

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Vayak'heil Exodus 35:1–38:20

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Parashat Vayak'heil Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: It Takes a Village (Women and Men) to Build a Community

Theme 2: Heart, Skill, Spirit

Theme 3: What Do You See in the Mirror?

Introduction



P*arashat Vayak'heil* continues and expands on themes of the previous three Exodus portions (*Trumah*, *Ttzaveh*, and *Ki Tisa*); together with the next portion (*P'kudei*), these five portions form a comprehensive narrative about the design, construction, and dedication of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), the Israelites' elaborate, but portable, sanctuary in the desert. These chapters are divided between those in which God gives instructions for the fabrication of the *Mishkan* (chapters 25–34, the so-called “descriptive” chapters) and those in which the Israelites implement the instructions for the *Mishkan* and its furnishings (chapters 35–40, the “prescriptive” chapters). It is also in the prescriptive chapters that the actual construction begins. In the previous parashah, *Ki Tisa*, the Israelites and God survive an early rupture in their relationship when the frightened people construct the Golden Calf for comfort and protection after Moses leaves them to ascend Mount Sinai. In contrast, here in *parashat Vayak'heil* the Israelites eagerly demonstrate their commitment to fulfilling God's commands with their copious offerings of material to be used for building the Tabernacle. Abundance abounds in this portion. The people are so eager to give that they bring more supplies than the artisans of the *Mishkan* can use. Their gifts—the threads and yarns, fabrics, skins, wood, oils, spices, precious stones, and metals—are portrayed so elaborately and with such rich detail that the reader can almost feel, see, and smell these sumptuous contributions, the outpouring of the peoples' hearts. Of particular interest in this parashah are the descriptions of the women's contributions. *Parashat Vayak'heil* makes clear that women are among the community's skilled artisans and that their expertise is acknowledged and valued. In this most sacred work, the talents and ability of both women and men are required. Finally, *parashat Vayak'heil* emphasizes that the essential components of one's “offering” are not only technical skill, comprising physical dexterity and practical knowledge, but also the heart and spirit that one brings to holy tasks.

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 521–22 and/or survey the outline on page 522. 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: It Takes a Village (Women and Men) to Build a Community



What is the best way to build a community and the structures that serve it? This theme explores *parashat Vayak'heil's* response to that question. This portion makes clear that women play an integral role in the construction of the *Mishkan* as both donors and artisans. Moved not by command but by their own hearts, both men and women come forward and willingly part with their own treasured possessions for the greater benefit of the community. Thus *parashat Vayak'heil* not only describes an event in biblical times but also offers a model of egalitarian community building that is equally compelling in today's world.

1. Read Exodus 35:1–9.

- a. According to Carol Meyers, who is “the whole Israelite community” convoked by Moses in 35:1? What are the possible meanings of the Hebrew word *edah*? What are the implications of the different interpretations?
- b. Before Moses begins his instructions for constructing the *Mishkan*, he reminds the Israelites about some of the laws of Sabbath observance (Exodus 35:2–3). What do you think is the relationship between the giving of these commands and the lengthy building directives that follow? What might have been the reason for placing instructions for Sabbath adherence before, rather than after the detailed building orders? What insight or guidance might the placement of these instructions give us about the contemporary observance of Shabbat?

2. Read Exodus 35:20–29.

- a. Note how many times the text refers to “the whole community” or to “everyone” in this passage (the word *kol* in Hebrew). Why do you think the biblical text explicitly refers to “everyone” when describing the community to whom Moses gives instructions and who then come forward with contributions?
- b. Read Meyers's note to Exodus 35:22. What is the reason she gives for the use of the Hebrew word *nashim* (women) in this verse? What does Meyers say this suggests to the reader about the status of women in biblical society at this time?
- c. In Exodus 35:25–26, women are mentioned specifically in connection with particular skilled tasks. What were those tasks? Why do you think these jobs were the particular province of women? According to Meyers's comments on these two verses, how did the gender-specificity of these tasks impact the community's women and their relationships? To what extent do these verses and Meyers's commentary on them challenge and expand your perception of women's

role in the building of the Tabernacle?

3. Read Exodus 35:30–36:7.

- a. In Exodus 35:30–35 and 36:1 Moses commissions “all [the community’s] skilled persons.” How does Meyers explain why the Hebrew word *ish* here refers to both women and men? What is the significance of Meyers’s interpretation in terms of your personal reading of the building of the Tabernacle?
- b. In Exodus 36:2–6 the community continues to bring offerings until finally Moses has to tell them to stop. The genders are mentioned separately by Moses in verse 6. How does Meyers explain this seemingly deliberate inclusion of both genders? How does her commentary affect your reading of this episode? In what way is this depiction of community building different from or similar to your experience of synagogue life today?

