

STUDY GUIDE

The Torah: A Women's Commentary

Parashat Vayeishev Genesis 37:1-40:23

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Parashat Vayeishev Study Guide Themes

Theme 1: The Power of Social Status

Theme 2: Clothing Makes the Man (and the Woman)

Introduction



“This is the family history of Jacob” (Genesis 37:2). Thus begins *parashat Vayeishev*, the continuation of the story of Abraham’s descendants. The narrative prepares the way for the Israelites’ move to Egypt, from which the central story of the Torah—the Exodus—will emerge in the next book, *Sh’mot* (referred to as Exodus in English). There are four stories in this portion, and each depicts powerful interpersonal cross-currents of desire, resentment, envy, entitlement, self-deception, and finally, maturation and growth. Joseph, the second youngest and favored son of Jacob, taunts his older brothers with his father’s gift of a coat and his dream-inspired predictions of a future in which he will be master over both his parents and his siblings (Genesis 37:1–11). Enraged, his brothers conspire to kill him (Genesis 37:15–20), until the first-born, Reuben, intervenes and has Joseph thrown into a pit instead (Genesis 37:21–24). When the opportunity to sell Joseph arises, Judah, the fourth-born, leads the negotiations, and Midianites take Joseph to Egypt (Genesis 37:25–28).

The narrative flow of the parashah is interrupted by the story of Judah and Tamar. Tamar was previously married to Judah’s son, Er. In accordance with the laws of levirate marriage, Judah was then obligated to give his second son, Onan, to Tamar, in order to produce an heir for his brother. After Onan married Tamar, he too died. By rights, Judah should have then given his third and youngest son, Shelah, to Tamar. However, Judah, fearing that this son would die like his brothers before him, refuses, thus consigning Tamar to a childless and constricted life in her father’s home (Genesis 38:1–11). Taking her fate into her own hands, Tamar deceives Judah into impregnating her with the child who will be the ancestor of King David and also acknowledging his own wrongdoing in depriving her of a husband (Genesis 38:12–30).

The Joseph narrative then resumes as Joseph is brought to Egypt and quickly rises to great power and authority in the home of his master and benefactor, Potiphar (Genesis 39:1–6a). When Joseph refuses to succumb to an attempted seduction by Potiphar’s wife, she turns the tables and accuses Joseph of “toying” with her. Joseph is thrown in jail (Genesis 39:6–20). In the final episode in this parashah, Joseph once again



interprets dreams, this time in prison, and catches the attention of two fellow prisoners, servants of Pharaoh (Genesis 39:21–40:23).

This study guide will highlight two particular themes within the parashah. In “The Power of Social Status,” participants will focus on how and by whom social status is defined and determined, how superior social status can be exploited, and how the seemingly powerless can utilize other strengths. The second theme, “Clothes Make the Man (and the Woman),” explores how clothing functions as a marker of identity and a tool of exploitation.

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 209–210 and/or survey the outline on page 210. 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: The Power of Social Status



A significant aspect of both the Judah/Tamar and Joseph/Madam Potiphar stories concerns social status, one’s place in the social order and hierarchy of one’s family or community. Both women and men desire to exert control over their own lives and the lives of others. In the Judah/Tamar narrative, two men—Tamar’s father-in-law, Judah, and her unnamed father—exert almost complete control over Tamar’s life. In the Joseph/Madam Potiphar story, a female seductress holds power over the fate of the male, Joseph. While deprived of most of the usual determinants of social status, both Tamar and Joseph possess and use one trait, intelligence, which proves to be their personal salvation. As Susan Niditch notes in *Another View*, “Tamar . . . becomes a trickster, a marginal figure who succeeds in indirect ways, by deceiving those in power. . . . Tales of tricksters appeal to the underdog side of each of us, but they may have special appeal among groups who feel themselves out of power—for example, women in a world dominated by men” (p. 226). “Trickery” is more than a game or a gimmick; it is the ability to out-think one’s opponents, to use one’s God-given intellectual ability. Thus, in a duel of wits, Tamar easily bests Judah, and Joseph, though initially a victim of Madam Potiphar’s tricks and lies, ultimately uses his cerebral powers of dream interpretation to rise to power once again in the next parashah, Mikeitz.

Questions for Discussion

1. Read Genesis 38:12–26, in which Tamar poses as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law, is threatened by Judah when he learns she is pregnant, and finally demands—and receives—Judah’s respect.
 - a. In the Central Commentary on Genesis 38:6–11, Athalya Brenner explains the custom of levirate marriage (p. 216). Who benefited from this practice? What accounted for how levirate marriage benefited men as opposed to how it benefited women? What do you think of Tamar’s rather unorthodox use of levirate marriage to take care of her own needs?

