

Women and Leviticus: Text Study

Leviticus begins as a priestly code. While women were not allowed to be priests in biblical Israel, there are various mentions of women throughout the first half of Leviticus. The second half of the book, the Holiness Code (beginning with Chapter 17), expands the audience of the instructions to the community of Israelites as a whole. Much like the rest of the Torah, the text is written by men and the default audience seems to be male. The following six *dapim* (source sheets) explore six different Torah portions in Leviticus, each dealing with a different verse regarding a mention of women in the text. Each of them separately highlights an issue of women's holiness and status in society. The group of verses together can help modern learners understand the society in which Leviticus was written, some of the main concerns regarding women in relation to holiness, and how women's issues were treated. In addition, they can influence our conversations about women's issues today. These source sheets include a context for the verse, the Hebrew and English verse itself, commentary (both modern and medieval), as well as questions for studying the text.

Women and Leviticus: Parshat Tazria

Commentary:

“and if she gives birth to a female child, etc.” the Torah now describes what procedure to follow if, as a result of the husband reaching orgasm first, a baby girl is born. We know this is the meaning from the letter ו before the word: ואם, “if or when.” This is how the Talmud, tractate Niddah, folio 31 interprets our verse.” (Daat Zkenim)

“Modern medicine recognizes no difference between the postpartum genital flow of the mother of a boy and that of the mother of a girl. The ancients, however, may have believed ->

there was a difference, or they may have noted that there is an occasionally vaginal flow from the infant girl herself and viewed this as necessitating a longer purification by the mother” (Jewish Study Bible, 222)

Context: *This verse comes at the beginning of the parsha; the opening verse is about a woman giving birth to a male, stating that she is impure for seven days like that of her menstruation cycle. The baby will be circumcised on the eighth day, followed by her state of blood purification for thirty-three days. Yet, when speaking about a female baby, it essentially uses the same basic construction except doubled in length of time of impurity.*

Leviticus 12:5

If she gives birth to a female, she will be impure for seven days like her menstruation. And for sixty-six days, she will remain separate on account of blood purification.

“The purification period for a woman after giving birth to a female child is 80 days, twice as long as after a male child. But the provisions follow the same two-step pattern: for the first two weeks, she is in a state of impurity comparable to a menstruating woman; and for sixty-six days she remains impure in regard to the sanctuary and items consecrated to it. The reason for the longer state of impurity after the birth of a girl is unclear. One proposed explanation is that the baby girl is a potential menstruant and mother, and so a future source of impurity.” (TAWC, 641)

ויקרא יב:

**וְאִם-נִקְבָּה תֵּלֵד וְטָמְאָה
שְׁבַע יָמִים כְּנִדְתָּהּ וְשָׁשִׁים
יוֹם וְשִׁשָּׁת יָמִים תִּשָּׁב
עַל-דְּמֵי טָהֳרָה**

Questions for Study:

1. What about childbirth renders women impure?
2. Which commentary on this verse resonates with you?
3. If a woman gives birth to a female child, she remains impure for twice as long as when she births a male child. In your opinion, is this difference justified? Why?

Women and Leviticus: Parshat M'Tzora

Context:

This verse appears in the section dealing with genital discharge. First, the laws surrounding the abnormal and normal male discharges are outlined, followed by the female, which are ordered by the normal laws of menstruation and then abnormal blood discharge.

Commentary Continued:

"[In Leviticus, the menstruant is separated from the sancta (the sacred). The social and ritual isolation of menstruating women is found in many cultures around the world ("Introduction," Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, eds., *Blood Magic*, 1988, p.12). However, the social functions of menstrual taboos are culturally variable and specific. In one society, these taboos function to subordinate women; in another, they give women exclusive ritual powers; and yet another culture views menstruation ambivalently, as both containing and enhancing women's power (Buckley and Gottlieb, p. 14). The legislation in Leviticus can be seen as moderate in that the menstruating woman remains at home and has somewhat normal family and social relationships..." (Elaine Goodfriend, TAWC, 668)

Commentary:

"AND IF A WOMAN HAVE AN ISSUE: One might think that this means: if there be an issue from any limb of her body (e. g. ear, nose)! It, however, states in a law referring to ->

this matter, (Leviticus 20:18) "and she hath uncovered the fountain of her blood" —only that issue of blood therefore makes her unclean which comes from her fountain (Sifra, Metzora Parashat Zavim, Section 4 2)." (Rashi)

Leviticus 15:19

When a woman has discharge- blood being the discharge from her body- seven days she will be in menstrual separation, and all that touches her will be impure until the evening.

ויקרא טו:יט

וְאִשָּׁה כִּי-תִהְיֶה זֹבָה, דָּם יִהְיֶה זֹבָה בְּבִשְׂרָהּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תִּהְיֶה בְּנִדְתָּהּ וְכָל-הַנִּגָּע בָּהּ יִטְמָא עַד-הָעֶרֶב

Questions for Study:

1. How relevant is this legislation in modernity?
2. What kinds of things convey for you impurity today?
3. What do we/you think about impurity transfer today?

