

MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT ASSEMBLY

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TORAH LAW EDUCATIONAL COURSE

The 613 Mitzvot of Yahweh

Bereishit • Shemot • Vayikra • Bamidbar • Devarim | The Tanakh Writings

LESSON 09

Negative Law #169

Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:18 — Not to Take a Wife and Her Sister as Rivals

וְאִשָּׁה אֶל-אֲחֹתָהּ לֹא תִקַּח לְצֵרֶר

*Ve'ishah el-achotah lo tikach litzror***"A woman and her sister you shall not take as rivals."***The Sororal Restriction: Protecting the Sister Relationship Within the Covenant Household — and the Mercy of Return***Four Spheres: Individual • Community • Nation • World****Authority: The Tanakh — The Word of Yahweh Alone**

Standard: Devarim 19:15 — Two or Three Witnesses

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SECTION I — THE HEBREW TEXT

Vayikra (Leviticus) 18:18 — Full verse: *"And a woman to her sister you shall not take as rivals, to uncover her nakedness before her, in her lifetime."*

The Sexuality Household Study (Section 35) documents this in the complete arayot list: *"V. 18 — A wife's sister during the wife's lifetime: You shall not take a wife's sister as a rival wife during the wife's life. This is the sororal restriction on polygyny — it prohibits the specific combination, not polygyny generally."*

A. Lexical Analysis of Key Terms

לִצְרוֹר (litzror, H6887): BDB: "to bind, tie up; as rivals, to create adversarial rivalry." HALOT: "to confine, to cramp; to treat as a rival, to show hostility." Gesenius: "to bind, compress; as a rival wife, to show enmity to." The term designates competitive adversarial antagonism — not merely two women in the same household, but two women placed in a rival relationship against each other. The Sexuality Household Study (Section 43) states: *"The covenant household Yahweh designed is built on justice for every person within it."* The litzror relationship violates this design by placing sisters in systemic conflict.

בְּחַיֶּיהָ (be'chayeha, H2416): "In her lifetime" — the temporal clause that precisely defines the restriction's scope. The prohibition applies while the first wife lives. At her death, the restriction ends. This temporal precision demonstrates that the prohibition is not on the sister's character or eligibility — it is on the rival relationship that a living sister experiences when her sibling is also taken as a wife by the same man.

What this law prohibits specifically: This law does not prohibit polygyny. The Sexuality Household Study (Section 43) states: *"Polygyny is explicitly regulated but never prohibited in the Torah. Over 40 significant figures in the Tanakh had multiple wives or concubines, and Yahweh established His covenant with them through those household structures."* This law prohibits one specific combination: a wife's **sister** as an additional wife while the first wife lives. The prohibition is on the sisterly rival relationship — not on additional wives generally.

B. The Pre-Sinai Tension — Ya'akov, Rachel, and Leah — Addressed Directly

The Torah's own narrative records that Ya'akov had both Rachel and Leah — sisters — simultaneously as wives (Bereishit 29:16-30). This is a pre-Sinai narrative. The Sexuality Household Study (Section 46) addresses this directly: *"The Torah gives the framework. Human beings live within that framework with all their selfishness, weakness, and capacity for harm."* The Sinai covenant established laws that did not

exist formally before Sinai. The Bereishit narratives record what happened — including the pain, rivalry, and covenant struggle of the Rachel/Leah household — not what the Torah endorses.

The Rachel/Leah narrative (Bereishit 29:31-30:24) is itself the most powerful argument for Law #169. The Sexuality Household Study (Section 38) documents the consequences of household conflict for children: *"Children of divorced parents are approximately twice as likely to drop out of high school as children from intact families."* The rivalry between Rachel and Leah produced household conflict that eventually contributed to the near-fratricide among Ya'akov's sons (Bereishit 37). The narrative is the evidence; the law is the covenant remedy. **Yahweh** gave the law at Sinai to prevent what the Bereishit narrative documented as catastrophic household destruction.

