

## STUDY GUIDE

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

## *Parashat Va-et'chanan* Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

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### *Parashat Va-et'chanan* Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Cozbi—The Decalogue—Are They Addressed to Women?

Theme 2: Responding to the Challenge of the Commandments

## Introduction



In *parashat Va-et'chanan* Moses recounts the events that occurred while the Israelites journeyed in the wilderness. Moses explains the lessons the Israelites are supposed to derive from these experiences in order to affect their future actions. Thus, the common Israelite experience of God in the wilderness becomes the basis for the relationship that will mark their lives in the new land. Since Moses will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land, his teaching aims to ensure that the community learns from the past as they move on to the future. The text of this *parashah* contains well-known material found in the prayer book, known as the *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta*, as well as the Decalogue, or the Ten Commandments. In her introduction, Ora Horn Prouser notes, “First, he spells out various reasons as to *why* the Israelites should obey God’s teachings (4:1–40). Next, he reminds them of *what* God commanded at Horeb (Sinai) (4:44–5:30), including the Decalogue (“Ten Commandments”) (5:6–18). Then, he teaches them *how* to fulfill the commandments” (p. 1063). The first theme will deal with the “what” of Moses’ teaching, and the second theme will deal with the “how.”

## Theme 1: The Decalogue—Are They Addressed to Women?



This *parashah* is the second time that the Torah recounts the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, given at Mount Sinai. The first occurs in *parashat Yitro*, in Exodus 20:1–14. Here, Moses reminds the people of the events from *Yitro*, just as they stand on the plains of Moab, poised to enter the Promised Land. In retelling the events of the Israelites’ time in the desert, Moses plays the role of teacher throughout the *parashah*. This section of the study guide will focus on the what section of Moses’ teaching, specifically the Decalogue. We will look at the question of who appears to be the intended audience and how these commandments may relate to women, while also taking a deeper look at some of the laws themselves and comparing them to the version from *parashat Yitro*.

1. Read Deuteronomy 5:6–18, the Decalogue, as a whole.
  - a. Look at the language of the Decalogue. What is the grammatical structure of the



- language? To whom do these laws seem to be addressed? Explain your response.
- b. Which of these laws seem particularly pertinent to women? On what do you base your response?
  - c. What insights might you glean about the lives of women in ancient Israel from this list of commandments?
2. Now go back and read Deuteronomy 5:12–15, which lays out the commandment of the Sabbath.
- a. Based on the description provided in these verses, what constitutes the Sabbath? How is that the same as or different from what comes to mind when you think of Shabbat today?
  - b. What reasons are given for the continued Israelite celebration of the Sabbath?
  - c. Read Exodus 20:8–11, which contains the first iteration of the commandment to keep the Sabbath. How do the language and rationale differ from the version in Deuteronomy?
  - d. Why do you think that two separate traditions regarding the Sabbath would have been maintained in the two texts of the Decalogue?
  - e. What lesson does the editorial note at the end of the comment on Deuteronomy 5:12–15 (p. 1074) derive from the differences between the versions of this commandment in Deuteronomy and Exodus?
  - f. Look carefully at the list of people mentioned in Deuteronomy 5:14. Given a typical family structure, who is not mentioned in that list? What might that imply in terms of who is allowed to work on the Sabbath? What might the absence on this list indicate?
3. Read Deuteronomy 5:16–18, which, as Prouser explains, “deal[s] solely with issues protecting the family” (p. 1073).
- a. How does the commandment to honor one’s father and mother (5:16) differ from the structure or wording of other commandments in the Decalogue? What does this say about the relative importance of this commandment?
  - b. How does the commandment not to commit adultery (5:17) apply differently to men and women? What can you glean from this difference?
4. Prouser (and the translation) notes that verse 18 applies only to men. What is her rationale for this conclusion? Contrast Prouser’s commentary with that of Elaine Goodfriend on the text in Exodus 20:10 (p. 418). How does Goodfriend’s comment speak to Prouser’s?
5. Having looked at some of the details of the Decalogue, look back again at Deuteronomy 5:6–18, the recounting of the Decalogue as a whole as it is presented in this *parashah*.
- a. Turn to page 416 and read Elaine Goodfriend’s comment regarding the target audience of the Decalogue in her commentary on *Parashat Yitro*. Explain her argument. How does her argument color your reading of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy?
  - b. Now read Goodfriend’s comment on Exodus 21:2 (p. 430). How does this comment fit into her argument about the relationship of women to the Decalogue?

