

USER'S GUIDE TO THE STUDY GUIDE

for *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*



Welcome to the User's Guide for *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* study guides. These study guides aim to provide you with a general framework for facilitating meaningful explorations of selected Torah portions through the lens of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*.

Overview of the User's Guide

Within this User's Guide you will find several different sections. Feel free to choose the sections that you think will be the most helpful to you.

- I. Introduction to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*
- II. Introduction to the Study Guides
- III. Getting Started
- IV. Using the Study Guides
- V. Review, Reflect, Revise
- VI. Additional Ideas for Successful Programming
- VII. Publicizing Your Program
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- IX. Schedule for First Year of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* Study Guides
- X. Further Resources

I. Introduction to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*

The publication of this groundbreaking commentary represents the fulfillment of a dream Cantor Sarah Sager shared with the then National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (now Women of Reform Judaism) in 1993. Speaking at its National Biennial Assembly, Cantor Sager declared: "If we are really serious about women's spirituality, about re-claiming our history and our voices, about...integrating the Torah of our tradition into the Torah of our lives, then there is something very concrete that we can do. We can commission the creation of the first women's commentary to the Torah!" Fifteen years of work later, this vision was realized with the publication of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. (For more information on this history of this project, see the introductory essays in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*.)

In an effort to provide multiple ways to meaningfully engage with our sacred text, each parashah of the Commentary contains five different types of commentary, each written by a different author. This multi-vocal format also follows the pattern of *Mikraot G'dolot* (also called the Rabbinic Bible), which contains the Hebrew text, a translation, and commentaries by various sages. The five different types of commentary



included within each parashah are the Central Commentary, Another View, Post-biblical Interpretation, Contemporary Reflection, and Voices.

Central Commentary. The Central Commentary, written by a biblical scholar, is the heart of each parashah. This section begins with an introduction and outline that provide an overview of the Torah portion, and then follows the Hebrew text, a “gender accurate” English translation, and a running explanation of the parashah. Its main objective is to help readers understand the plain sense of the text in its own literary, historical, and cultural context.

Another View. This short essay, also written by a biblical scholar, focuses on a specific aspect of the parashah in a way that supplements or challenges the Central Commentary.

Post-biblical Interpretation. In this section, a scholar of rabbinic literature discusses a selection of past responses to the Torah—typically, rabbinic teachings and classical Jewish commentaries.

Contemporary Reflection. In this section, a range of authors—scholars, rabbis, cantors, and other Jewish leaders—reflect on the parashah and what meanings it holds for Jews today.

Voices. This section contains creative responses to the parashah, mainly in the form of poetry. Much of the poetry in this section was published previously, while some is published here for the first time. While certain pieces were written in response to the Torah text, many others were not written with the intention of being Torah commentary; instead, the Voices section creatively pairs these pieces with the Torah in order to enrich our understanding of the biblical text and our relationship to it.

(For more background on these five different kinds of commentary, see the introductory essays in *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*.)

II. Introduction to the Study Guides

This series of study guides will be published over the course of several years. In the first year of this project, there will be a study guide available for one parashah each month. Generally this will be the parashah for the first Shabbat of each month, though there are several exceptions made to allow for the holy day cycle. Each year additional study guides will be added. (See the list of dates for the first year in section IX.)

Each study guide to *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* begins with an introductory section that provides an overview of the parashah. Next, the guides focus on three key themes or topics in the portion, accompanied by guiding questions based on the text and the related commentary. The questions aim to help the learners engage with both the biblical text and *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. The questions refer to various parts of the commentary, helping readers draw connections between the five sections. Certain questions strive to use the commentary to help students link the Torah text to their own lives, one way of making this ancient, sacred text meaningful to Jews in the 21st century. The guides are meant to provide a basic structure and roadmap, while also allowing room for each group leader to add and adapt.

III. Getting Started

1. Defining Your Group

As you begin using the study guides, consider some preliminary questions. With whom do you want to study *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*? Is there a group that already exists, or are you hoping to form a new group? Do you envision men and women studying together, or are you hoping to form a single-sex group? Do you want this to be a sisterhood program or do you want to reach a broader group within your congrega-



tion or community? Do you want people of all ages to be in the group, or are you hoping to reach a specific constituency? What are your reasons for your choice of gender and age composition? Are you hoping that this group will become an ongoing community of learners, or is this intended more for a time-limited course of study? What are your specific goals in teaching this material? It will be useful to return to these questions as you make specific programmatic decisions.