4. Read Elsie R. Stern’s *Another View* (p. 538).

- a. Stern first outlines two ways that scholars have understood the relationship between the Tabernacle depicted in this parashah and the Jerusalem Temple. What are these two positions? Stern further asserts that the Tabernacle and the Temple represent two different models of sacred space. What are those two models?
- b. Stern connects the idea of the Tabernacle to the concept of the *Shechinah*. How does she explain the *Shechinah*? According to Stern, how do the Kabbalists understand the concept of the *Shechinah* in gender-specific ways? How is the kabbalistic idea of the *Shechinah* linked to the symbolic differences between the Tabernacle and the Jerusalem Temple? What do you think makes “immanence” a feminine quality? Would you also attribute gender-specific attributes to the Tabernacle and the Temple? If so, what are those different attributes?
- c. The Hebrew wording in Exodus 35:22 is unusual, literally “the men on [or: over] the women came. . . .” Read the comment on this verse in *Post-biblical Interpretations* (p. 538). According to Ruth H. Sohn, what were the various ways that the medieval commentators understood this phrasing? Look at each of the cited commentators’ interpretations of this phrase. What does each suggest about the relationship between men and women in biblical society?
- d. In your experiences with religious institutions, have you ever felt that your “offerings” were not valued, appreciated, or welcome? If so, why do you think this was so? What did you do about it? Looking back, would you handle the situation differently now? If so, in what way?
- e. In your own life, where do you find “sacred space”? What is it about this place that makes it “sacred” to you? What is your definition of “sacred”?

Theme 2: Heart, Skill, Spirit



Leaders of every sort of institution and organization have long pondered the question “What are the best ways to motivate our people?” In this section of *parashat Vayak’heil*, God provides an answer (and a prediction): each person “whose heart is so moved” will give. The result is an outpouring of offering so great that it overtakes the actual need. This theme considers internal rather than external motivations in both giving materially and creating a product. What is the role of inborn skill? How important are the heart and spirit that one brings to a task? How might each of these qualities enhance the others?

1. Read Exodus 35:4–19.

- a. In Exodus 35:5 Moses tells the people what God commanded: “Take from among you gifts to *YHVH*; everyone whose heart is so moved shall bring them. . . .” In 35:29, the reader is told, “Thus the Israelites, all the men and women whose hearts moved them to bring anything for the work. . . .” According to Meyers’s note on 35:5, what is the Hebrew root for “to be willing, be moved”? What does this root mean when used in conjunction with “heart”? What insight into this verse is provided by Meyers’s commentary?
- b. Read Exodus 35:10, in which Moses calls for all “who are skilled” to come forward and build the structure that God has commanded. According to Meyers’s note on this verse, what is the Hebrew expression that is translated here as “skilled”? How does this compare with the expression used to connote motivation in verse 5?

2. Read Exodus 35:20–31.

- a. In Exodus 35:25–26, the women are described as “skilled” and as “excelled in that skill” (of spinning goats’ hair). What is Meyers’s explanation of the literal meaning of the Hebrew *chochmat lev*, translated in verse 25 as “skilled”? What do you think is the connection between “heart” and one’s technical skills? Why do you think that, after specifically noting that the women “excelled” (in v. 25), the text repeats this description of the women immediately following in verse 26? What point might the biblical author(s) have been trying to make?
- b. Turn back to *parashat Breishit* and read Genesis 1:2. What is the meaning of the Hebrew word *ruach*? Who or what possesses *ruach* (spirit) in this passage? How is *ruach* used in Genesis and what does it accomplish? In Exodus 35:31, Moses explains that God has given the artisan Bezalel “a divine spirit [*ruach*] of skill. . . .” How do you understand *ruach* being both a divine and a human attribute? Who do you think manifests this type of *ruach* today?
- c. Why do you think there is so much emphasis in the above-mentioned verses on the motivation of the “spirit” and “heart”? What would be an alternative motivation of the people? Why do you think that God calls forth this particular human impulse?
- d. Do you think that if “spirit[s]” and “heart[s]” had *not* been invoked, the people would have brought “more than is needed for the tasks entailed in the work that *YHVH* has commanded to be done” (Exodus 36:5)? Explain your response. What in your experience with the life of a community informs your response?

