



ROSH HODESH: IT'S A GIRL THING!

PARASHIYOT: Weekly Torah Portions

Themes and Discussion Questions

In addition to its monthly and seasonal cycles, the Jewish year is also divided into weekly PARASHIYOT Torah portions. You will find below Ellen Frankel's interpretive summary of each week's PARASHAH (Torah portion), followed by a set of age-appropriate discussion questions and selected themes by Nomi Manon. We hope that these materials will be a useful resource for furthering group conversation and activity. They may inspire you to develop your own gathering plans. (We encourage you to use the blank Gathering Plan form we have provided and to share your creation with other leaders through ROSH HODESH: IT'S A GIRL THING!)

Frankel's summaries are excerpted from her book *The Five Books of Miriam* (New York: Putnam, 1996), and are used by permission of the author and the publisher. We are grateful to Ellen Frankel and Nomi Manon for providing us with their work.

BEREYSHIT Gen. 1:1-6:8

Torah speaks:

In the beginning, Shekhinah, the Holy-One-Who-Dwells-in-This-World, spins the world into being: light, water, earth, heavenly bodies, seed-bearing plants, sea creatures, birds, animals—and Adam, the only creature cast in the divine image, double-gendered and unique. And then the Holy One rests. And Adam then untwins, differentiating into two separate creatures: man and woman. Seeing the woman, the man names her “bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh,” name of my name, *isha* of my *ish*. Cleaving together, they embody the divine image in their unity. In partnership, they set up house in Eden.

But like all idylls, this one too proves false, and soon comes to an end. Adam and Eve awaken to desire, and beget history and sin. In turn, their sons, Cain and Abel, follow after their own hearts, and beget death. Thus the human drama begins to run its course. Many generations follow, until the earth fills up with evil, and God—like any heartbroken parent—wonders how it all could have gone so wrong.

Discussion questions and themes:

In this parashah, God regrets having created humankind because of their evil inclinations.

When do we regret things that we have done and what can we do to make ourselves feel better about our choices? How can we work on making choices in our lives that don't lead to regret? Does feeling regretful ever lead to positive changes in our lives?

Why do you think the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is forbidden to Adam and Eve? What would it mean not to have knowledge of good and evil?

- Regret
- Good and evil
- Sibling rivalry
- Anger

NO'AH Gen. 6:9–11:32

Torah teaches:

Not long after civilization is set in motion, it goes awry. Humanity becomes corrupt and lawless, and the Holy-One-Who-Dwells-in-This-World decides to try Her hand again, wiping out all life on earth with a great flood and beginning anew with Noah and his family. And so Noah and his sons build an ark, and Naamah and her daughters-in-law make it habitable. And they fill it with breeding pairs from all the kingdoms of life, and in that fragile ark ride out the forty days and nights of rain. When they emerge from their lifeboat a year later, all animal life has disappeared except what remains in the ark and in the seas.

Noah and Naamah, their children, and all their animal guests emerge from their seaborne prison and repopulate the earth. In thanksgiving Noah offers a sacrifice, and the Holy One of Blessing responds with a promise, a rainbow signifying that never again will the earth be destroyed by flood. Then Noah plants a vineyard and gets drunk. His son Ham sees him naked and is cursed: Noah's other two sons, Shem and Japheth, cover his nakedness and are blessed. And then human civilization spreads out. In the valley of Shinar, people come together to build a great tower so that they can make a name for themselves and avoid being scattered over the earth. But God babbles their speech, earning this place the name Babel. And so humankind is scattered over the face of the earth.

Shem begins a new line, which leads to Abram, Sarai, and their nephew, Lot. Leaving Ur, they journey to Haran, where Abram's father, Terah, dies [many years later].

Discussion questions and themes:

The ark that Noah builds serves as a safe haven for him and his family. Because they have this special place to go to, their lives are spared. What kinds of places do we have in our lives that serve as safe spaces? We don't hear how Noah and his family felt when they were in the ark. How do you imagine they felt? How do we react when bad things are going on around us? How do we feel when we make it through a bad time? Noah offers a sacrifice to God—what do we do?

- **Safe spaces**
- **Destruction**
- **Resiliency**
- **The power of promises**
- **The importance of diversity**

LEḤ-LEḤA Gen. 12:1–17:27

Torah teaches:

Called by God to leave his own land and go to a new one, Abram, together with his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and several converts to their new faith, travel to Canaan and then to Egypt, where Sarai narrowly escapes Pharaoh's harem. Returning to Canaan, Abram and his nephew part company in a dispute over land. Then God promises Abram a son and makes a covenant with him. And Sarai, still barren, gives Abram her handmaid, Hagar, but drives her away when the pregnant Hagar shows contempt for her. God then comes to Hagar in the desert and promises her that her son will become the father of a great nation.

God promises Abram that Sarai too will bear a son to carry on the covenant. And then the Name-That-Transcends-Speech gives both of them new names: Abraham and Sarah.

Discussion questions and themes

In Egypt Sarai had to lie about her relationship to Abram because of her beauty. Beauty was evidently seen as a very important characteristic in a woman in those days. How important is women's beauty in our society? Who defines a beautiful woman? How do we know what society thinks is beautiful? What influence does the media have in our perception of beauty? How do generalized ideas of beauty affect us individually, and women in general?

When God makes a covenant with Abram, he gives Abram and Sarai different names (Abraham and Sarah). What is significant about changing one's name? When do people change their names? How did each of us get our name? Is there any significance behind your name?

- **The power of beauty**
- **Jealousy**
- **Rivalry between women**
- **The importance of names/naming**

VAYERA Gen. 18:1–22:24)

Torah teaches:

Three divine messengers come to Abraham and announce that Sarah will yet give birth to a son. When Sarah overhears this, she laughs, thinking to herself: I am almost ninety and no longer menstruating! But Shekhinah upbraids her: Is anything too difficult for the Creator of Life?

God also reveals to Abraham that the nearby cities of Sodom and Gomorrah will be destroyed because of their wickedness. Abraham negotiates with God to spare Sodom, where his nephew Lot and his family live. God agrees—if at least ten righteous people can be found there.

Then two of the angel-messengers go to Sodom and find shelter there with Lot. When the evil townspeople seek to molest them, the angels thwart their designs by blinding them. Then God tells Lot to flee with his family before the city is destroyed, but only his wife and two [of their] daughters consent to join him. [Two other daughters and their husbands refuse to leave.] During their flight, Lot's wife looks back and turns into a pillar of salt, so that only three of them escape the firestorm engulfing the cities of the plain. Convinced that the rest of humanity is doomed, Lot's daughters get their father drunk and sleep with him, and each gives birth to a son.

Then Abraham journeys to the kingdom of Abimelekh, where he protects himself from death a second time by telling the king that his wife, Sarah, is really his sister. Visited by a divine dream and a plague of barrenness, the king discovers the truth and placates Abraham and Sarah with gifts and safe settlement in his domain. Then Abimelekh and Abraham conclude a covenant at the well of Beersheba.

At the age of ninety, Sarah gives birth to Isaac—"Laughing Boy"—as God has promised. When the baby is eight days old, he, his older half-brother, Ishmael, and their aged father are circumcised.

Then Sarah, fearful of Ishmael's harmful influence on her son, demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael. God instructs Abraham to honor Sarah's wish. In the desert, God saves the two exiles, promising Hagar that Ishmael will become a great nation.

Then God calls upon Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah. But when Abraham raises the knife to kill his son, the Merciful One stays his hand, and so Abraham sacrifices a ram instead. In reward for his obedience, God blesses Abraham with a fruitful and glorious future.

Discussion questions and themes:

In this parashah, Lot and his family are told not to look back as the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. Lot's wife, however, does look back. Why do you think she looked back? What might she have been thinking as her home was being destroyed? When do we look back on events in our lives? Why do you think God told Lot's family not to look back? Is there a time when it's a good idea not to look back?

Both Sarah and Hagar come close to losing their sons in this parashah. How might each of them have felt as they were aware of the potential death of their sons? Do you think that both women were helpless in their situations? What situations in our lives make us feel helpless? What can we do to help people who are feeling helpless? What can we do for ourselves when we feel this way?

- **Bargaining with God**
- **Good vs. evil**
- **Destruction**
- **Life and death**
- **Powerlessness and empowerment**

HAYEY SARAH Gen. 23:1-25:18

Torah teaches:

At the age of 127, Sarah dies. Abraham mourns her death, and when he rises up from the mourning stool, he buys the Cave of Makhpelah as a burial place.

Determined that his son Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman, Abraham then sends his

servant Eliezer back to the old country to find Isaac a bride. To select the appropriate woman, Eliezer sets up a test, and lo and behold! Rebecca, Abraham's great-niece, passes it, for without being asked, the young woman waters Eliezer's camels as well as giving him drink. Eliezer then asks her father, Bethuel, and her brother, Laban, for Rebecca's hand, and they agree, but only after Rebecca herself gives her consent.

Eliezer returns to Canaan with Rebecca and her nurse, Deborah. Isaac marries Rebecca, bringing her into Sarah's tent, where he finally finds comfort after his mother's death.

Then Abraham remarries, has many more children, and dies at the age of 175. His sons Isaac and Ishmael bury him beside Sarah in the Cave of Makhpelah. Ishmael also has many children, and he dies at the age of 137.

Discussion questions and themes:

Isaac and Rebecca are married in a very different way than most people we know are today. What roles do love, personal choice, or the future play in their union? How important are these things in a relationship? What are the important aspects of our romantic relationships? How do we choose the person whom we are going to date? What influences our decision?

- **Death and mourning**
- **Love**
- **Hospitality**
- **Reconciliation**

TOLDOT Gen. 25:19–28:9

Torah teaches:

After marrying Isaac, Rebecca is barren for twenty years. At last she conceives and bears twins—red, hairy Esau and smooth-skinned Jacob, who emerges grasping his brother's heel. Esau grows up to be a hunter, the apple of his father's eye; Jacob, a homebody, his mother's favorite. One day, Esau returns from the fields famished, and his brother persuades him to sell his birthright for a pot of lentils.

When famine besieges Canaan, God tells Isaac to remain in the land and then blesses him. Coming to the court of the Philistine king Abimelekh, Isaac protects himself from Abimelekh's royal prerogative—taking Rebecca for his bed and Isaac's head for his trophy—by using the same wife-sister ruse that his father, Abraham, had used before him to outmaneuver both Pharaoh and Abimelekh. Isaac then settles in Abimelekh's domain and prospers there. But after he is repeatedly harassed by the neighboring Philistines, Isaac moves on to Beersheba and concludes a peace agreement with Abimelekh.

Then Esau marries two Hittite women, which grieves his parents.

Sensing his approaching death, old, blind Isaac asks Esau to bring him some cooked game and receive his blessing as firstborn. Overhearing Isaac's words, Rebecca instructs Jacob to dress as Esau and steal his brother's blessing. And so, disguised in sheepskin, Jacob tricks Isaac and is blessed. And when Esau returns from the hunt and receives only a lesser blessing from his father, he swears revenge against his brother.

Rebecca urges Jacob to flee to her father's house, and she then persuades Isaac to send him there to marry one of her kinspeople. And so Isaac sends Jacob off with his blessing.

Esau, seeking to please his father, then marries Ishmael's daughter Mahalath in addition to his Hittite wives.

Discussion questions and themes:

Does Rebecca's decision to promote Jacob for the blessing of leadership necessarily mean that she prefers Jacob? How do you think Jacob feels? How might Esau have felt? There seems to be a recurring theme of competition between brothers in the Genesis stories (Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, now Jacob and Esau, and later Joseph and his brothers). By contrast, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are relatively cooperative leaders. Is there something for us to learn

about healthy and unhealthy expressions of rivalry? Is rivalry unavoidable? Where do we see good solutions to problems of rivalry? Is it ever useful to feel competitive? What are appropriate limits on our competitive behaviors?

- Sibling rivalry
- Competition
- Parental involvement

VAYETZEY Gen. 28:10-32:3

Torah teaches:

Fleeing Esau, Jacob lies down to sleep and dreams of a ladder with angels ascending to and descending from heaven. And in his dream God blesses him. Upon awaking, Jacob builds an altar out of his stone pillow and names the place Bethel, the “house of God.” Then he continues on toward Haran.

There Jacob meets his cousin Rachel and waters her flock. Smitten with love, he asks his uncle Laban for Rachel’s hand in marriage, and he receives it in exchange for seven years of labor. But Laban tricks Jacob and gives him Rachel’s older sister, Leah, instead and then extorts seven more years out of him for Rachel as his second wife. The two women bring with them their handmaids, Zilpah and Bilhah.

To compensate Leah for Jacob’s preference for her younger sister, God grants her fertility: she bears six sons—Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun—and a daughter, Dinah. The barren Rachel then gives Jacob her handmaid as a concubine, and Bilhah bears to him Dan and Naphtali, Leah then gives Jacob Zilpah, who gives birth to two sons, Gad and Asher. Finally, Rachel conceives and gives birth to Joseph.

At the end of Jacob’s fourteen years of service, Laban demands of him six more years, in exchange for a share of the herds, and Jacob grows prosperous through ingenious animal husbandry and divine blessing. Then Jacob, aware of Laban’s festering ill will, flees back to Canaan with his wives, children, and flocks.

Before leaving, Rachel steals her father’s idols. Laban pursues them and demands his stolen gods. Rachel deceives her father, and they escape unscathed. Then Jacob and Laban conclude a nonaggression pact, sealing it with a mound of stones. Laban returns home, and Jacob’s camp heads west, accompanied by angels.

Discussion questions and themes:

The Torah does not give us many details about the lives of Rachel and Leah, but we do hear about their differences and their competition for Jacob’s love. What are the factors that might have interfered with Rachel and Leah having a healthy and loving relationship with one another? If you were to imagine other aspects of their shared life together, how would you imagine them? What are Rachel’s blessings? What are Leah’s blessings? How might we interpret the qualities of love, beauty, and fertility? Are there people whom you both love and envy? How does envy feel? How can we train ourselves to appreciate our best qualities so that we do not waste time wishing for what other people have? What qualities do you want to cultivate in yourself?

- Trickery
- Relationships between women
- Envy
- Leaving home

VAYISHLAH Gen. 32:4–36:43

Torah teaches:

After twenty years in exile, Jacob returns home. Still fearful of Esau’s revenge, he sends ahead of him gifts of livestock to placate his brother.

That night, after his family and his herds have crossed the river Jabbok, Jacob struggles with a divine being and wrests from him a new name, Yisrael (Israel)—“one-who-wrestles-with-God.” Because Jacob is wounded in the thigh as a result of this encounter, Jews have ever since refrained from eating the thigh muscle of kosher animals.

Then, in anticipation of seeing his brother,

Jacob divides his large family into two camps and goes to meet Esau, who greets him with a tearful embrace. Jacob introduces Esau to his family and presents gifts. Esau returns to his home in Seir; Jacob and his family settle near Shechem.

One day, Dinah goes out to visit the women of the land. Shechem, son of the local chieftain Hamor, rapes her and then asks his father to obtain her for him as a wife. When Hamor and Shechem come to Jacob and his sons with their request, Jacob's sons consent, but only on the condition that Hamor and Shechem and their people circumcise themselves. They agree, but when the men of Shechem are still weak from their wounds, Simeon and Levi attack the town and slaughter all the men. Then the other brothers come and plunder the town, taking among the spoils the women and children. Jacob accuses his sons of causing trouble for him by their actions.

Jacob moves to Bethel and builds an altar there. Then Rebecca's servant Deborah dies and is buried. God blesses Jacob with a promise of many descendants, kings among them, and with the land of Canaan.

Rachel then gives birth to a second son, whom she calls Ben-oni, "son of my suffering," but Jacob renames him Benjamin, "son of my right hand." Rachel dies in childbirth and is buried near Bethlehem.

Jacob then comes to his father, Isaac, in Hebron. Isaac dies at age 180 and is buried by Jacob and Esau.

Esau has five sons by Canaanite wives, and their many descendants become the kings and clans of the land of Edom.

Discussion questions and themes:

In this story, Dinah is raped, but we do not hear her voice. When is it important to speak out? How do we find the courage to speak out? Discuss violence against women, rape, saying no, and self-protection. When a person becomes the victim of a violent

crime, how can we assist her and help her understand that it was not her fault? How can a society help prevent the victimization of vulnerable people? What feelings of fear or insecurity do girls and women have about their own bodies in our society? What role does revenge play in our lives? Are there times when revenge feels necessary? Is it ever necessary?

- Rape
- Birth and death
- Revenge

VAYESHEV Gen. 37:1–40:23

Torah teaches:

Because Joseph is singled out as Jacob's favorite, receiving from him a special coat of many colors, his brothers envy and resent him. At seventeen, Joseph has two dreams about his privileged status: in the first, his brothers' sheaves bow down to his; in the second, the sun, the moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. When he tells these dreams to his brothers, they hate him even more.

One day, Joseph goes to his brothers where they are shepherding their flocks. They plot to kill him, but the oldest brother, Reuben, intending to rescue Joseph later, convinces them to throw Joseph into a pit instead. When a caravan of Ishmaelites happens by, Judah persuades his brothers to sell Joseph to them, and he is carried to Egypt and sold into slavery. The brothers smear Joseph's coat with goat's blood and tell Jacob that his son has been killed by wild beasts. Jacob mourns Joseph's death, refusing to be comforted.

Soon after, Judah marries a Canaanite woman, Shua, who bears him three sons. Er, the firstborn, marries Tamar, but dies without children. Then Judah orders Onan, the next-born, to father his brother's heir with Tamar, but Onan refuses, and he too dies. Judah promises to marry Tamar to his third son, Shelah, when he comes of age, but fails to fulfill his promise.

So Tamar tricks Judah into sleeping with

her: posing as a prostitute, she demands Judah's seal, cord, and staff as a pledge for later payment. When Tamar becomes pregnant, Judah threatens to burn her for harlotry—but backs off when she shows him his own pledge, identifying him as the father. Tamar gives birth to twins—Zerah and Perez.

In Egypt, Joseph is bought by Potiphar, Pharaoh's courtier and chief steward, and in time rises to become chief of Potiphar's household. Captivated by Joseph's beauty, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him; when she is rebuffed, she accuses Joseph of trying to rape her, and Joseph is thrown into prison.

There Joseph again rises to a position of authority, becoming head of the prisoners. When Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker are cast into prison, they come into Joseph's charge, and both present dreams for him to interpret. Joseph tells the butler that three branches of grapes in his dream foretell release for him in three days; the baker's three baskets of bread, however, predict his death in three days. Both dreams come true—but the butler forgets to tell Pharaoh about Joseph's plight and ask for his release.

Discussion questions and themes:

In the ancient world, dreams were sometimes considered to be divine communication. Do you remember your dreams? Have you ever tried keeping a dream journal? Do you think there is value in recording dreams? Joseph has dreams about his brothers being subservient to him and he tells them about it. What might have been Joseph's reasons for telling his dreams to his brothers? Why might a person tell something to others that would hurt them or make them angry? When do we do that in our lives? How does it affect our relationships with other people? How does it feel when others do that to us?

- Dreams
- Sibling rivalry/competition
- Jealousy
- Unjust accusation

MIKETZ Gen. 41:1-44:17

Torah teaches:

Then Pharaoh has two troubling dreams: In the first, seven lean, ugly cows emerge from the Nile and swallow seven fat, handsome cows grazing by the river. In the second, seven thin, scorched ears of grain swallow seven full, healthy ears. None of Pharaoh's wise men is able to interpret the dreams.

And now the chief butler remembers Joseph and tells Pharaoh, who orders Joseph fetched from prison. Pharaoh recounts his dreams, and Joseph unravels them: the seven fat cows and ears of grain represent seven coming years of plenty; the seven lean cows and ears, seven years of famine that will follow this prosperity. The double dream signifies the hand of God. Joseph advises Pharaoh to choose a wise vizier to supervise the stockpiling of food during the good years to prepare for the bad. Pharaoh chooses Joseph as that man, elevates him to second in command of Egypt, and gives him Asnat, a priest's daughter, as his wife. Joseph executes his plan. By the time famine strikes, Joseph is the father of two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim. Joseph rations out food to save Egypt from starvation. The famine afflicts the whole region, including Canaan.

Jacob sends all his sons but Benjamin to Egypt for food. Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they do not know him. He questions them about their family, and they reveal to him that Jacob is still alive and that Benjamin has remained behind with him. Then Joseph falsely accuses them of being spies and demands that they bring back Benjamin to prove that they are not lying to him. He holds Simeon as hostage, gives the others grain, and secretly restores their money to them.

When they return home and tell their father what has happened, he refuses to part with Benjamin—since he has already lost Joseph and Simeon. Then Reuben offers his own two sons and Judah offers himself as surety for Benjamin's safe

return. Jacob finally relents, and the brothers journey again to Egypt, with their youngest brother, gifts of spices and nuts, and double payment for food.

Joseph greets them, hiding his tears upon seeing his younger brother, and fetes them in the palace. When provisioning them with more food, he orders his servants to slip his silver goblet into Benjamin's saddlebag. Pursued by Joseph's steward, the brothers discover to their horror that Benjamin has been set up as a thief. When Joseph accuses Benjamin of the crime and condemns him to remain in Egypt as Joseph's slave, the other brothers offer themselves as slaves as well. But Joseph wants only Benjamin.

Discussion questions and themes:

Pharaoh calls on Joseph to interpret his dreams. What makes Pharaoh trust Joseph to interpret correctly? Do we gain people's trust only through our actions? How do we know whom to trust? What can we do to make others feel that they can trust us?

Why did Joseph trick his brothers? Does it make sense that Joseph might still be angry with his brothers? How long do we hold onto our anger? When, if ever, is it appropriate to remain angry with someone for a long time? Has your anger ever led to anything positive? What do we do when we are angry? When, if ever, should we hold on to anger and when should we let things go?

- Dreams
- Anger
- Revenge

VAYIGASH Gen. 44:18–47:27

Torah teaches:

When Joseph threatens to hold Benjamin captive in Egypt as his slave, Judah offers himself in his brother's stead to spare old Jacob such heartbreak. Convinced that his brothers have indeed repented of their past sins, Joseph breaks down and reveals his true identity to them. He embraces his stunned brothers and then urges them to bring Jacob, their families, and their herds to live in Goshen, a region of Egypt where

pasture is plentiful. And Pharaoh gives his blessing to this plan.

So the aged Jacob, shocked, then buoyed, by this unexpected good news, travels with his teeming household of children, grandchildren, and livestock down to Egypt. The seventy members of Jacob's clan settle in Goshen, where they prosper and multiply under Joseph's watchful eye.

Discussion questions and themes:

After much testing, Joseph decides that his brothers have become good men. What makes him decide this? How can we tell when people have changed? How are we able to know that they really have become better people? How do we repent for things that we have done wrong? How do we know when we need to change our behavior, attitudes, or actions? When have you worked to change yourself for the better and succeeded? How do we prove to others that we have changed?

- Forgiveness
- Self-sacrifice
- Family reconciliation and reunion

VAYEHI Gen. 47:28–50:26

Torah teaches:

When Jacob nears the end of his long life, he summons Joseph and makes him swear not to bury him in Egypt but to return his body to the family burial place in Canaan. Then he blesses Joseph's two sons, purposely honoring the younger Ephraim above the older Manasseh, and adopts both of them as his own sons. Finally, he delivers his last will and testament to his twelve sons, giving Joseph a double portion through his two sons.

At the conclusions of this testament, Jacob repeats his wish to be buried with his ancestors in the Cave of Makhpelah, and then he dies. Joseph orders his father embalmed, and all Egypt mourns his death. Then Jacob's entire clan, together with the court of Egypt and a royal escort, brings Jacob's body back to Canaan and buries him there.

Once their father is dead, Joseph's brothers fear Joseph's revenge and appeal to his mercy. Joseph reassures them that all that has transpired has been divinely ordained and pledges his protection.

When he himself is about to die, after a long and fruitful life in Egypt, Joseph makes his brothers swear to bury him back in Canaan. "WHEN GOD HAS TAKEN NOTICE OF YOU." He then dies at the age of 110 and is embalmed.

Discussion questions and themes:

When Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers worry that Joseph might want revenge on them. What does this tell us about the role that Jacob played in the family? Is there one person in your family whom people rely on to keep the family functioning? Is it important to have someone in the family fill this role? What problems can arise from this situation? What happens when this person can no longer fill the role? Because of their treatment of Joseph as a young man, Joseph's brothers understand that he might want revenge. Is that why they are scared? What makes us fear other people? What actions of our own cause us to worry about what other people might do to us?

- **Revenge**
- **Difference in treatment of children**

SHEMOT Ex. 1:1-6:1

Torah teaches:

Jacob's original clan of seventy multiplies to become the teeming Israelite people. But the reigning Pharaoh, who no longer knows Joseph, fears a fifth column in his midst. And so, to stave off the possibility of a slave rebellion, he enslaves the Israelites and sets them to work building royal treasure cities. He also orders the Israelite midwives, Shifra and Puah, to kill all Hebrew male babies. But they defy his orders, and so he instructs his own people to throw the babies into the Nile.

One of the Hebrew slave women, Yokheved,

hides her newborn son for three months and then, when she can no longer conceal him at home, sets him adrift on the Nile in a reed basket. Pharaoh's daughter finds him and adopts him, unwittingly hiring the baby's mother as wet nurse. She names her Hebrew son Moses, meaning "draws out." And Moses grows up in Pharaoh's palace.

One day, Moses comes upon an Egyptian taskmaster beating an Israelite slave and strikes the Egyptian dead. Afraid of being punished, Moses flees to Midian, where he marries Zipporah, daughter of the local priest, who bears him a son, Gershom.

Then Pharaoh dies, and a new Pharaoh succeeds him. And God hears the Israelites' cry in bondage, remembers the covenant, and takes notice of the suffering people.

Tending his flock in Midian, Moses chances upon a mysterious burning bush, out of which God addresses him, commanding him to return to Egypt and tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave Egypt. Then God shows Moses signs to convince Pharaoh of his authority, reveals to him a new divine name—"I AM THAT I AM"—and foretells the Israelites' liberation and future possession of the Promised Land.

Discussion questions and themes:

Both Moses and the midwives, Shifrah and Puah, go against what they are told because they believe it is the right thing to do. When and how do we defy bad orders in our own lives? How do we know when to resist an order and when to go along? How does it feel to do something other than what you are told? When Jochebed (Yokheved) set Moses out on the water, and later, when Moses went back to Egypt, both acted on faith. Jochebed didn't know what would become of her son, and Moses didn't know what Pharaoh would do to him and his people. What does it mean to act on faith? When do we act on faith? How can we know that we are doing the right thing?

- **Resistance and rebellion**
- **Uncertainty**
- **Doing what you believe in**

Torah teaches:

After reaffirming to Moses the divine promise of redemption, God instructs him to demand from Pharaoh the release of all the Israelite slaves. Moses protests that his “impeded speech” will certainly handicap God’s designs, but God reassures him that he will not face Pharaoh alone: Aaron will serve as his prophet.

Appearing before Pharaoh, the two brothers demand freedom for their people. To back up their demand, Aaron presents his credentials as God’s agent, casting down his rod, which turns into a serpent and swallows up the serpentine rods of Pharaoh’s magicians. But Pharaoh remains unimpressed.

The next day, Aaron strikes the Nile with his rod, turning its waters and all the waters of Egypt into blood. But when his own royal magicians mimic this feat, Pharaoh again pays no heed to Moses’ and Aaron’s demands. God then brings on a plague of frogs, which swarm all over Egypt. Yet once again Pharaoh’s sorcerers duplicate the strangers’ magic. This time, however, Pharaoh agrees to meet the brothers’ demands in exchange for a reprieve from the frogs. But as soon as the plague is lifted, Pharaoh reneges on his promise, refusing to let the people go.

Next Aaron strikes the dust, unleashing a plague of lice. This time Pharaoh’s magicians fail to replicate the miracle; their powers finally outdone, they acknowledge that here is none other than “THE FINGER OF GOD.” But Pharaoh still will not be moved. So God strikes Egypt with a fourth plague, of insects that devastate the land. Unnerved, Pharaoh pledges to release his Israelite slaves, but he changes his mind as soon as the insects disappear. Next a deadly disease afflicts Egyptian livestock, though the Israelites’ animals remain untouched. Still Pharaoh will not yield. Moses then casts up soot into the sky, unloosing a plague of boils that torment

the Egyptian people and their beasts. On the heels of this plague comes fiery hail that pelts the fields of ripening barley and flax, but none of these plagues softens Pharaoh’s adamant heart. He still refuses to let his slaves go.

All this time, as these seven plagues devastate Egypt, the Israelites and their possessions remain unharmed in their territory of Goshen, awaiting redemption.

Discussion questions and themes:

Aaron’s wife, Elishevah, happens to be mentioned in this parashah, and she is never mentioned again. In the surrounding Torah portions and haftarat, there are many women who are mentioned, but whose lives we know little about. Look at the information we know about Tamar (Gen. 38), Jephtha’s daughter (Judges 11:31-11:58), Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:12), and Shifrah and Puah (Ex. 1:21). Even though they are not given much space in the text, we can guess what their lives were like. Think of women in your family and the roles they play. From the little that we know about these biblical characters, what qualities do you think they might have had? Which of these qualities would you like to have or incorporate into your life? Pharaoh seems to be very stubborn in this story. Does it end up getting him what he wants? Is being stubborn ever a good quality to have? When? How does it affect others when we are stubborn? How does it feel when other people are stubborn?

- **Stubbornness**
- **Magic/miracles**
- **Doing the right thing**

BO Ex. 10:1-13:16

Torah teaches:

Moses and Aaron warn Pharaoh that unless he releases the Israelites, his land and people will suffer a plague of locusts, unprecedented in its destructiveness. Even Pharaoh’s courtiers urge him to relent, lamenting that “EGYPT IS LOST.” So Pharaoh now tries to bargain with

Moses, offering to let only the men go, but Moses refuses to compromise and is immediately expelled from Pharaoh's presence.

God then brings a black cloud of locusts upon the east wind. They quickly consume the remaining crops and fruit, stripping Egypt bare. Panic-stricken, Pharaoh pleads for mercy, and God hurls the locusts into the Sea of Reeds. But Pharaoh goes back on his word.

The ninth plague utterly darkens Egypt for three days; the Israelites, however, remain in light where they dwell. Pharaoh then agrees to let all the Israelites go—but refuses to release their livestock. When Moses rejects this final offer, Pharaoh banishes him from the palace. As he leaves, Moses parodies his adversary, agreeing with him that “I SHALL NOT SEE YOUR FACE AGAIN.”

Then God instructs Moses to prepare the people for their exodus: They are to demand from their Egyptian neighbors silver and gold. Each Israelite family is to slaughter a lamb and then stain their doorposts with its blood to ward off the Destroying Angel. They are to feast that night upon the roasted meat, eating it together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. These special Passover rituals are to be commemorated each year throughout the generations, to remind the Jewish people of their redemption from slavery.

That night, every firstborn of Egypt dies in the final plague, from Pharaoh's son to the son of the dungeon captive, as well as all the firstborn of Egypt's livestock. Then Pharaoh orders the Israelites out of Egypt at once. They leave in such haste that their bread does not have time to rise. With them they take their neighbors' gold and silver, as God has commanded.

And so, after centuries of slavery, 600,000 Israelite men, together with their wives, children, livestock and a “mixed multitude,” finally leave Egypt. With them they carry the blueprint of Passover and the commandment to redeem their firstborn sons and beasts, both rituals reminders of their miraculous

redemption from slavery. In addition, they carry with them the bones of Joseph.

Discussion questions and themes:

In this parashah we are commanded to continue the ritual of the Passover seder in order to remember our redemption. How does performing a ritual make us remember something? What are some things that help us to remember events of the past? What rituals do we have in our lives to help us remember significant events, values, or commitments? Is it important to have rituals in our lives? What other purposes do rituals serve?

If you had to leave your home at a moment's notice, what would you take with you? What things would be important for you to remember about your life there? How would you make sure that you remember the things that are important to you? How might these needs influence our later rituals?

- Preparation for a major event
- Leaving
- Redemption

BESHALAH Ex. 13:17-17:16

Torah teaches:

The Israelites journey into the desert, carrying with them their memories and the bones of Joseph. Regretting now his decision to let the Israelites go, Pharaoh pursues them with his army of chariots, hemming them in at the Sea of Reeds. Although the Israelites are protected by a divine cloud and God's promise of deliverance, they despair and complain to Moses. Then God instructs Moses to part the waters with his rod and lead the people through to safety. After the Israelites have reached the other side, the Egyptians pursue them, only to be drowned by the collapsing walls of water. In celebration, Moses sings a song of triumph. Miriam leads the women in dance and sings her own song.

The people journey on, and soon complain of hunger. Then God miraculously provides

quail and manna, instructing the people to gather only as much manna as they need for each day, with the exception of Friday, when they are to gather a double portion to last over Shabbat. And when they complain of thirst, God instructs Moses to strike the rock at Horeb, out of which flows fresh water.

Then the warlike nation of Amalek attacks the Israelites. And Moses holds up his rod to ensure victory as Joshua leads the people in battle. After they have won the battle, God promises to blot out utterly the memory of Amalek.

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah is paired up with a haftarah about two strong women: Deborah and Yael. Read about Deborah, Yael, and Miriam. How does each of these women play a role in the survival of the Israelite people? Each of these women shows important leadership skills. What can we learn from each of them about leadership? Who are the role models of leadership in our lives? What skills and characteristics does a leader need to have? How can we be a leader in our lives? Why is it important to have strong leaders?

- Leadership
- Miracles
- Regret
- Triumph

YITRO Ex. 18:1-20:23

Torah teaches:

Soon after the Exodus, Jethro—Yitro—priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses, brings his daughter Zipporah and her two sons, Gershom and Eliezer, to meet Moses in the wilderness. After hearing Moses' dramatic account of events in Egypt, Jethro praises God and offers a sacrifice.

Noting how burdened Moses is as sole arbiter and judge of such a numerous people, Jethro advises his son-in-law to delegate his authority to others, creating a hierarchy of qualified judges to decide all but the most important cases. Moses

follows Jethro's advice, and Jethro returns to Midian.

Two months after leaving Egypt, the people reach Mount Sinai, where God instructs Moses to prepare them to receive the covenant. They are to remain in a state of purity for three days, after which time Moses is to ascend the mountain alone to receive God's teaching.

On the third day, Mount Sinai erupts in thunder, lightning, smoke, and loud blasts of a ram's horn, God pronounces the Ten Commandments, and the people, terrified and awestruck, keep their distance. Moses ascends the mountain "WHERE GOD WAS" (20:18).

Discussion questions and themes:

Moses is urged to delegate some of his responsibility because he is overwhelmed. When is it important to delegate? How do we improve our lives by delegating responsibility? Is it ever difficult to delegate? How do we decide to whom to delegate? Why is it important for a leader to delegate? What does it say about sharing responsibility in a community? What communities are you a part of? What are your responsibilities as part of those communities?

- Families reuniting
- Leadership and delegation
- Revelation
- Community

MISHPATIM Ex. 21:1-24:18

Torah teaches:

Following the revelation at Sinai, God ordains an elaborate set of ethical and ritual laws concerning the treatment of slaves; murder and injury; proper conduct toward parents; property rights and responsibilities; the bride-price of virgins; seduction; sodomy, witchcraft, and idol worship; responsibility toward the poor and oppressed; firstfruits; fairness in legal proceedings; observance of the Sabbath and the sabbatical year; offerings due on the three pilgrimage festivals; and dietary laws.

God also promises to grant the people victory when they battle the inhabitants of Canaan. In return, the people are to remain absolutely faithful to God, resisting the seductions of their neighbors' practices.

Then Moses descends the mountain and repeats all these laws to the people. With one voice, they proclaim their assent. Then Moses writes the laws down. And he sets up an altar with twelve pillars, where the people offer sacrifices.

Moses then reascends the mountain, accompanied by Aaron, Aaron's two sons, and seventy elders. There they behold a vision of God, mounted upon a pavement of sky-blue sapphire. God instructs Moses to ascend alone to the top of Sinai to receive the stone tablets of God's teachings. And Moses enters the flaming cloud of God's presence and remains there for forty days.

Discussion questions and themes:

Some interpret the ban on combining milk and meat (23:19) as a way to separate death from life. Honoring life is something we see in other laws in this parashah. (21:12, 22:23) What are ways that people can honor or respect life? How do we work at respecting all life? What can we do in our lives to show that we respect all living things? Where else in Judaism is honoring life a theme?

In this portion Moses tells the Israelites all the laws that God wants them to follow, and every person agrees. Why might it be important for everyone in this community to follow the same rules? What communities are we a part of where everyone has the same basic rules? What are important features of a community? What basic moral principles are most important to us in our lives? How does it feel to be part of a community or group where people have similar values?

- **Faithfulness to God**
- **Being part of a group**
- **Having a moral code**

TERUMAH Ex. 25:1-27:19

Torah teaches:

Moses remains atop the mountain for forty days. There he receives not only God's laws but also detailed instructions about how to house and consecrate God's presence among the people. This parashah sets out the blueprint for constructing the Mishkan, the portable Tabernacle, together with all its furnishings: the Ark of the Covenant, the golden table for the twelve showbreads, the seven-branched menorah, and the altar of acacia wood with its copper utensils.

The Tabernacle itself is to consist of ten dyed linen panels, woven together and embroidered with cherubim, joined at the edges with loops of blue wool and fifty gold clasps. The tent walls are to be reinforced on the inside by walls of acacia planks, overlaid with gold. Sheltering the Tabernacle from above will be a goatskin tent, itself covered by ram and dolphin skins. The Tabernacle will be ringed with a seven-foot fence of fine linen, hung in panels on silver and copper posts, with an embroidered gate of blue, purple, and crimson yarns.

And inside this nested structure will be the Holy of Holies, veiled by a curtain of embroidered linen and wool, containing in its secret heart the Ark of the Covenant, crowned by a pair of hammered gold cherubim.

Discussion questions and themes:

The Israelites are supposed to donate their possessions for the creation and decoration of the Tabernacle. Do you think it is important that the Tabernacle is made from the possessions of the community? How must it feel to have your belongings used for such a sacred purpose? Do you think it would contribute to a feeling of community and responsibility? Do you think it makes a difference to feel ownership of something that plays such a major role in the life of the community? Are there communities you have contributed to? How do you feel about that community and your contribution to it?

- **Ownership**
- **Sacred space**

Torah teaches:

After issuing instructions for building and furnishing the portable Tabernacle—the Mishkan—God turns to the sacred personnel who are to superintend it. To dignify and adorn the priests, “ALL WHO ARE SKILLFUL” among the people are called upon to fashion special garments out of fine linen and wool, precious stones and gold. These the priests are to wear as they perform their sacred duties.

To consecrate Aaron and his sons for their sacred office, God ordains a seven-day ritual of investiture, during which Aaron and his sons, together with the sacrificial altar, are to be dedicated for holy service. First, Aaron is to be anointed with oil and arrayed in the robe, miter, and breastplate of the High Priest. Then he and his sons, along with their priestly garments, are to be anointed with sacrificial blood. Then, for seven days, they are to offer bulls and lambs, choice flour and oil, upon the altar, to purify the Sanctuary as God’s dwelling place among the people.

God instructs Moses to build an incense altar of acacia wood to stand before the Holy Ark. Upon this altar Aaron himself will burn aromatic incense every morning and evening when he tends the lamps. And once each year, he will purify this altar with blood.

Discussion questions and themes:

The priests are given the finest clothing to wear as a mark of their status. What purpose do visual markers of someone’s status have? What can we tell about someone just by looking at her? If someone puts on another’s clothes, are we still able to tell something about who she really is? How does it feel when people judge us by our appearance? Is it important to look beyond people’s appearance? How can we make sure that we do?

- **Dedication to service** • **Wearing costumes**
- **Judging by appearance**

Torah teaches:

God orders each adult Israelite to pay a “ransom” of half a shekel to maintain the Sanctuary. Moses then receives more instructions about readying the Tabernacle and the priests for service: From this time forth, Aaron and his sons are to wash their hands and feet in a special copper laver before performing their sacred duties. And to purify the Sanctuary precincts, furnishings, and utensils, a special anointing oil of choice spices and incense of pure herbs are to be prepared and dedicated solely for this use.

God identifies two Israelites—Bezalel and Oholiab—as artistic directors of this sacred construction project. Endowed with “A DIVINE SPIRIT OF SKILL, ABILITY, AND KNOWLEDGE,” they will supervise the holy work.

God then repeats the commandment to keep the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant. And after pronouncing these words, God gives Moses two stone tablets, “INSCRIBED WITH THE FINGER OF GOD.”

But the people, fearful that Moses’ long absence atop Mount Sinai spells his doom, go to Aaron and demand that he make them a god to lead them in his brother’s place. Aaron demands from them their gold jewelry and casts it into the fire, creating a molten calf. Then Aaron builds an altar and declares the following day a festival. The next day, the people sacrifice to their new god upon the altar and rejoice with feasting and dance.

Taking note of their apostasy, God decrees the doom of this stiff-necked people and promises Moses to start over again with him, but Moses refuses the bargain, persuading God to relent by appealing to God’s reputation and sense of honor. But when Moses himself descends to the camp and sees the people dancing before the Golden Calf, he angrily shatters the tablets in his hands, burns the calf into ash, and makes the people drink it.

Accused by his brother, Moses, Aaron denies any part in the people's sin. Moses orders the Levites to punish the idolaters, and they put three thousand Israelites to the sword. Moses then asks God to forgive the people, offering his own life as forfeit. God accepts his appeal but promises to render an accounting among the guilty. A deadly plague then strikes the camp.

God orders Moses to lead the people forth to Canaan, promising to send an angel before them but refusing to travel in their midst because of what they have done. From that moment on, the people refrain from wearing their finery, as a sign of mourning.

Moses requests to see God's face as a sign of divine favor, but God warns him that "MAN MAY NOT SEE ME AND LIVE." So God hides Moses in a cleft of the rock and shields him with a divine hand as God's back passes by. Then Moses carves two new tablets of stone, reascends the mountain, and receives the Law once again.

Discussion questions and themes:

The Israelites build the golden calf because they are impatient for Moses' return. Is this the Torah's way of teaching us that patience is an important virtue? How does being patient help us and those around us? Are there times when being impatient is important? The Israelites mourn after they are punished for creating the golden calf. Throughout history, Jews have mourned after horrific events. Is mourning helpful? What are some ways in which we mark sadness in our lives? Is it important to remember devastating events in history or in our own lives? What might we be able to get out of remembering?

- Impatience
- Sin
- Punishment
- Mourning

VAYAKHEL Ex. 35:1-38:20

Torah teaches:

Moses calls upon the people to bring gifts of precious metals, wood, yarn, skins, and

cloth to build the Mishkan, the portable desert Sanctuary designated to serve as the ritual lightning rod between heaven and the Israelite camp. But so generous are the people's freewill offerings that Moses has to ask them to stop bringing their gifts. Bezalel and all the artisans construct the Mishkan and its furnishings, including the holy ark, the menorah, and the altar where the people are to bring their offerings to God.

Discussion questions and themes:

Moses calls upon the people to contribute some of their belongings to help build the Tabernacle, as their hearts move them. The response he gets is overwhelming; this is clearly something that is important to the people. What things do our hearts move us to do? Why do you think the response of the Israelites is so overwhelming? What kinds of things have our communities or our society done because people's hearts moved them? What leads people to do such things?

Here, and in an earlier parashah, the particulars of the Tabernacle are spelled out. What does this kind of detail say about the importance of the structure? What kinds of structures are important in our lives? What kind of meaning can a building hold? Are there spaces that hold special meaning for us, our community, or our society?

- Contributions of the heart
- Sacred space

PEKUDEY Ex. 38:21-40:38

Torah teaches:

The skilled workers make vestments for the priests, and then the holy work is finished. When Moses sees the Tabernacle and its furnishings, and the priestly garments, he blesses the Israelites.

Then God commands Moses to dedicate the Tabernacle on the first day of the first month. Moses offers a sacrifice there as God has commanded. When Moses has finished

the work, the Cloud of the Divine Presence, the Shekhinah, fills the Tabernacle. When the Cloud lifts, the people are to journey on; while it remains, they are to stay encamped where they are. And each night, a fire lights up the cloud, and all of Israel sees it throughout their years of wandering.

Discussion questions and themes:

God asks Moses to sanctify the Tabernacle to make it holy. How can people make an object holy? What does it mean to make something holy? Are there ways that we sanctify things in our lives? Is it important to have objects that are holy? What purpose does making something special serve? How does it feel to possess something that is special to you? When Moses sees the hard work that the Israelites have done to make the Tabernacle, he blesses them. Is this Moses' way of forgiving the Israelites for some of the trouble they have caused him? How can our actions show people that we have changed? Are actions the only way to let people know that we are different than we were? If people act differently than usual, does it mean that they have changed their ways? How do we know when someone is truly different? How does it feel when someone we care about changes her behavior for the better? How does it feel when we change our behavior?

- **Forgiveness**
- **Sanctification**
- **Sacred space**

VAYIKRA Lev. 1:1-5:26

Torah teaches:

This parashah introduces the sacrificial system presided over by the priestly cult. Two major categories of sacrifices are described: the “joyful offerings,” consisting of the burnt, meal, and well-being (or peace) sacrifices and the “sorrowful offerings,” consisting of the purification and guilt sacrifices. The Israelites are commanded to offer these sacrifices so that they may draw near and stay near to God.

Discussion questions and themes:

The sacrifices that are described here can be seen as a way to bring balance to the community. There is an appropriate sacrifice to offer to God when a sin has been committed or when there is a joyful celebration. What ways do we have to mark negative or positive events in our lives? How do we express or “let go” of feelings that we have? How does it feel to be able to express our intense feelings? How does acknowledging our actions and/or events in our lives bring balance to our communities or ourselves? What kind of ritual could we create to help us mark events or feelings in our lives?

- **Staying near God**
- **Sacrifice**

TZAV Lev. 6:1-8:36

Torah teaches:

This parashah explains how to offer the sacrifices previously described. We are given further details about the role of the priests; about the *shelamim* (peace or well-being) offerings—the *todah*, brought in thanksgiving; the *nedavah*, brought as a freewill offering; and the *neder*, brought to fulfill a vow; and about the role of blood in sacrifice.

The parashah concludes with the ordination of Aaron and his sons.

Discussion questions and themes:

Blood is used in the rituals in this parashah, and elsewhere, to purify. Blood can also be something that makes a person impure. What kind of symbolism does blood have? How is blood viewed in our society? Why was a woman's menstrual cycle sometimes seen as mysterious? How do you feel about your own menstrual cycle and the significance of this blood?

- **Role of the priest**
- **Role of blood**

SHEMINI Lev. 9:1-11:47

Torah teaches:

When Moses and Aaron consecrate the Tabernacle, a divine fire descends and consumes the sacrifices laid upon the holy altar.

Then Aaron's two elder sons, Nadav and Abihu, offer "alien fire" upon the altar, and God strikes them dead. In the face of their deaths, Aaron remains silent.

The Torah then lays out a detailed set of rules concerning intoxicants, as well as permitted and forbidden foods, and stresses the vital connection between dietary practices and holiness.

Discussion questions and themes:

When Nadav and Avihu are killed, Moses does not offer very compassionate words to his brother, Aaron, the father of these boys. Why do you think he doesn't? Why is it important to offer comfort to those who are dealing with loss? How can we comfort people who are in upsetting situations? How does it feel to offer comfort to someone who needs it? How does it feel when someone offers sympathetic words to you?

- **Improper behavior**
- **Punishment**
- **Comforting those in pain**
- **Bringing holiness into everyday acts**

TAZRI'A Lev. 12:1-13:59

Torah teaches:

In this parashah, the Torah presents various purity laws concerning childbirth and leprosy. After giving birth, a woman remains ritually impure, for twice as long if she has borne a girl than if she has borne a boy. At the end of this period, she is to bring two offerings: a sin offering and a burnt offering. Other laws and obligations apply to a person afflicted with a leprosy skin condition.

Discussion questions and themes:

Paradoxically, in the Bible, contact with something holy makes a person temporarily ritually impure. The double period of impurity for women who bear girls may have been the Torah's way of acknowledging that the girl might one day undergo the holy experience of bearing children. How is giving birth a holy activity? Is it seen as a holy activity in our society? How can we infuse it with that important meaning? How can we make our other creative activities (artistic, intellectual, etc.) holy? What value is there in making the things we do holy?

- **Purity**
- **Holiness of creation and creative process**

METZORA Lev. 14:1-15:33

Torah teaches:

This parashah continues the discussion begun in the previous one, detailing the leprosy conditions that render both people and property ritually impure. These descriptions are followed by instructions about appropriate remedies to effect purification. In addition to leprosy, the Torah lists various bodily discharges that place a person in a state of ritual impurity, specifically a man's nocturnal emissions and a woman's menstrual blood. To cleanse themselves of such impurities, affected individuals must cleanse themselves and the material they touch, and bring appropriate sacrifices. Others who come in contact with them likewise become ritually contaminated and must be cleansed.

Discussion questions and themes:

By having purity laws concerning a woman's menstrual cycle, the Torah may be acknowledging the holiness of menstruation. Are there ways in which we can acknowledge the special nature of our menstrual cycle? What would be a meaningful way to celebrate our bodily changes? How can we create sacred space and time around important moments in the life cycle of women and girls?

- **Purity**
- **Holiness**

AḤAREY MOT Lev. 16:1-18:30

Torah teaches:

This parashah begins with the “Holiness Code,” a kind of “handbook” of Levitical law and practice. The first section is a description of the Atonement Ritual of the High Priest, when the holiest man in the community enters the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle (later, the Jerusalem Temple), the holiest room in the holiest dwelling, to make expiation for the people’s sins. As part of this ritual, the High Priest dons special clothing and sacrifices two sin offerings, a bull to atone for himself and a goat to atone for the people. With blood from both animals, he then “cleanses” the Tabernacle and the altar.

The goat that is sacrificed is one of a pair donated by the community. By lot, one is designated to be slaughtered, the other to be the “scapegoat,” bearing the people’s sins off into the wilderness of Azazel.

After this description, the people, who now stand poised between two foreign cultures—Egypt and Canaan—are admonished to reject the pagan ways of both: in this case, inappropriate sexual conduct and child sacrifice to the Canaanite god Molech.

Discussion questions and themes:

In this parashah we read about the scapegoat. Do you think that having a physical way of getting rid of your sins is helpful for a community? What problems might this ritual cause? Why is it such a powerful image? When are people used as scapegoats? What happens when people are used this way? How do we “send away” our bad feelings and sins? What makes us feel truly rid of our sins?

- Scapegoat
- Idolatry
- Blood
- Sexual and marital relationships

KEDOSHIM Lev. 19:1-20:27

Torah teaches:

This parashah consists primarily of laws governing social, economic, sexual, and

ritual behavior. These laws mandate: (1) protecting the weaker members of society—leaving gleanings for the poor and the stranger, respecting the disabled, not selling one’s daughter as a prostitute, honoring the elderly, respecting strangers; (2) ensuring social stability and justice—honoring parents, shunning theft and deceit, observing fair labor practices, safeguarding judicial fairness, maintaining social harmony and sexual boundaries, protecting property, keeping honest weights and measures; (3) preserving religious orthodoxy—keeping the Sabbath, rejecting idolatry and child sacrifice, observing dietary restrictions on sacrifices, honoring God’s name, refraining from eating blood, shunning magical practices, avoiding bodily disfiguration, rejecting traffic with ghosts; and (4) respecting the natural order—preserving distinctions between species of livestock, grain, and clothing, refraining from harvesting new fruit trees for four years.

Taken as a whole, these laws lay the foundation for a just society.

Discussion questions and themes:

Traditionally, this parashah has been compared to the Ten Commandments in importance. What rules do you think are important in creating a just society? What new laws might you add to the ones enumerated in this parashah? Why is it important to have a set of rules that everyone in a community follows? This parashah also states a rule against mutilating one’s body. Why do you think this law was included? Traditionally, many people believe it is because we are each created in God’s image. How do you feel about this? Is piercing or tattooing our bodies changing God’s image? Sometimes, people hurt themselves intentionally. What might be the reason behind such behavior? How can we work to help girls and women who are hurting their bodies?

- Holiness
- Respect for the body
- Communal rules

EMOR Lev. 21:1-24:23

Torah teaches:

This parashah sets out elaborate details about the role and obligations of the priests. Following these are laws concerning the observance of holy days, including the Sabbath and the New Moon, as well as laws concerning the sacred oil and breads used in the Tabernacle. The parashah concludes with an incident involving a blasphemer, who curses God's name and is punished by divine decree.

Discussion questions and themes:

God commands the Israelites to observe many holy days. Each holy day marks a season or commemorates an event. What are ways in which we mark time? Is it important to have rituals that serve to remind us of past events? Which events or times are important to mark? Are there events or times in our lives that are not marked by any ritual but should be?

- Holidays
- Commandments
- Blasphemy

BEHAR Lev. 25:1-26:2

Torah teaches:

This parashah presents the laws concerning the observance of the sabbatical and jubilee years. The Israelites are commanded to give their fields and vineyards "A COMPLETE REST" every seventh year, eating only what grows from the uncultivated ground. After seven sabbaticals—that is, in the fiftieth year—the Israelites are commanded to "PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT THE LAND FOR ALL ITS INHABITANTS." On Yom Kippur of that year, the shofar is to be sounded, announcing the jubilee "year of release," during which all tribal lands are to return to their original borders and all slaves are to go free.

Discussion questions and themes:

The sabbatical and jubilee years give the land and people rest and freedom. Why might it be

important to build this special time off into our society's framework? What does it say about our ideal society that we clear people's debt and let servants go free every seven years? Do we have built-in ways of showing respect to all people in our society? What are ways in which we give rights to, or help, people who have less than we do?

- Equality
- Freedom
- Rest

BEHUKOTAY Lev. 26:3-27:34

Torah teaches:

After presenting these last ten chapters of communal laws, known collectively as the "Holiness Code," Leviticus concludes with a promise and a threat: If Israel obeys these laws, God will bring peace and prosperity to the land and its inhabitants. But if Israel fails to uphold God's commandments, disaster will follow: famine, disease, wild beasts, wholesale devastation, and exile. Then the land will at last enjoy the Sabbaths denied it by its people, and the repentant people will return to God, who will renew the ancient covenant with them.

Discussion questions and themes:

God threatens to punish the Israelites by ruining them and their Promised Land if they do not follow the laws. What connection do the wandering Hebrews have to the Promised Land at this point? Are there places you have never seen or experienced that you feel connected to? What does it mean to feel connected to a place? How do we show that we have strong feelings about a place or an object?

- Covenant
- Blessings and curses

BEMIDBAR Num. 1:1-4:20

Torah teaches:

The Book of Numbers takes its English name from its initial recorded event: the first census of the Israelites a year after their exodus from Egypt. After the census, God delineates the arrangement of the twelve tribes that will surround the central

Tent of Meeting on all four sides. The population of the Levites is not recorded in the general census but is recorded separately. The Levites are assigned special duties and rights because of their unique status as God's priests. And among the Levitical families, Aaron's ancestral house is charged with the special duties of maintaining the Tabernacle.

Discussion questions and themes:

A census can tell us about our community and what our community needs. Do you think it is important to have a census? Is counting people a good way to have a clear picture of one's community? Why is it important to know about our community? How does recording information about our community help our leaders? What do you think is the most important information for our leaders to know about us? What are ways in which we can get information about what we want and who we are to our leaders?

- Counting
- Inclusion
- Special status

NASO Num. 4:21-7:89

Torah teaches:

This parashah describes a ritual involving a woman suspected of adultery. This is the only example in Judaism of "trial by ordeal"—that is, a procedure for judging an individual's innocence or guilt by subjecting her to a physical test.

The parashah also contains the laws of the Nazirite, an individual who chooses to take a vow of abstinence and separation from the community. Following this section is the Blessing of the Priests, *Birkat Kohanim*, to be conferred on the people by Aaron and his sons.

The parashah concludes with the consecration of the Tabernacle, celebrated for twelve days with gift giving by all the tribes.

Discussion questions and themes:

In the laws in this particular parashah women and men are obligated equally.

Being held accountable for doing wrong against another person perhaps deserves this special status. Why is this law important enough that both men and women are specifically commanded to follow it? How important is it to take responsibility for the things we have done wrong? Is it important that the person whom we have wronged knows that we regret what we have done? Is it enough to confess our wrongdoings to ourselves alone, or do we need to let others know what we have done? How does it feel to confess that you have done something wrong? How does it feel when others make confessions to you?

- Jealousy
- Responsibility
- Guilt
- Separation

BEHA'ALOTEĤA Num. 8:1-12:16

Torah teaches:

This parashah opens with various laws concerning the Levites and the celebration of Passover. Then the Torah describes the divine cloud that constantly hovers over the Tabernacle, guiding the people. This is followed by a detailed description of the marching formation of the Israelite camp.

When the people now complain bitterly of hunger and cry out for meat, Moses despairs and asks God to end his life. God instructs him to share the burden of leadership with seventy elders.

Following God's instructions, Moses appoints seventy elders, who surround the Tabernacle, where possessed by *ruakh*, the spirit drawn from Moses, they begin speaking in tongues. Two other elders, Eldad and Medad, who remain elsewhere in the camp, also receive the spirit and speak in tongues. Alarmed by what he takes as an act of defiance, Joshua demands that these two renegades be restrained. But Moses disagrees, declaring: "WOULD THAT ALL GOD'S PEOPLE WERE PROPHETS, THAT GOD PUT THE DIVINE SPIRIT UPON THEM!" (12:29) Then God sends quail to the people upon a wind sweeping in from the sea, followed by a severe plague.

Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses, and God strikes Miriam with leprosy. For the next seven days, Miriam is isolated outside the camp, and the people wait for her return before traveling on.

Discussion questions and themes:

Although Miriam, Aaron, and Moses all work fairly well together, this parashah shows us a moment of tension. Why do Miriam and Aaron speak out against Moses? Is joining together with others to speak out against the leader of a community a bad thing to do? How does it affect the leader? How does it affect other people around you? Are there times in your life when you have to speak out against a leader? Are there times when it is important to go along with the leader, even if you don't agree? Have you ever been the person whom people are protesting against? How does it feel to be in that position?

- **Patience**
- **Punishment**
- **Challenging authority**

SHELAH LEHA Num. 13:1-15:41

Torah teaches:

Moses appoints twelve men, one from each tribe, to scout out the land of Canaan before the Israelites attempt to conquer it. Forty days later, the twelve spies return, reporting that the land is indeed “FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY,” but that its people are too mighty to conquer. Two of the spies, Caleb and Joshua, disagree, claiming that with God’s help, the land will surely fall into their hands. Persuaded by the alarming report of the other ten spies, the people rise up in mutiny against Moses and Aaron, demanding to return to Egypt.

Angered by the people’s lack of faith, God threatens to destroy them and begin over again with Moses, but Moses calms God’s wrath. God then commutes the rebels’ death sentence to forty years of wandering in the wilderness, until all the men who had been slaves in Egypt have died. Of that entire generation, only Caleb and Joshua

will be allowed to enter the Promised Land. Too late, the people defy God’s verdict and resolve to press on into Canaan, but they are routed by the Canaanites and forced to withdraw.

The parashah ends with laws concerning sacrifices to be offered once the people have settled in the land as well as the commandment to attach fringes to the corners of their garments to remind them of their allegiance to God’s law.

Discussion questions and themes:

When the spies go into the Promised Land, they see themselves as small as grasshoppers, showing their lack of faith in themselves. Are there times in our lives where we see ourselves as tiny grasshoppers? What kinds of situations make us feel this way? How can we work on balancing the two extremes of feeling like giants and grasshoppers in our lives? Are certain groups of people more likely to feel like grasshoppers? Are there people who view others as small and insignificant? Are there elements of society that make us feel insignificant? What can we do to help ourselves and others feel worthy?

- **Self-esteem**
- **Anger**
- **Punishment**
- **Fear**

KORAH Num. 16:1-18:32

Torah teaches:

On several occasions as they wander through the wilderness, the Israelites challenge the exclusive authority of Moses. In this parashah, it is Korakh, son of Moses’ first cousin Ishar, who leads a mutiny, enlisting as allies the Reubenites Datan and Abiram (two of the Rabbis’ favorite villains) and On, as well as two hundred fifty chieftains. Their indictment of Moses and Aaron: “YOU HAVE GONE TOO FAR! FOR ALL THE COMMUNITY ARE HOLY, ALL OF THEM, AND GOD IS IN THEIR MIDST, WHY THEN DO YOU RAISE YOURSELVES ABOVE YHVH’S CONGREGATION?”

MOSES ANSWERS THEM WITH HIS OWN CHALLENGE: “THE MAN WHOM YHVH CHOOSES, HE SHALL BE THE HOLY ONE, YOU HAVE GONE TOO FAR, SONS OF LEVI!” Instructing the rebels to bring their fire pans to the Tabernacle, he declares: “IF THESE MEN DIE AS ALL MEN DO... IT WAS NOT GOD WHO SENT ME. BUT IF GOD BRINGS ABOUT SOMETHING UNHEARD OF, SO THAT THE GROUND OPENS ITS MOUTH AND SWALLOWS THEM UP WITH ALL THAT BELONGS TO THEM, YOU SHALL KNOW THAT THESE MEN HAVE SPURNED GOD.” And so—in dramatic detail—Moses’ prophecy comes to pass.

The parashah ends with an inventory of priestly entitlements and the story of the miraculous flowering of Aaron’s rod.

Discussion questions and themes:

Korach leads a rebellion because he believes that all people are holy and therefore there should not be a hierarchical structure to their community. Does this reasoning always work? Can you believe that everyone is holy and still have a structure in place for leadership? Can a leader or leaders affirm everyone’s holiness and still lead effectively? What does it mean to believe that all people are holy? How can we (or do we) live in a way that shows we believe each person is special? How does it feel when people make you feel like you are special? Why were Korach and his rebels punished so harshly? Do you think it was because they rebelled in general, or because of their specific rebellion?

- Rebellion
- Punishment
- Leadership
- Hierarchy

HUKAT Num. 19:1-22:1

Torah teaches:

This parashah is permeated by death. Chapter 19 describes the puzzling ritual of the Red Heifer that purifies someone contaminated through contact with a corpse. In the following chapter, both

Miriam and Aaron die, and Moses hears his own death sentence after he strikes the rock contrary to God’s instructions. And in Chapter 21, many of the people die from a plague of fiery serpents when they complain about the lack of water.

Discussion questions and themes:

When Miriam dies in this parashah, we do not read of the people mourning for her as they do later for Aaron, her brother. Instead, immediately after her death, they complain to Moses that they don’t have any water. Since we know that Miriam was an important presence in the life of the Israelites, why did they fail to mourn her death? Why did the Hebrews complain to Moses so quickly after Miriam’s death? Do we ever express our feelings in a way that is not necessarily directly related to what caused our feelings? What happens when we act on our anger or sadness in ways that do not relate to the cause of the feelings? How does that affect the people around us? How can we work on expressing our feelings in ways that help us deal with the reason we are feeling them?

- Death
- Punishment
- Ritual

BALAK Num. 22:2-25:9

Torah teaches:

When the Children of Israel, two million strong, approach King Balak’s domain, he summons the pagan prophet Balaam to curse this formidable enemy before they attack. Balaam first refuses to obey, arguing that this people is blessed by God, but he changes his mind when God assures him that his mission has divine sanction. En route to Balak, Balaam’s ass balks when she encounters an angel with a drawn sword. Balaam, blind to the angel, beats the ass until she speaks to him, after which the angel makes himself visible to Balaam as well. Arriving at Balak’s side, Balaam blesses Israel instead of cursing it—against his own will.

Discussion questions and themes:

Balaam beats his donkey for telling him the truth that he himself cannot see. Are there times when we know the truth but are afraid to acknowledge what we know? How does it feel when people do not believe you? Are there times when withholding the truth is safer than revealing it? What kinds of situations cause people to doubt the person who speaks the truth? How do we know when others are telling the truth?

- Truth
- Danger
- Blessings and curses

PINHAS Num. 25:10-30:1

Torah teaches:

As a reward for Pinkas' zeal in slaying the two idolaters—Zimri and his Midianite lover, