

## STUDY GUIDE

# *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

### *Parashat Vayeira* Genesis 18:1-22:24

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#### *Parashat Vayeira* Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: Women as Victims and Victimiziers

Theme 2: The Vicissitudes of Laughter

## Introduction



**V***ayeira* is a portion rich in the complexities, passions, and challenges of family and communal life. Each story in the portion is multilayered and full of paradox, ambiguity, and intricacy. In brief: God grants Sarah and Abraham a miraculous pregnancy late in life, which results in Isaac's long-awaited birth (Genesis 18; 21:1–7). In violent Sodom, the daughters of Abraham's nephew, Lot, are offered to a brutal mob before going on to become the mothers of new nations after the destruction of their city (Genesis 19). Abraham seeks to protect himself from a foreign ruler by passing off his wife as his sister (Genesis 20). Next, expulsion and salvation result when two other mothers, Sarah and Hagar, desperately seek to protect their sons, Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 21:8–21). After Abraham settles his family in Beersheba, God "tests" Abraham in a dramatic episode known as the "Binding of Isaac." The parashah concludes with the announcement of a new generation, which includes Rebekah, the wife Isaac will marry in the next parashah.

This study guide will spotlight two themes. In "Women as Victims and Victimiziers," participants will examine the incidences of violence in this parashah in which female characters function as both agents and recipients of aggression. The second theme, "The Vicissitudes of Laughter," explores the multiple meanings and uses of laughter. Both themes consider the role of gender in the decision to employ violence and laughter in human interaction.

## 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 page 85 and/or survey the outline on page 86. 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 material in the Central Commentary. This will help you to answer questions and gain a deeper understanding of the biblical text.

## Theme 1: Women as Victims and Victimizers



While violence in this parashah is directed toward men, women, and children alike, we will focus here on the female characters as both recipients and perpetrators of exploitation and abuse. First, Lot, harboring two divine messengers, offers up both his virgin daughters to an aggressive mob gathered outside his home demanding that his guests be brought out (Genesis 19:6–8). Next, for the second time in Genesis, Abraham seeks to protect himself from a foreign ruler by passing off his wife, Sarah, as his sister (Genesis 20:1–13). (Later, in *parashat Tol'dot*, the story is repeated a third time, when Isaac seeks to shield himself from the same ruler by disguising Rebekah as his sister.) Finally, a distraught Sarah and a compliant Abraham cast Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness. In the Contemporary Reflection, Judith Plaskow notes, “In Lot’s treatment of his daughters—and in the Torah’s lack of comment on that treatment—can we see the casual acceptance, indeed the invisibility, of violence against women that is so ubiquitous in many cultures, including our own?” (pp. 107–8). She poses another question, “In Abraham’s seeming lack of concern about the fate of Sarah, can we see the ways in which marginalized peoples are all too liable to duplicate patterns of subordination from which they themselves have suffered?” (p. 108). Plaskow points out how easily victims can become victimizers when they turn the oppression once directed at them onto someone even more vulnerable and marginal than themselves. Thus, to save himself, a frightened Abraham exploits Sarah, and then a threatened Sarah oppresses Hagar and Ishmael.

### Overarching Questions

As you study these parts of the parashah, keep in mind the following overarching questions:

- What is the nature of the violence perpetrated by women in this parashah?
- What is the nature of the violence perpetrated by men in this parashah?
- When they are the recipients of violence, how do the women in this parashah respond?
- Do the gender differences in this parashah mirror what you see in the world today? In the world in which you grew up?

1. Read Genesis 19:1–8, which tells of Lot’s attempt to placate the mob by offering his daughters in place of his (male) visitors.
  - a. What do you think of Lot’s willingness to sacrifice his daughters in order to save his guests?
  - b. What might have been Lot’s reasons for acting as he did?
  - c. Who ultimately save the women from harm? What might the reader infer from the text about the daughters’ rescuers?
  - d. Read the Central Commentary on verse 8. Compared to the Lot’s view, how does our culture today view male rape vis-à-vis female rape?
  - e. What parallels do you see between this story and events in our day?
  - f. How does the more contemporary understanding of rape as an act of violence rather than sex change the way you view Lot’s actions?

2. Read Genesis 20:1–18, in which Abraham claims that Sarah is his sister, King Abimelech seizes her, and God, in the king’s dream, reveals Sarah’s true identity.
  - a. How does Abraham justify his treatment of Sarah?
  - b. How does this scene compare to Abraham’s concern about the strangers of Sodom and Gomorrah for whom he pleaded before God (Genesis 18:23–32)?
  - c. Who “rescues” Sarah? What point might the text be making here?
  - d. On page 107, Judith Plaskow writes, “The story names a pattern that becomes a recurring part of Jewish history: male Jews, subordinated by the dominant culture, in turn subordinate women within their own cultures, doubling the otherness that partly mirrors their own.” What do you make of Plaskow’s assertion? Can you think of examples that would support this theory in the world today?
  
3. Read Genesis 21:9–21, the story of the banishing of Hagar and Ishmael.
  - a. In the note on verse 9 (p. 98), Tammi J. Schneider explains that the Hebrew word for “playing” can be interpreted to have a sexual connotation, suggesting that Sarah was motivated by a wish to protect her son, Isaac, from a sexually predatory Ishmael. Yet in the next verse, Sarah tells Abraham, “The son of this slave girl is not going to share in the inheritance with my son Isaac!” suggesting that Sarah is primarily concerned about protecting Isaac’s economic interests. What do you think might have been the motive(s) behind Sarah’s actions? Does one motive make Sarah more sympathetic to you than another? Why or why not?
  - b. How might Abraham’s treatment of Sarah in the Abimelech incident (Genesis 20:1–13) have contributed to Sarah’s behavior in this story?
  - c. In verse 10 Sarah tells Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael, and in verse 12 God tells Abraham to do as Sarah says. Read the poem “Sarah” on page 109. What insight does this poem bring to Sarah’s actions? What does Edna Apehek give as reasons for Sarah’s actions?
  - d. Read “Sarah and Hagar” on page 110. What kind of relationship does Linda Hirschhorn imagine for the two women that is *not* found in the biblical text? What other type of relationship between Sarah and Hagar can you imagine that might have been lost or omitted from the biblical text?

## Theme 2: The Vicissitudes of Laughter

Along with many acts and forms of violence, there are sections of this parashah filled with incredulity, amazement, great joy—and laughter. In *parashat Lech L'chah*, God declares to Abraham that his line will continue through a son to be born to Sarah (Genesis 17:15–16). In this parashah, three divine messengers announce that the conception of that son, Isaac, is imminent. Laughter is the first response to both proclamations. The Hebrew root for “laughter” (*tzadi/chet/kuf*) appears four times when Sarah and Abraham learn that they will have a son (Genesis 18:12–15); again in Genesis 21:9, when Sarah fears for Isaac at the hands of Ishmael; and in the next parashah, *Tol'dot*, when Isaac, now an adult, “plays” with his wife, Rebekah. 1. Read Deuteronomy 5:1–4.



## Overarching Questions

As you study these parts of the parashah, keep in mind the following overarching questions:

- We most often think of laughter as a positive response or an expression of joy, but that is not always the case. What other types of laughter are there?
- Do you think that there are differences in the way women and men laugh or use laughter?
- How do you use laughter? What role does it play in your life?
- Do you find power in laughter? Under what circumstances can laughter be powerful?

1. Read Genesis 18:1–15, in which Sarah and Abraham learn that they will have a son within the year.
  - a. Turn back to the previous parashah and read Genesis 17:15–18, where Abraham reacts to this news. Compare this to Sarah’s response in Genesis 18:9–15. Sarah and Abraham hear the same information, that they will have a child, and each laughs. Yet the quality and meaning of their laughter are different. How does their laughter differ? What does this difference reveal about Abraham and Sarah?
  - b. In Genesis 18:13, God asks Abraham why Sarah is laughing. The Hebrew words for “laughter,” “play” (with a sexual connotation), and the name “Isaac” all share the same Hebrew root—*tzadi/chet/kuf*. How are “laughter” and “sexual play” related? How are they related to the role played by Isaac in this story?
  - c. Read the Central Commentary on Genesis 18:13 (p. 89). What are the various interpretations of Sarah’s laughter? What is the support given for these different readings? What are the ramifications for the different ways Sarah’s action can be understood?
  - d. Read the Post-biblical Interpretation on Genesis 18:13 (p. 105). According to the Rabbis, why does Sarah laugh? What are the Rabbis saying about *sh’lom bayit*, “peace in the home,” and the proper relationship between a husband and wife? What do they suggest about the relationship between Sarah and God? In these comments about Sarah, what insights can be gleaned about the rabbinic worldview?
  - e. Turn back to the biblical text itself and read Genesis 18:14. How does God interpret Sarah’s laughter? What do you think this response suggests to the reader about God? What might Sarah’s laughter imply about her relationship with God?
  - f. Read the two comments about Genesis 18:15 on page 89. What explanation does Tammi J. Schneider give as to why Sarah denied laughing? What does this suggest about the difference between Sarah’s relationship with God and her relationship with Abraham?
  - g. Read “A Meditation in Seven Days” on page 109. In Alicia Suskin Ostriker’s retelling, Sarah is the one who names Isaac, and Ostriker gives the reason for Sarah’s choice. Do her reasons resonate with you? Why or why not? What might Ostriker be saying by comparing Hagar and Sarah—by comparing God’s pity and God-given laughter?

## 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

