

## STUDY GUIDE

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## *Parashat Pinchas* Numbers 25:10 - 30:1

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### *Parashat Pinchas* Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Cozbi—Foreign Seductress or Scapegoat?

Theme 2: Five Sisters Who Challenge God's Law—and WIN!

Theme 3: Short but Sweet—The Cameo Appearances of Other Named Women

## Introduction



The narrative in *parashat Pinchas* begins when the Israelites' forty-year journey in the wilderness is coming to an end. At the conclusion of the previous *parashah*, *Balak*, a group of Israelite men have sexual encounters with Moabite women and end up worshipping the local deity, Baal-peor. Although many Israelites go astray, the account focuses on one couple in particular: an Israelite notable and his Moabite partner, Cozbi, who act profanely in front of the entire Israelite community. Phinehas ("Pinchas" in Hebrew), Aaron's grandson, impales the couple with a spear, thus checking the plague God sent to punish the Israelites for their worship of foreign gods. *Parashat Pinchas* opens with the conclusion of this episode, including the blessing God bestows on Phinehas in the form of a pact of friendship that promises that the priesthood will remain in his family for all time, and the placing of blame for the Israelite offense.

After this blessing, the attention in our *parashah* turns to the Israelites as they prepare to enter the Land of Israel. Moses and Eleazar, the priest, take a census so that the Land of Israel can be divided among those present. As is the case with other examples of census taking in the Bible, this census takes account of the households using the men as representatives. Five sisters—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah—whose father Zelophehad has died, challenge this inheritance system. They note that their father's rightful piece of the land will be lost because he left no male heirs. They bring their complaint to Moses, who in turn brings it to God. God supports the claim of these five daring sisters, which leads to the initiation of a new law that allows daughters to inherit in cases where there is no son.

## 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 pp. 961–962 and/or survey the outline on p. 962. This will allow you to highlight some of the key themes in this portion and help participants 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.

## Theme 1: Cozbi—Foreign Seductress or Scapegoat?



In the preceding *parashah*, we read that the Israelites had “succumbed to the sin of idolatry, and Phineas the priest—Aaron’s grandson—responded by slaying a couple who had committed idolatry in front of the community” (Tamara Cohn Eskenazi, p. 963). *Parashat Pinchas* opens with God rewarding the priest for “displaying . . . his passion for [God]” (Numbers 25:11). Eskenazi elucidates three reasons why the opening scene is troubling to a modern reader: “first, because the new generation of Israelites falls prey to idolatry—and does so within view of the Promised Land; second, because Phinehas is rewarded for acting violently and without recourse to due process; and third, because women (albeit foreign) receive a disproportionate blame for the people’s downfall” (p. 963).

This section of the study guide will explore this third reason, as participants examine how the Torah text explains the roles of foreign women in this troubling episode. Cozbi, the female Moabite woman killed by Phinehas, is mentioned more than her male Israelite counterpart, and she receives most of the blame. This section of the study guide will help participants unpack the biblical text, assessing who is responsible according to the *parashah*. Additionally, participants will explore their own reactions to the way the story is told and compare the Cozbi narrative to other biblical narratives involving foreign women.

1. Go back and read Numbers 25:1–9 (from parashat Balak), which describes the Israelite apostasy at Baal-peor.
  - a. What was the sin of the Israelite menfolk at Baal-peor?
  - b. Who is blamed for enticing the men into their sinfulness? How does Nili Sachar Fox explain the contradictory descriptions of who tempted the Israelite men to sin?
  - c. How do the actions of one Israelite notable and one Midianite woman exemplify the situation at Baal-peor?
  - d. What action does Phinehas take in response to them?
2. Read Numbers 25:10–13, in which Phinehas’s action against the sinning couple is rewarded.
  - a. What is your response to Phinehas’s action? Explain your answer.
  - b. Read the section “Concerning Phinehas” in *Another View* by Tikva Frymer-Kensky (p. 982).
    - i. Frymer-Kensky translates the “covenant of friendship” differently than the Central Commentary. What is her translation?
    - ii. How does Frymer-Kensky’s translation allow her to interpret God’s response to Phinehas not as a reward for violence but instead as an end to the cycle of violence?
3. Read Numbers 25:14–18, in which the names of the culprits and their crime are elucidated.
  - a. Who are Cozbi and Zimri? What do we learn about them from their names? Why

- do you think they are introduced by name here but not in Numbers 25:1–9?
- b. According to Numbers 25:1–2, who is responsible for initiating the sinful events at Baal-peor? Compare this to who seems to be held responsible in Numbers 25:16–18. Point to specific facets of the text that support your conclusion.
  - c. Read Tamara Cohn Eskenazi’s note on Numbers 25:18 (p. 965). How might this emphasis on Cozbi’s name influence interpretations about whom the text considers to be the more responsible party?
  - d. Which member of the couple is more to blame? In answering this, please consider each of the following questions:
    - i. What is the relative status of each member of the couple vis-a-vis the general community? How might this play into the narrative of this event?
    - ii. What does Cozbi’s name mean? How does the meaning of her name reflect the Torah’s views of the Midianite women’s role in causing this crisis?
4. What is your response to the question of who is to blame for the Israelite betrayal?
5. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Numbers 25:15 (pp. 983–984), which contains multiple traditions about Cozbi.
- a. How would you summarize the rabbinic interpretation of Cozbi?
  - b. What do you think might have motivated the Rabbis to portray Cozbi in this way?
  - c. How do the Rabbis use the story of Cozbi to criticize Moses’ leadership?
6. Read the Introduction to Numbers 25:14–18, under the heading “The Culprits and Their Crime.”
- a. Read Exodus 2:5–10 and Exodus 4:24–26. What is the role of foreign women in these narratives?
  - b. How do the roles that foreign women play in Moses’ life compare to the role that Midianite women play in the Numbers 25 narrative (including the material from Numbers 25 that is parashat Balak)?
  - c. Compare the texts from Numbers and Exodus to Genesis 28:6–9. How are these texts similar and how are they different regarding the question of taking foreign wives? Overall, how would you characterize the Torah’s understanding of foreign women’s involvement in the Israelite narrative?