C. The Penalty and the Temporal Scope

The Torah does not assign a specific death penalty to this violation in the arayot framework. The penalty clause "in her lifetime" suggests that the primary consequence is the rivalry relationship itself — and the covenant damage it produces to the sisterly bond. However, the violation of this law still falls within the arayot framework of Vayikra 18:29 (karet — cutting off) for whoever does any of these abominations.

The temporal clause **בְּחַיֶּיהָ** ("in her lifetime") has a specific legal implication: after the first wife's death, a man may marry her sister. The Torah does not prohibit the surviving sister from becoming a wife after the first wife has died. The prohibition is specifically on the **rival** relationship — which only exists while both sisters are living simultaneously in the same household covenant.

D. The Covenant Mercy of Yahweh — Sincere Repentance

Even where the Torah states the judgment of death, the covenant mercy of **Yahweh** is always extended to a person who sincerely repents. This is not a contradiction of the law — it is a covenant truth that runs through the entire Tanakh and must be stated plainly in every study.

Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 18:21-23 establishes this directly: ***"But if the wicked man turns from all his sins which he has committed and observes all My statutes and practices justice and righteousness, he shall surely live; he shall not die. All his transgressions which he has committed will not be remembered against him; because of his righteousness which he has practiced, he shall live. Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked," declares the Lord Yahweh, 'rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?'"***

This is the covenant position of **Yahweh** Himself — not a weakening of the law, but the full covenant framework. The death penalty is the Torah's declaration of the **gravity** of the sin. Yahweh's mercy through genuine repentance is the Torah's declaration of His **covenant character**. Both are true simultaneously. The Hoshea narrative is the clearest

demonstration: **Yahweh** pursued covenant restoration with Yisra'el after centuries of spiritual adultery — not because the sin was less serious, but because His covenant love is greater than His judgment, for those who genuinely return.

The Sexuality Household Study (Section 46) states: *"Yahweh's covenant with Yisra'el did not end when Yisra'el committed adultery against Him — spiritually, repeatedly, across centuries. Yahweh pursued covenant restoration through every prophet He sent. The word to every person in covenant community who has violated the violation of the sororal rival restriction is the same word Yahweh gave through Hoshea: return. The door of covenant restoration is the same door that stands open before Yisra'el in every prophetic book. What Yahweh requires is not performance — it is the sincere turning of the heart, the genuine abandonment of the covenant violation, and the humble return to the covenant structure He designed."* That is **Yahweh's** covenant: judgment is real, mercy is greater, and repentance is the bridge between the two.

Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 18:23 — JPS 1985

"Is it My desire that a wicked person shall die? — says the Lord Yahweh. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live."

Witness: Yahweh's own stated desire — not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn and live. The judgment of the law establishes the gravity. The mercy of Yahweh through repentance establishes the covenant character. Both stand together in every lesson of this course.

SECTION II — TWO/THREE WITNESS CORROBORATION

Reference	Teaching / Witness
Vayikra (Lev.) 18:18	Primary text — the sororal rival restriction. First witness.
Bereishit (Gen.) 29:30-30:24	The Rachel/Leah narrative — documents exactly the covenant damage of sisterly rivalry in a shared household that Law #169 was given to prevent. The narrative is the human witness; the law is the covenant remedy. Second witness.
Shemot (Ex.) 21:10	"He shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights." The obligation to every wife in the household (Lesson 03) — which becomes uniquely complicated and fraught when the wives are sisters in active rivalry. Third witness confirming the covenant obligations that apply within the household Law #169 addresses.
Bereishit (Gen.) 37:2-4	The consequences of the Rachel/Leah household rivalry extend to the next generation: "Israel loved Joseph more than all his children... and his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, and they hated him." The household rivalry between sisters produced the near-fratricide of the next generation. Corroborating narrative witness.
Malakhi (Mal.) 2:15	"And did not He make one? Yet had He the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That He might seek a godly seed." Yahweh's design is for the household to produce covenant offspring — not to be consumed by rivalry and conflict. Corroborating covenant purpose witness.
Yechezkel (Ez.) 18:21-23	Yahweh's covenant mercy — the door of sincere repentance is always open even for those who have violated the sororal restriction.