- b. In Genesis 38:15, Judah assumes that the disguised Tamar is a prostitute (*zonah*). But in Genesis 38:21, when Judah's friend is unable to find her, he asks passersby, "Where is that courtesan [*k'deishah*]?" Read Brenner's comment on page 218. As the story is presented here, what do you think was the biblical view of prostitution? Given the place of prostitution in her society, how does Tamar use Judah's sexual interest for her own purposes? What do you think were her motives in doing so?
 - c. In biblical times, a man's seal was worn by the owner as part of his public attire. Imprints of the seal were used as signatures, to represent the owner. A staff was often personalized and could serve as a symbol of transmission in sales proceedings. According to Brenner (p. 218), what was the significance of these items? What do you imagine it meant for a man to be without them in biblical times?
 - d. In the Contemporary Reflection (pp. 228–229), Carol Selkin Wise reminds us of the reality of a widow's life in biblical times. According to Wise, how does Tamar's role as a "new family member" and a widow compare to your own experiences and observations? How might Tamar serve as a model for contemporary women?
 - e. Wise goes on to suggest that Tamar might be foreign, not an Israelite (p. 229). How would the fact of her being a foreigner affect the story and the reader's view of her?
 - f. In Another View, Susan Niditch notes, "Tamar, like other marginal females in ancient Israelite social structure, is caught betwixt and between social categories available to women—as virgins or as child-producing, faithful wives. Eventually Tamar takes matters into her own hands" (p. 226). What do we learn from Niditch about what it meant to be feminine in the biblical world? What has changed and what has not?
 - g. In the Central Commentary on Genesis 38:16, Brenner describes Tamar as "quick-witted," while in Another View, Niditch calls Tamar a "trickster" (p. 226). Are "quick-witted" and "trickster" different? If so, how? Are there circumstances under which you would consider one of these traits more acceptable or appropriate than the other?
 - h. Read Post-biblical Interpretations (pp. 226–227), in which Carol Bakhos describes the rabbinic view of Tamar. Why do you think the Rabbis took this view of Tamar?
 - i. Read Ellen Frankel's piece from *The Five Books of Miriam* in Voices (p. 230). Frankel frames Tamar's actions as a test of Judah. In this test, Judah fails, and she, Tamar, triumphs. Do you agree with Frankel's assessment of the "winner" and "loser" of this test? Why or why not?
 - j. Read "Tamar's Lament" by Hara Person in Voices (p. 230). How does Person's view of Tamar contrast with that of the Rabbis?
2. Read Genesis 39:6–20, which tells of Madam Potiphar's unsuccessful seduction of Joseph.
 - a. Read the Central Commentary on "one of Pharaoh's officers" in Genesis 39:1 and on "fair of form and fair of appearance" in Genesis 39:6 (p. 221). For what other reasons than those suggested might a wealthy, higher-status Egyptian woman like Madam Potiphar have for seducing a young, lower-status foreigner like Joseph? In the Central Commentary on Genesis 39:11, Brenner questions Joseph's behavior and the general ambiguity of this verse. Do you agree with

- Brenner that Joseph is taking a deliberate risk? Why might he have done so? How else might you read Joseph's behavior?
- b. Genesis 39:10–16 twice mentions Madam's Potiphar's household staff. In what direct and indirect ways does her community of household servants support her choices and behavior? Why do you think they do so?
 - c. In Genesis 39:13–18, Madam Potiphar lies about what happened with Joseph. Why does she do so? What might have been her fate if she had not?
 - d. What accounts for Madam Potiphar's social status? What are its limits?
 - e. Madam Potiphar presents a highly structured indictment of Joseph in presenting her case to her husband. What are the elements of her case? How does she use her own social status and that of her husband in her argument?
 - f. Read the rabbinic assessment of Tamar and Madam Potiphar in Carol Bakhos's *Post-biblical Interpretations* on pages 226–228. Why do you think the Rabbis drew the distinction they did between the two women, both of whom were non-Israelites? What do you make of their interpretation?
 - g. Read "Potiphar's Wife" by Linda Hepner (p. 231). What is the portrait that Hepner paints of Madam Potiphar? According to Hepner, what are the limits of Madam Potiphar's power even with her high social standing? What do you think are the limits of female power today? What are the reasons for these limitations?