3. Read Post-biblical Interpretations in which Ruth H. Sohn discusses Exodus 35:25, “all the skilled women spun with their own hands” (p. 539)

- a. While the Torah text describes Bezalel as having “a divine spirit of skill” (Exodus 35:31), Sohn explains that Rabbi Eliezer understood the term “skilled women” (35:25) to mean something quite different. What point was Rabbi Eliezer making when he used this verse as a proof text in the Babylonian Talmud (BT), *Yoma* 66b?
- b. How did Rabbi Eliezer’s opinion impact the learning opportunities for Jewish women?
- c. Why do you think Eliezer’s opinion was the majority view instead of Ben Azzai’s opinion rendered in BT *Sotah* 20a?

4. In her *Contemporary Reflection* (pp. 539–41), Rachel Adler comments on the extensively detailed description of the building and adorning of the Tabernacle. She suggests that a building and its objects and furnishings make a statement about the values of those whose skill and effort were used in its construction. Think of a building to which you have dedicated “skill and effort” to make it what it is today. This might be your home, an office, your synagogue, or another community structure. What do some of the objects in this space say symbolically about you and the things that are most important to you?
5. Read “They Build the Tabernacle” by Ruth Brin (p. 543). Why does Brin believe that God is found less often in grand edifices such as the Temples of Solomon and Herod? Despite the emphasis on material offerings found in this parashah, Brin suggests that devoting one’s whole heart to God is more challenging. What has been your experience with both types of “offering”?
6. Think about situations in which you have had to motivate people, perhaps your children, other family members, supervisees, colleagues, or community volunteers. What tactics have you tried, and what has been your experience with different sorts of approaches? What did you learn as a result?

Theme 3: What Do You See in the Mirror?



In this section, items of personal vanity (women’s mirrors) are transformed into sacred objects (the copper laver and its stand). This theme considers the following questions: Are the two types of objects mutually exclusive? Must they be? Can an object benefit an individual and also serve a wider communal purpose? For women, the mirror has often served as a source of both affirmation and self-hatred. What else might be learned through the looking glass, the act of self-reflection?

1. Read Exodus 38:1–8, in which Bezalel forms the altar, its utensils, and mesh grating as well as a copper laver and stand fashioned from women’s mirrors.
 - a. According to Carol Meyers, what were the laver and the stand? What functions did they serve in the Tabernacle, and where were they positioned in it?
 - b. Who provided the materials for these objects? According to Meyers’s note on Exodus 38:8, why is the Hebrew *ha-tzovot asher tzavu* translated here as “women”? What does Meyers suggest is the implication of women possessing mirrors?
 - c. What is the significance of the text’s specifically placing the women “at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (Exodus 38:8)? How does this enhance or expand your impression of the role of women at this very significant community site? What insight does this verse provide into ancient views of women’s role in society? In what way has this changed, and in what way does it still apply today?
2. Read Sohn’s comments on Exodus 38:8 in *Post-biblical Interpretations* (p. 539).
 - a. How did the medieval commentators Ibn Ezra, *Chizz’kuni*, and *Sforno* interpret this verse?
 - b. Why do you think these male observers would want to believe that these women “had cast away their jewelry in order to devote themselves to God”? Why would “personal vanity” be considered incompatible with Temple service? In your view, how might the two coexist?
 - c. According to Rashi, what was Moses’s initial objection to accepting the women’s mirrors? In the midrash cited by Rashi, how do the women convert an object of “personal vanity” into an act

of “survival and redemption”? Why do you think Rashi needed to give the women these attributes?

- d. In your own life, can you think of an object that can be used for multiple purposes, for both personal pleasure as well as communal service?
3. In Rachel Hadas’s poem “The Mirror” (p. 544), what does the mirror represent to the writer? What function does the mirror play in the parent-child relationship? Why does the writer refer to some of those who look in the mirror as “big oafs”?
 4. In Lea Goldberg’s poem “From My Mother’s Home” (p. 544), how does the writer use her own vision in the mirror to undo her grandmother’s erasure from the world of images?
 5. What has been your own relationship with mirrors? How have you used mirrors, and what have they meant to you? Has your experience of looking at yourself in mirrors changed over the course of your life? If so, what do you think has caused the change? Do you think that there are differences between women and men in their use of and relationship to objects like mirrors that reflect their image back to them? If so, what are those differences?

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:

- What do you consider to be the key components of a successful endeavor?
- What are the roles of effort, intent, devotion, and desire? What is the role of aptitude or inborn talent and ability?
- Have you ever in your life wished to engage in a particular undertaking for which you felt you lacked the capability? What did you do in this situation? What would you advise others to do?
- Do you think there are differences in how women and men approach challenging tasks for which they might not be fully able or competent?

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

