment?
 - c. What are the overall themes of this ceremony? Do these seem like themes you would expect in a ceremony expressing gratitude? Why or why not?
 - d. How is the donation of the first fruits "recognition of God's giving the Promised Land to Israel," as Berlin describes it (p. 1193)?
 - e. The word *avot* occurs twice in these eleven verses. In Deuteronomy 26:3 it is translated as "fathers," and in 26:7 it is translated as "ancestors."
 - i. According to the comment on verse 3, why is the word *avot* translated differently in these verses?
 - ii. How does the difference in the translation affect your reading of each verse?
 - iii. What is the significance of connecting the ancestors to this ceremony of gratitude?
 - f. Deuteronomy 26:5–9 recounts the main events in Israel's past, from the descent to Egypt in the time of Jacob, to the Exodus and the entry into the land.
 - i. What kinds of events are emphasized in these verses?
 - ii. What do you believe is the intended effect of this recitation on the Israelite who recites this passage?
 - iii. We repeat these verses every year when we read the Passover Haggadah. Why do you think they are an important part of the seder? What significance does it have for you to recite these words on Passover?
2. In the Contemporary Reflection, read from "Throughout our lives" through "settlement of the land" (first paragraph, p. 1212).
- a. To what does Alice Shalvi compare the ceremony of the first fruits?
 - b. What might the transitions in our own lives and the ancient Israelite transition into the Promised Land share in common? How might they differ?
 - c. Some transitions in our lives are marked privately, and some are marked publicly. What is impact of experiencing a transition in a public, communal setting rather than individually?
 - d. What moments of transition have you publicly marked?
 - i. What emotions were common to these moments?
 - ii. How has the communal aspect of these moments of transition added to or detracted from the significance of the moment?
 - iii. Did the public aspect of these moments help with the emotional aspect of the transition? Explain why or why not.
 - e. Have there been moments when you felt that a transition went unmarked in your life? What were they?

3. Continue reading in the Contemporary Reflection, from “Now in *Ki Tavo*” through “is an essential part of developing a new identity, beginning a new existence” (in the third paragraph, p. 1212).
 - a. What emotions does Shalvi believe marked the Israelite transition from wandering in the desert to entrance into the Promised Land?
 - b. To what extent do the moments of transition in your own life mirror this combination of joy and sadness?
 - c. How does Shalvi understand the role of personal responsibility in this transition? How does this compare to your own understanding?
4. Read “Thankful” by Ruth Fainlight.
 - a. What does Fainlight express in this poem?
 - b. How does the poem relate to the biblical text we have just studied?
5. Read “Still Dreaming of Home” by Merle Feld.
 - a. According to Feld, what motivates the nesting urge that women sometimes experience before the birth of a baby? Have you ever experienced a similar urge? How did it get expressed?
 - b. How do the actions described in the poem regarding preparing a home compare to the rituals of first fruits the Israelites are to perform as they become settled in their new homeland?
 - c. How do the feelings of hope expressed in the poem relate to the idea of the Israelites’ looking toward settling in the land?
 - d. What things have you done in the past to make a home for yourself?

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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 New York: WRJ and URJ PRESS, 2008
 URJBooksandMusic.com
 WomenofReformJudaism.org