SECTION III — FOUR-SPHERE APPLICATION

Level	Sphere	Application	Torah Witness
INDIVIDUAL	The Sister Relationship is Sacred	Sisters share a covenant bond that Yahweh designed to be a bond of mutual support, not competition. Placing them in romantic rivalry through a shared husband violates the covenant of sisterhood Yahweh created.	Vayikra 18:18
INDIVIDUAL	The Wife's Lifetime is Protected	The temporal clause — 'in her lifetime' — means the covenant restriction exists precisely during the period when the rivalry would be most damaging to both the wife and her sister. After the wife's death, the prohibition ends.	Vayikra 18:18
INDIVIDUAL	The Pre-Sinai Warning — Learn from the Narrative	The Rachel/Leah narrative is Yahweh's pre-Sinai demonstration of why this law is necessary. Anyone who would violate Law #169 should read Bereishit 29-37 first — and count the cost: household rivalry, the pain of the less-loved wife, the rivalry that nearly destroyed the next generation.	Bereishit 29-37
INDIVIDUAL	Sincere Repentance — Yahweh's Covenant Mercy	Where Law #169 has been violated — and the resulting household damage is real — Yahweh's covenant mercy is extended to	Yechezkel 18:21-23; Hoshea 2:14-20

		genuine repentance. This includes both the man who created the rival situation and the sisters whose relationship was damaged by it.	
COMMUNITY	Counsel Against Sororal Rival Situations	Where a covenant community member is considering adding a wife's sister while the first wife lives, covenant community leadership must provide clear counsel: this is prohibited by Written Torah. The Rachel/Leah narrative is the community's evidence of why this prohibition protects everyone involved.	Vayikra 18:18
COMMUNITY	Protect the Sister's Covenant Bond	The covenant community must recognize that the sister who is taken as a rival wife is also a victim of the household structure — her sisterly bond with her sibling has been transformed into adversarial rivalry. The community owes both women pastoral care.	Vayikra 18:18
NATION	Understand the Scope Precisely	National marriage law that prohibits a man from marrying his deceased wife's sister goes beyond the Torah's scope. The Torah does not impose this restriction — it permits the union after the first wife's death. National law that adds this	Vayikra 18:18

		restriction is more restrictive than Torah.	
NATION	Polygyny Regulation — Not Prohibition	Where nations permit polygyny, Law #169 provides a specific Torah restriction within that framework: the sororal rival combination is prohibited while the first wife lives. National law must be able to distinguish regulated polygyny from prohibited combinations.	Shemot 21:10; Vayikra 18:18
WORLD	The Rival Household Destroys Families	The Rachel/Leah narrative is the world's documentation of the consequences when this law is violated: household conflict, the pain of the less-loved wife, and rivalry that extended to the next generation (Bereishit 37 — the near-fratricide). The world-level consequence of household covenant violation is covenant destruction that spans generations.	Bereishit 29-37
WORLD	Covenant Household as World Witness	When a covenant household upholds the Torah's framework — all wives honored equally with she'er, kesut, and onah (Lesson 03); the sororal restriction honored; covenant faithfulness maintained — it becomes a testimony to the nations of Yahweh's design for the family.	Shemot 21:10; Vayikra 18:18; Mishlei 31

SECTION IV — THREE-RELIGION AUDIT

Judaism

Upholds Torah: Halakhic law maintains the sororal restriction as Torah law — not merely rabbinic custom. Both Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities uphold it. **Note on halachic extension:** Some halakhic authorities extend the prohibition beyond the wife's death in certain circumstances — this is a rabbinic addition to the Written Torah's scope. The Written Torah's scope is clear: the restriction applies in the wife's lifetime.