2. Choosing a Setting

After you have defined your group, decide upon an appropriate context for the study of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Suggestions include, but are not limited to:

- A Torah study group, such as an existing *parashat hashavuah* group or a new study opportunity;
- A monthly sisterhood meeting;
- A Rosh Chodesh group;
- The adult education component of a family education program;
- A lunch and learn group;
- A synagogue retreat;
- A sisterhood retreat;
- A congregational *s'udah sh'lishit* ("third meal") program late Shabbat afternoon with snacks, singing, Torah study, and *Havdalah*.

IV. Using the Study Guides

1. Preparing for the Study Session

The study guides to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* aim to help you navigate the material so that you can create sessions that match your interests and those of your group. The study guides are meant to be useful year after year; for this reason we have provided more material presented than you can likely cover in one gathering.

Your first step in preparing for the session should be to read the parashah and the corresponding material from *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Then, look through the study guide and determine which theme(s) to focus on in your session, a decision that should be guided by the make-up, setting, and time frame of your study group.

Next, think about how you will approach the questions presented in the study guide. The more you know about your participants, the better you will be able to create an engaging and meaningful learning experience. Some participants may prefer group conversations; others will be more engaged through small group discussion or alternative activities such as writing exercises or creative applications of lessons from the Torah to current events.

When planning for your session, make sure to incorporate time for the group to read and assimilate the material from the *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, both the biblical text and the related sections from the Commentary. Consider incorporating creative reading techniques to give the participants this access. *Chevruta* study, in which pairs read aloud to each other, is a traditional way to study Jewish texts and provides an opportunity for people to meet each other more intimately than in group conversation. If the parashah allows, assign roles, such as narrator and characters in a biblical passage or one person to read the selected passage from the Torah and another to read from the Women's Commentary. This will engage more people



than a single volunteer reader. Consider experimenting with different reading techniques each time your group meets.

2. Creating a Welcoming Atmosphere

As you plan your program, keep in mind the importance of creating an atmosphere in which all participants feel comfortable and welcome. This will help to ensure a successful experience for everyone. Here are a couple of things to consider:

- Beginnings are important.
 - In your initial meeting, take the time to orient the group to *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* by explaining the five different kinds of commentary in each parashah.
 - At each meeting, start with an opening question related to the parashah or the focus of the session that does not rely on prior knowledge of the text. This question will allow the participants to get to know each other and become comfortable hearing their own voice in the conversation.
 - Consider starting each session with a prayer for Torah study:
Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.
Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who has sanctified us through Your commandments and commanded us to engage in words of Torah.

ברוך אתה יי, אלהינו מלך העולם, אשר קדשנו במצותיו וצונו לעסוק בדברי תורה.

- A healthy group dynamic is fundamental to the success of your group. Here are some keys and helpful hints for creating a respectful learning environment:
 - Make sure the discussion is a conversation among equals in which no one person or opinion dominates. If this becomes an issue, one possible idea is to offer everyone the opportunity to speak before any one person speaks twice.
 - Foster respect for different viewpoints and opinions. *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* is itself an example of inherent value in maintaining different perspectives. Just as there is no “right answer” among the commentaries, make sure that it is clear to the participants that there is room in the conversation for their voice. The leader should make room in the conversation for differing opinions, even opinions with which you disagree; the group leader's job is to be a nonjudgmental presence in the group.
 - As the leader, and the person who has undoubtedly done the most advance preparation, you will likely have your own opinions regarding the text. While there is always a place for your views in the conversation, be aware that as the acknowledged group leader, your opinion will carry more weight. Consider offering your opinion only after other participants have done so.
- Endings are also important. It is important to end each session with time for review and reflection. Include a wrap-up question that applies to the whole session. The wrap-up might focus on something each participant has learned from the session.

V. Review, Reflect, Revise

Just as you should provide your participants a chance to review their learning at the end of the session, you should do the same. Consider implementing these three R's at the end of each meeting:

- **Review:** Consider providing a way for participants to share their impressions of the session. One approach is to distribute an index card at the end of the session and ask people to offer a comment or question about the study experience. Another approach is to send participants an e-mail with a follow-up question following the session. Take the time to answer these questions yourself. Remember, the closer to the time of the gathering, the better the participants' memories will be. Evaluation questions can cover three areas: (1) the content covered in the session, (2) the participants' experience of the style employed by the facilitator, and (3) what the participants gained from the session. Choose your questions based on what you most want to learn from the participants.
- **Reflect:** What did you learn from the participant responses that can enhance future study sessions? Remember that constructive criticism can be more helpful in improving your teaching than compliments. What are the major themes that come across in the participants' answers? Were you surprised by any of their answers?
- **Revise:** With the insight gained from reflecting on the evaluations, you can revise your strategies for the next meeting. Be bold in your attempts to implement the improvements your participants suggested. You may even want to let them know at the next meeting what revisions you have made in light of their initial comments.