"Frequent menstruation is the product of various factors of modern life that were not relevant to our foremothers. Women in ancient Israel (and the ancient world in general) probably menstruated less frequently than modern women, for several reasons. Due to sparse diet, females in pre-modern times began to menstruate on average at age 14, as opposed to an average of age 12 today. Women married soon after they began to menstruate, and generally they experienced more pregnancies in their lifetime than their average modern Jewish counterparts (see *B'reishit*, Another View, p. 27)... The original meaning of the key term for menstruation in the Bible, *niddah*, is unclear, but several Hebrew roots with the letter combination *n-d* have the general sense of "expel" or "throw." It is possible that the word was used for the expulsion or elimination of menstrual blood..." (Elaine Goodfriend, TAWC, 668)

Women and Leviticus: Parshat Acharei Mot

Commentary:

"THE NAKEDNESS OF THY FATHER'S WIFE: This is intended to include in the prohibition of union with one's father's wife already mentioned v. 7. even the doing of this after his death (Sanhedrin 54a)" (Rashi)

"(Verse 18:7) *Your father's nakedness, that is, the nakedness of your mother.* A woman's sexual organs are permitted only to her husband; by engaging in intercourse with the wife of one's close relation one commits a crime against the male relation as well." (TJSB)

"THE NAKEDNESS OF THY FATHER'S WIFE: Even if she is not your mother." (Bekhor Shor)

Context:

The name of this parsha translates to "after the death" in reference to the sons of Aaron who died in Parshat Shmini. It is clear that after such an incident, the priests want to be clear on the rules and boundaries. This verse comes in the final section of the parsha after speaking about the laws of eating meat (chapter 17). This is one of the laws regarding sexual boundaries, and specifically distinguishing the Israelites from the Canaanites (18:3). This verse stands out amongst the list of forbidden sexual relationships (18:7- 20) because it attributes the nakedness of the women as belonging to the man.

Leviticus 18:8

Do not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is the nakedness of your father.

וִיקָרָא יָחַח

עֲרוֹת אִשְׁת־אָבִיךָ,
לֹא תִגְלֶהָ: עֲרוֹת
אָבִיךָ, הִוא

"Here, the prohibition against intimacy with a stepmother follows that of parental incest because a stepmother is seen as an extension of the father. Marriage, in the biblical view, conjoins two bodies as one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

In contrast to the sexual prohibitions enumerated in Leviticus 20, here there are no attendant penalties for perpetrating such acts. In Leviticus 20:11 a man who lies with his father's wife is put to death along with the woman; here, it is simply forbidden. Reuben, who slept with his father's concubine, Bilhah, is cursed by Jacob on his deathbed (Genesis 49:4)." (TAWC, 690)

Questions for Study:

1. What is the definition of nakedness in this verse and what might be your definition today?
2. What does this verse say about the ownership of women's bodies?
3. How is this different from cultural taboos about relationships today?

Prepared by Joanne Loiben. Resources: Berlin, Adele & Marc Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*. Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn & Andrea L. Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. Sefaria.org.

Women and Leviticus: Parshat K'doshim

Commentary:

"This is a warning to a father not to put off marrying off his daughter before she reaches the age of 12 and a half." (Chizkuni)

"Scripture speaks of one who gives his unmarried daughter away for illegitimate concubinage (cf. Sifra, Kedoshim, Chapter 7 2; Sanhedrin 76a)." (Rashi)

"Scripture employs metonymy, and means sexual immorality among the *inhabitants* of the land. Compare, "when the land sins against me" [Ezekiel 14:12]." (Ibn Ezra)

"*Degrade*, lit. "profane." This is the opposite of holiness." (TJSB)

Context:

This parsha is part of the "Holiness Code" in the book of Leviticus, teaching the idea that all of Israel being holy (Lev. 19:1-2). This verse sits in the middle of what The Torah: A Women's Commentary refers to as "A Compendium of Paths to Holiness" and in the subsection called "The sacred status of daughters." (TAWC, 702)

Leviticus 19:29

Do not degrade your daughter and make her a prostitute, and do not let the land become harlotrous and be filled with moral corruption.

ויקרא יט:כט

**אַל-תַּחֲלִיל אֶת-בִּתְּךָ
לְהַזְנוֹתָהּ וְלֹא-תִזְנֶה
הָאָרֶץ וּמִלָּאָה הָאָרֶץ
זִמָּה**

"These verses reflect one of the central themes in the Holiness Code as a whole: the Israelite role in the maintenance and expansion of holiness. On the surface, v. 29 simply seems to prohibit the use of daughters as prostitutes. The key word in this verse is "degrade," which should be rendered more accurately as "desecrate." The verb *ch-l-l* is a technical term in the Holiness Code indicating a decrease in the level of holiness. The use of this verb implies that the daughter is not only a member of society, but also bears the responsibility for aspects of holiness in the community. If a father puts his daughter in a position that diminishes her holiness, that action affect the entire land negatively. This point is made even more strongly by coupling this teaching with a reminder to observe Shabbat and to keep watch over God's holy space. To some degree, the holiness of a daughter is akin to the holiness of the sanctuary." (TAWC, 709)

Questions for Study:

1. What does this verse say about a father's responsibility for his daughter's moral status?
2. Does a daughter have agency over her sexual choices according to this verse? Why or why not?