## Theme 2: Five Sisters Who Challenge God’s Law—and WIN!



Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah are the five daughters of a man named Zelophehad of the tribe of Manasseh. Initially, inheritance law provided that upon entering the Land of Israel, the land would be divided among the heads of Israelite households. The sisters, whose father has died in the wilderness leaving no son, realize they will be disenfranchised and that the portion belonging to their father will be lost to their clan permanently because he left no male heirs. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah publicly challenge the fairness of this inheritance law, and as a consequence, they are granted their father’s portion of the land. Additionally, the law is changed permanently so that women without brothers can

inherent their father's land in certain circumstances. Eskenazi explains the significance of this episode, highlighting the fact that "their proposal becomes God's Torah" (p. 971). Thus, in *parashat Pinchas* we encounter a lesson for women who hope to revise religious communal practice. As Eskenazi writes, "This case is important in showing (among other things) women who challenge community practices and who thereby bring significant modifications to existing legislation in order to meet changing social needs" (p. 961).

1. Read Numbers 27:1–11.
  - a. How are the sisters referred to in the biblical text? What does this say about the biblical understanding of the importance of their actions?
  - b. Where do the sisters choose to present their case? How is the narrative affected by the setting they choose?
  - c. What request do the sisters put to the Israelite leadership? What rhetorical devices do they use to present their case?
  - d. What precedent is set for future religious innovation through the framing of the sisters' challenge?
  - e. Read "The daughters of Zelophehad . . . came forward" in the Post-biblical Interpretations by Judith Baskin (pp. 984–985).
    - i. How would you characterize the rabbinic understanding of the sisters' actions?
    - ii. What do the Rabbis consider to be important about the fact that the sisters are named?
2. Read "Concerning the Daughters of Zelophehad" in Another View by Tikva Frymer-Kensky (pp. 982–983).
  - a. How does the story of the Shunammite woman connect to the story of the daughters of Zelophehad? What insights into our parashah does the tale in II Kings 4 and 8 provide?
  - b. How did land ownership affect the reality of women's lives in ancient Israel?
  - c. How do the sisters help create the "new world order" that Frymer-Kensky argues this parashah is trying to create?
    - i. Go back and read Eskenazi's introduction to "The Results: The Sisters Receive the Promise of Land" (p. 973).
    - ii. How does Eskenazi's introduction support Frymer-Kensky's assertion?
3. What experience have you had in challenging existing practices and creating communal change? Have you ever had an experience comparable to that of the daughters of Zelophehad? How did your experience compare to that of the sisters? What can you learn from their example?
4. Read the last three paragraphs of the Contemporary Reflection by Silvina Chemen (p. 986).
  - a. What does Chemen believe is the most important legacy of the five sisters?
  - b. Whom do you consider to be contemporary "daughters of Zelophehad"? Why?
5. Read "I Know About the Woman Who Sits and Waits" by Judith Rose (p. 988).
  - a. What does the poem seem to say about what it means to be women who sit and wait?
  - b. How does the poem hope women will act differently?
  - c. Do you know of a woman who "sits and waits"? What has her influence been in your life?

## Theme 3:

### Short but Sweet—The Cameo Appearances of Other Named Women



In her introduction to the *parashah*, Eskenazi highlights “other fascinating women [who] make cameo appearances” in *parashat pinchas* (p. 962). Studying these women draws attention to the uniqueness of *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, as the Central Commentary and Post-biblical Interpretations explore the role these women play in the biblical narrative. This section provides a brief introduction to the female characters in Numbers 26.

1. Read Numbers 26:46, which mentions a woman in the context of a census that mostly lists men.
  - a. According to Tamara Eskenazi’s comment on this verse, why might Serah’s name have been preserved?
  - b. Read Genesis 46:17 and the comment on that verse. What additional information do we learn about Serah here?
  - c. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Numbers 26:46 (p. 984). How do the Rabbis explain Serah’s presence?
  - d. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Genesis 46:17 (p. 276), from the *parashah* where Serah bat Asher is first introduced. How do the Rabbi’s explain Serah bat Asher’s longevity?
  - e. Read the poem, “Serah Bat Asher,” by Hara Person (p. 280). In what way does Person’s interpretation of Serah bat Asher’s long life add to or differ from that of the Rabbis? What does this poem add to your understanding of Serah bat Asher’s role in the biblical narrative?
2. Read Numbers 26:59, in which two women are mentioned, and the comments on this verse.
  - a. Eskenazi explains that “the reference here emphasizes that these particular family events are not merely personal but of a national consequence” (p. 970). What do you think she means?
  - b. Jochebed and Miriam each play a role in saving Moses’ life and therefore in the redemption of the people of Israel from slavery. How is their presence in the narrative honored in this *parashah*?
  - c. What is significant about the fact that Jochebed and Miriam are named?
3. In this *parashah* we find eight women mentioned by name. What does it mean for you personally to read about these women? What insights about women in the Bible do you take away from their appearance in the *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 remain?



*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*  
Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Andrea R. Weiss, editors  
New York: WRJ and URJ PRESS, 2008  
URJBooksandMusic.com  
WomenofReformJudaism.org