VI. Additional Ideas for Successful Programming

Here are some additional ideas to consider as you start to plan your study group experience.

1. Meeting the Educational Needs of Your Group

Make sure to plan your study group so that it will meet the basic expectations of the participants. These expectations include:

- A leader who is prepared and familiar with the material;
- A clear and coherent plan for approaching the material;
- A leader who is respectful of the participants' prior knowledge and experience, whatever that may be;
- A flexible approach that balances your goals for the session with the expressed needs and concerns of the group.

2. Meeting the Practical Needs of Your Group

Make sure that the type of program you decide on meets the needs of your target audience.

- Is your program at a convenient time and location?
- If you are hoping to reach parents, will they need child care in order to participate? Consider providing child care and offering programs when children are otherwise engaged, such as during religious school.
- Does the format and setting allow you to provide a meal or snack as part of your program? Sharing even a light snack can change the dynamic in a group from formal to friendly.



3. For Experienced Educators: Working with Adult Learners

Remember that adult learners have their own special needs. Although they may not be extremely knowledgeable about Torah or Jewish texts, our communities are full of intelligent, well-educated people. In order to better reach these participants, keep these few suggestions in mind:

- Ask questions that tap into participants' life experience and knowledge, which will allow them to see themselves as capable Jewish learners.
- Create opportunities for the participants to apply what they have learned about the Torah to their own lives.
- Allow students to steer the conversations, as long as the direction is relevant. Often, the best conversations come as "side-bars" to your plan for the session.

Remember that the gathering is not simply a study session; it is an opportunity to form a sacred community based on one of the primary activities Jews have done over the years: study.

VII. Publicizing Your Program

To avoid the frustration of working hard to create a great program and then not having anybody show up, here are a few basic suggestions for how to encourage participation:

- The earlier, the better. Included below in section IX is the schedule of the study guides for the first year. Get the word out about the first date now and consider including a copy of the full schedule.
- Set regular meeting times, such as the first Sunday of the month or Thursday evenings. Choose a time that will be convenient and stick with it.
- Get the word out. Use a variety of means to advertise and remind people of upcoming meetings, such as e-mail, flyers, and bulletin announcements. Follow up the initial publicity with friendly, short, and easy to read reminders.
- Make your potential participants comfortable by emphasizing that no prior knowledge is necessary for participation.
- The personal touch can make all the difference. Call or reach out in person to invite potential participants.
- Reach out to existing groups.

VIII. Last but Not Least

There is a lot of information here for you to absorb. Hopefully some of this will be helpful as you embark on your program of studying *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. If you have questions about the material, about starting a study group, or about anything that may come up along the way, reach out to your rabbi, cantor, or educator, as well as to other members of your congregation who may be able to provide help. The most important thing is to remember that a leader does not need to have all the answers, only a willingness to guide the group and to work together to explore the material. Good luck!



IX. Schedule for First Year of *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* Study Guides

Nov. 1, 2008—*Noach*
Dec. 6, 2008—*Vayeitzei*
Jan. 3, 2009—*Vayigash*
Feb. 7, 2009—*B'shalach*
Mar. 7, 2009—*T'tzaveh*
Apr. 4, 2009—*Tzav*
May 2, 2009—*Acharei Mot/K'doshim*
June 6, 2009—*Naso*
July 11, 2009 (not the first Shabbat of the month)—*Pinchas*
Aug. 1, 2009—*Va-et'chanan*
Sept. 12, 2009 (not the first Shabbat of the month)—*Nitzavim/Vayeilech*
Oct. 17, 2009 (not the first Shabbat of the month)—*B'reishit*

X. Further Resources

Teaching Adult Learners

Aron, Isa, and Sara Lee. *A Congregation of Learners*. New York: UAHC Press, 1995.

Brettler, Marc Zvi. *How to Read the Jewish Bible*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005.

Cousens, Beth, and Jeremy S. Morrison. "Using the Contextual Orientation to Facilitate the Study of Bible with Generation X." Download at: http://www.brandeis.edu/centers/mandel/Mandel%20Documents/Working_Paper_5_Cousens_Morrison.pdf.

Holtz, Barry. *Textual Knowledge: Teaching The Bible in Theory and In Practice*. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003.

Kugel, James. *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*. New York: Free Press, 2007.

Meyers, Carol. *Exodus*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Norris, Joye A. *From Telling to Teaching*. North Myrtle Beach, SC: Learning By Dialogue, 2003.

Peerless, Shmuel. *To Study and To Teach: The Methodology of Nechama Leibowitz*. Jerusalem: Urim Publications, 2004.

Schuster, Diane Tickton, and Lisa D. Grant. "Teaching Jewish Adults." In *The Ultimate Jewish Teacher's Handbook*, ed. Nachama Skolnick Moskowitz. Denver: A.R.E. Publishing, Inc., 2003, 140–163.



Essential Resources for Torah Study

Fields, Harvey J. *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*. New York: UAHC Press, 1998.

This resource provides a summary of each portion, as well as basic, accessible discussion of major themes and excerpts of traditional commentary.

Glickman, Elaine Rose, ed. *Living Torah: Selections from Seven Years of Torat Chayim*. New York: URJ Press, 2005.

This is an anthology of *divrei Torah* from the Torah Chayim website that offers three different views on each Torah portion.

Plaut, W. Gunther, ed. *The Haftarah Commentary*. New York: UAHC Press, 1998.

This is the haftarah commentary of the Reform movement. It includes the Hebrew text and gender-sensitive English translation of each Haftarah portion, as well as an accessible commentary.

Plaut, W. Gunther, ed. *The Torah: A Modern Commentary, rev. ed.* New York: URJ Press, 2005.

This is the Torah commentary of the Reform Movement. It includes the full Torah text in Hebrew and English as well as commentary, essays, and gleanings.

Reform Voices of Torah

This on-line Torah commentary about the weekly portion is written by leading Reform rabbis. It is available at <http://urj.org/torah/> at no charge. In addition, there is an archive going back almost ten years of this material, which used to be called Torat Chayim. For the archive go to <http://urj.org/torah/archives/>.

Additional Torah Commentaries and Translations

Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation and Commentary*. W.W. Norton, 2004.

Berlin, Adele, and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds. *The Jewish Study Bible*. Oxford University Press, 2003.

Cassuto, Umberto. *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Magnus Press, 1967.

Cassuto, Umberto. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Magnus Press, 1967.

Fox, Everett. *The Five Books of Moses (The Schocken Bible, Volume One)*. Schocken Books, 2000.

Friedman, Richard Elliott, ed. *Commentary on the Torah*. Harper Collins, 2001.



Leibowitz, Nechama. *Studies in Chumash*. Chemed Books, 1995.

Lieber, David. *Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary*. Jewish Publication Society, 2002.

Sarna, Nahum M. *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel*. Schocken Books, reprinted 1996.

Sarna, Nahum M., and Chaim Potok, eds. *The JPS Commentary Set*. Jewish Publication Society, 2003.

Sarna, Nahum M. *Understanding Genesis*. Schocken Books, 1970.

Stein, David E. S., revising ed. *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*. Jewish Publication Society, 2006.

Haftarah Commentaries

Fishbane, Michael, ed. *JPS Bible Commentary: Haftarah*. Jewish Publication Society, 2002.

Psychological and Spiritual Commentaries

Cohen, Norman J. *Self, Struggle, and Change: Family Conflict Stories in Genesis and Their Healing Insights for Our Lives*. Jewish Lights, 1996.

Horwitz, Joshua, and Naomi H. Rosenblatt. *Wrestling With Angels: What Genesis Teaches Us About Our Spiritual Identity, Sexuality and Personal Relationships*. Delta, 1996.

Kushner, Lawrence S., and Kerry M. Olitzky. *Sparks Beneath the Surface: A Spiritual Commentary on the Torah*. Jason Aronson, 1993.

Zornberg, Avivah. *The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis*. Image Books, 1996.

Zornberg, Avivah. *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*. Image Books, 2002.



Women's Perspectives

Antonelli, Judith S. *In the Image of God: A Feminist Commentary on the Torah*. Jason Aronson, 1997.

Buchmann, Christina, and Celina Spiegel. *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*. Ballantine Books, reprinted 1995.

Elper, Ora Wiskind, and Susan Handelman, eds. *Torah of the Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts*. Urim Publications, 2000.

Frankel, Ellen. *The Five Books of Miriam: A Women's Commentary on the Torah*. Harper San Francisco, reprinted 1998.

Goldstein, Elyse, and Irving Greenberg. *Revisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens*. Jewish Lights, 2001.

Goldstein, Elyse, ed. *The Women's Haftarah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Haftarah Portions, the 5 Megillot and Special Shabbatot*. Jewish Lights, 2004.

Goldstein, Elyse, ed. *The Women's Torah Commentary: New Insights from Women Rabbis on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions*. Jewish Lights, 2000.

Kensky, Tikva Frymer. *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories*. Schocken Books, 2002.

Orenstein, Debra, and Jane Rachel Litman, eds. *Lifecycles Vol. 2: Jewish Women on Biblical Themes in Contemporary Life*. Jewish Lights, 1997.

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www.URJBooksandMusic.com

www.WomenofReformJudaism.org