3. What is the incentive for men not to abuse daughters' bodies in this verse?
4. What is a modern example of a desecration of society committed by men through women's bodies?

Women and Leviticus: Parshat Emor

Context:

This verse is in the section of the laws concerning the families of the priests. This section expands on laws about prohibited relations for all Israelites, and focuses of special restrictions for priests. These laws differ from those of the rest of the people of Israel.

“There are only a few references to men divorcing their wives in biblical texts.... Each of these cases involve either improper behavior or false charges of improper behaviors on the part of the wife, many of a sexual nature. This pattern or assumption might explain why the present verse prohibits a priest from marrying a divorce. Marriage to a women possibly prone to sexual promiscuity is problematic for priests, who must be sure that their progeny is their own, and whose family must maintain a certain level of propriety. Note that widows, who generally were above such suspicions, are acceptable marital candidates for priests, except for the chief priest. (see v. 14).” (TAWC, 727)

Commentary:

“FOR THEY ARE HOLY TO THEIR GOD: every member of the tribe is by definition, an especially distinguished personage among his people. If he were to marry someone guilty of or unfortunate ->

enough to belong to the categories mentioned in this verse, the husband would no longer be entitled to the sanctity his birthright had not only entitled him to but had expected him to preserve” (Sforno)

Leviticus 21:7

A woman defiled by prostitution, they shall not take (as a wife), and a divorced woman from her husband, they shall not take: for they are holy to their God.

ויקרא כא:ז

אִשָּׁה זֹנָה וְחִלָּלָהּ
לֹא יִקְחוּ, וְאִשָּׁה
גְּרוּשָׁה מֵאִישָׁהּ לֹא
יִקְחוּ כִּי-קֹדֶשׁ הוּא
לְאֱלֹהֵיוֹ

“The restrictions concerning whom priests may marry reflect a concern with protecting both the priests’ lineage and their reputation... Since the members of a priest’s family partake of his portion of the holy sacrifices and live in his household, the Holiness Code (see parashah introduction) likewise expects them to conduct themselves with a certain level of propriety; thus, only women of good repute are considered appropriate wives. For the same reason, a priest’s daughter comes under close scrutiny, and her father should take action if her behavior is inappropriate for one of her station.” (TAWC, 727)

Questions for Study:

1. What does this verse contribute to the definition of holiness according?
2. What does verse say about the holiness of a woman’s virginity or lack thereof?
3. What about men’s sexual partners makes them holy or unholy?
4. Does this verse render women more or less powerful?

Prepared by Joanne Loiben. Resources: Berlin, Adele & Marc Brettler, eds., *The Jewish Study Bible*. Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn & Andrea L. Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*. Sefaria.org.

Women and Leviticus: Parshat B'chukotai

Context:

This verse comes from the final parsha in Leviticus, after the long list of laws throughout the book. This last chapter ends with a long list of blessings if the people of Israel follow the laws, and curses if they do not obey.

This verse is in the midst of the curses section, and depicts what true famine will look like: not enough supplies, and even if there is food to eat, no one will be satiated. This verse follows other explications of plague and war, and precedes another warning against disobeying. Though this is the only explicit mention of women in this chapter, the curses described seem to mostly not discriminate between genders.

Questions for Study:

1. Is there a religious significance to the preparation of meals?
2. When a woman's role is altered what does that say about the state of society?
3. How do women have power through their labor?

Commentary:

“[TEN WOMEN SHALL BREAK YOUR BREAD] IN ONE OVEN — on account of scarcity of wood (fuel) (Sifra, Bechukotai, Chapter 6 2).” (Rashi)

Leviticus 26:26

When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, they will distribute your bread by weight; and you will eat and you will not be satisfied.

ויקרא כו:כו

בְּשִׁבְרִי לָכֶם,
מִטֶּה-לֶּחֶם, וְאָפוּ
עֶשֶׂר נָשִׁים לַחֲמֶכֶם
בְּתֵנּוֹר אֶחָד,
וְהִשִּׁיבוּ לַחֲמֶכֶם
בְּמִשְׁקָל; וְאָכְלֹתֶם,
וְלֹא תִשְׂבְּעוּ.

“TEN WOMEN: a round number. It was the custom in Israel for every household to bake in its own oven enough bread for the week. The arrangement of loaves on the Sabbath [24:8] provides evidence for this practice.” (Ibn Ezra)

“Here the text specifies women as the ones who bake the bread. This provides some insight into the division of labor in the ancient Israelite household. While women were the ones responsible for childbearing and childrearing, they also divided with men the other duties necessary to sustain and support the household. This text, then provides evidence that women were predominantly responsible for tasks related to food production, that is, the transformation of raw foodstuffs into consumable goods. In the ancient world this was a very important and time-consuming task. Other biblical texts, through their association of women and food production in various forms, support this conclusion.” (TAWC, 770)