- c. Read the Another View section in *parashat Mishpatim* (p. 445), in which Carol Meyers addresses the question of grammatical structure and women’s relationship to the Decalogue. Now return to Prouser’s comment on Deuteronomy 5:18. Having read Goodfriend’s and Meyer’s comments, do you now agree or disagree with Prouser’s assertion? Why or why not? What would you use to support your argument?
  - d. How would you now answer the question of whether or not the Decalogue is addressed to women?
6. Read “Sinai” by Merle Feld (p. 1087).
- a. How does Feld’s poem address the question of whether or not women were included in the revelation at Sinai?
  - b. Feld’s poem notes the importance of mothering as part of the woman’s experience at Sinai. How does the parental role affect her experience of revelation?

## Theme 2: Responding to the Challenge of the Commandments



As part of his final act as the Israelite leader, Moses teaches the gathered people the meaning behind the events that have transpired. His goal is for the Israelites to understand the basis of their relationship with God before they enter the Promised Land, so that they can act in a way that will maintain a positive relationship once in the Land. Moses will not be allowed to enter the Promised Land with them, and the people will fight under Joshua’s leadership. This knowledge adds a special degree of importance to Moses’ words—if he teaches the Israelites well and transmits all that they need to know, they can continue to thrive after he is gone. If his teaching fails to motivate the behavior that God wants, all his work to bring the Israelites to the Land could be for naught. Prouser points out that Moses, like any good teacher, divides his lesson clearly so that the people can understand his message (p. 1063). This theme of the study guide will address the question how to fulfill the commandments. The biblical verses in this theme will be familiar to anyone who has attended services. These prayers are known as the *Sh’ma* and *V’ahavta*, which Prouser describes as “prayers that stand at the center of the Jewish proclamation of faith” (p. 1063).

1. Read Deuteronomy 5:1–4.
  - a. Look at the first paragraph on page 1063. Prouser writes that “Moses exhorts them to use the past as the basis for future behavior...” Explain what she might mean by that statement.
  - b. Who does Moses believe is responsible for maintaining the proper relationship between Israel and God?
  - c. How does Moses emphasize the communal role in maintaining the covenant?
  - d. How does Moses try to convince the people of their proper role in the covenantal relationship?
2. Read Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and compare with the translation of the *Sh’ma* in the prayer book.
  - a. How does the translation of verse 4 compare to what you are used to hearing in synagogue?
  - b. Read Prouser’s commentary on verse 4. How do different translations of this verse lead to different theological conclusions? What is the role of this verse in the

- development of monotheism?
- c. How do the choices in translation impact on your understanding of these verses?
  - d. What is the relationship between the *Sh'ma* (Deuteronomy 6:4) and the *V'ahavta* (Deuteronomy 6:5–9)?
  - e. How do you understand the *V'ahavta* to be the *how* of the Israelites' need to maintain a proper relationship with God?
    - i. What are the main tenants of this *how*?
    - ii. What ongoing community structures help Jews fulfill this *how* today?
    - iii. What role does the Jewish household play in this *how*?
  - f. Prouser asserts that the command to “love” God has implications beyond emotional feelings. What are they? How does this help explain her interpretation of the *V'ahavta* as the *how* in Moses' lesson?
3. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on “Hear O Israel! YHVH is our God” (Deuteronomy 6:4–9) (p. 1083).
- a. How did the Rabbis understand the reason for the twice daily recitation of the *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta*?
  - b. Whom did the Rabbis understand to be commanded in its recitation?
  - c. What is your response to this piece of rabbinic logic?
4. Read the Contemporary Reflection by Carol Ochs from “Religion promises us a meaningful world...” through “is so central in our tradition” (p. 1084–85).
- a. What about standing on the precipice between life in the wilderness and life in the Promised Land does Ochs believe causes the Israelites to stand back and assess their relationship to God?
  - b. What does Ochs believe can be the role of religion today?
  - c. What role does family play in Ochs's understanding of the role of religion in our lives?
  - d. What is the role of religion in your life today? What kinds of moments in our lives may lead to reassessment in this way? Have you ever had an experience of standing on a metaphoric precipice that led you to assess your relationship with God?
5. Read “Vahavta” by Marge Piercy (p. 1088)
- a. Compare it to the text of Deuteronomy 6:5–9. In what ways is it similar, and in what ways is it different? What are the main themes of the poem, and how do they compare to the main themes of the biblical verses?
  - b. To whom does Piercy's poem seem to be addressed? Whereas Prouser writes that the Deuteronomy verses helped to “sustain the people Israel throughout many years of waiting to ‘cross the Jordan’” (p. 1077), what seems to be the context of this poem?
  - c. How is Piercy's poem a reflection of Jewish history and of God's role in that history?

## 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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