Overarching Questions

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

- What are the sources of personal and communal power in our world today?
- We most often think of lying as the false use of words. What are other means by which people can "lie"? How do the men in this parashah lie? How do the women lie?
- Do you believe that a moral code of behavior can ever be breached? If so, under what circumstances? By whom? Can lying or other forms of deception be justified if they are the only tools at hand for those lacking social status or power?

Theme 2: Clothes Make the Man (and the Woman)



Garments play a significant role in this parashah. In the first episode, Joseph's coat of many colors functions as an external marker, a symbol of his father's favoritism and a cause of his brothers' enmity and rage (Genesis 37:3–4). After throwing Joseph in the pit, the brothers bloody Joseph's coat and use it to deceive Jacob, who as a youth deceived his own father, Isaac, with a garment made of animal skins (Genesis 27:15–16). Tamar wears widow's garb until her daring seduction of Judah, when she adorns herself as a prostitute (Genesis 38:14–16), after which she once again dresses as a widow. At Tamar's demand, Judah parts with his major identity markers, including part of his dress, the cord from which hung his seal that was worn as part of its owner's public attire (Genesis 38:18). Finally, Madam Potiphar grasps Joseph's garment in her attempted seduction; when he flees, it is left in her hand as "evidence" of his "toying" with her (Genesis

39:12). As clothing serves as a source of both personal power and protection in this parashah, this raises a question of what other bodily adornments serve similar functions in our world today.

Questions for Discussion

1. In Genesis 37, read verses 1–4, 22–24, and 31–34, in which Joseph’s coat functions as an important “character” in the story.
 - a. Imagine that Joseph’s coat of many colors could speak. In each of the three sets of verses above, what do you imagine the coat saying to Joseph’s brothers and to Jacob?
 - b. Read Athalya Brenner’s comments on Genesis 37:3 (“coat of many colors”) and Genesis 37:32 (“Is it your son’s coat?”). According to Brenner, why might Jacob have chosen this particular type of garment for Joseph? What is significant about the fact that the brothers use Joseph’s coat to indicate that he is dead (instead of some other piece of clothing)?

2. Read Genesis 38:14–16, 38:19, in which Tamar dresses so as to represent a particular identity.
 - a. What do you imagine constituted widow’s garb in biblical times? What would a widow’s garb “say” about its wearer?
 - b. Read Brenner’s comment on Genesis 38:14–15. What constituted prostitute’s garb? Why might such garments have been appropriate for prostitutes?
 - c. In her comment on Genesis 38:14–15, Brenner notes, “Ironically, Judah sees Tamar only when she is covered.” What does this suggest about Judah’s understanding of Tamar’s needs as a childless widow prior to this encounter?
 - d. In the above comment, Brenner continues, “[Tamar], in fact, does not pretend to anything apart from disguising herself and looking available. She leaves the rest to him.” When Judah sees this woman thus clothed (his daughter-in-law, unbeknownst to him), who does he think she is? How does he read her garb?
 - e. Read the Post-biblical Interpretations on Genesis 38:17–18 (p. 227). Just as Judah had earlier tricked his father by “producing” Joseph’s torn and bloody robe (Genesis 37:32), now Judah is tricked by Tamar’s choice of clothing (Genesis 38:14). What was the Rabbis’ reaction to Tamar’s manipulation of Judah? How do they use the text to support their view that Tamar’s actions were foreordained?
 - f. How does Tamar employ clothing to achieve her goals?
 - g. How does the way Joseph tries to communicate to his brothers by wearing his special coat compare to Tamar’s use of clothing? In today’s world, what are the similarities in how men and women use clothing to communicate about themselves? What are the differences?

3. Read Genesis 39:7–20, in which Madam Potiphar is left with Joseph’s garment after he flees.
 - a. In Genesis 37:23, Joseph’s brothers tear off his robe and keep it to show to their father later. In this section, Joseph’s robe is torn away from him and then kept by Madam Potiphar. Why do the brothers and Madam keep Joseph’s clothing? Without his garment, what happens to

Joseph immediately following in both stories?

- b. In Linda Hepner's poem "Potiphar's Wife" in *Voices* (p. 231), Madam Potiphar proposes, "Here I shall stand bejeweled / And naked." Under what circumstances can nakedness be empowering? When can it be disempowering?
- c. In our world today, what kinds of protection does clothing provide? How is clothing at times utilized to misuse, exploit, or mistreat vulnerable individuals?

Overarching Questions

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

- Under what circumstances are human beings likely to "see" but not truly see? That is, when do we deny the messages of our senses in favor of the reality that is what we wish to see?
- When does clothing mask and when does it reveal who we truly are?

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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