Christianity

Upholds in practice: Christianity upholds the sororal restriction through its general prohibition on polygyny — since polygyny itself is not permitted, the sororal rival combination cannot arise. **Historical note:** The 19th-century British debates over the Deceased Wife's Sister's Marriage Acts actually addressed whether a man could marry his deceased wife's sister — which the Torah does not prohibit. The debates were often conducted without the Torah's precise temporal distinction (in her lifetime). The Written Torah is clear: after the wife's death, the restriction ends.

Islam

Upholds Torah: An-Nisa 4:23 explicitly prohibits "two sisters at the same time" — a direct parallel to Vayikra 18:18. **More restrictive than Torah:** Some Islamic interpretations extend the prohibition even after the first wife's death — which is more restrictive than the Written Torah. The Sexuality Household Study (Section 43) notes that Islam permits polygyny up to four wives under specific conditions of equal treatment — which is the closest of the three traditions to the Torah's own framework for the polygynous household.

STUDY REVIEW & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Individual Level

1. The Hebrew term **לִצְרוֹר** (**litzror**) specifically designates the adversarial rival relationship — not merely two women in a shared household. What does this specific designation reveal about what **Yahweh** is protecting through Law #169? Is He protecting the women's feelings, their sisterly bond, or something deeper?
2. The temporal clause **בְּחַיֶּיהָ** — "in her lifetime" — precisely limits the scope of the prohibition. After the first wife's death, the restriction ends. Why does the Torah build this temporal precision into the law? What does it reveal about the nature of what is being protected?
3. The Rachel/Leah narrative documents exactly the household damage that Law #169 was given to prevent. Trace the specific stages of damage from Bereishit 29 through Bereishit 37 — and explain how Law #169, if it had been in force, would have prevented each stage.

Community Level

4. A man in the covenant community is in a polygynous marriage and wishes to take his wife's sister as an additional wife while his wife is living. Using the Written Torah's framework, what does covenant leadership counsel — and on what specific Written Torah basis?
5. Both the wife and her sister who has been taken as a rival wife are members of the covenant community. Both are suffering from the rivalry. What does the covenant community owe each of them — and how does the Torah's framework (including Shemot 21:10's equal provision obligation) inform the community's response?

National Level

6. Nations that permit polygyny face the specific challenge of Law #169 — the sororal restriction within a polygynous framework. How should national marriage law handle this specific Torah prohibition — distinguishing it from general polygyny regulation?

World Level

7. Bereishit 37 documents the near-fratricide among Ya'akov's sons — a world-level consequence of the household rivalry that began in Bereishit 29. Trace the connection between the household covenant violation (the sororal rivalry) and the world-level consequence (the near-destruction of the covenant family). What does this narrative establish about the relationship between household covenant faithfulness and world-level covenant stability?

SCRIPTURE INDEX — LESSON 09

Reference	Teaching / Witness
Bereishit (Gen.) 29:16-30	Ya'akov's marriages to Rachel and Leah — the pre-Sinai narrative that demonstrates why Law #169 is necessary.
Bereishit (Gen.) 29:31-30:24	The Rachel/Leah rivalry — the documented pain, competition, and household damage of the sororal rival relationship.
Bereishit (Gen.) 37:2-4	The next-generation consequence — the household rivalry between sisters produces hatred among the children.
Shemot (Ex.) 21:10	She'er, kesut, onah — equal provision for every wife in the household. Applies to the context Law #169 addresses.
Vayikra (Lev.) 18:18	Law #169 — primary text. The sororal rival restriction. Temporal clause: in her lifetime.
Malakhi (Mal.) 2:15	Yahweh's covenant purpose for the household: to produce godly covenant offspring.
Yechezkel (Ez.) 18:21-23	Yahweh's covenant mercy — the door of sincere repentance is always open.

""Is it My desire that a wicked person shall die? — says the Lord Yahweh. It is rather that he shall turn back from his ways and live.""

Yechezkel (Ezekiel) 18:23

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Next: Lesson 10 — Law #170 — Vayikra 18:19 — The Niddah Separation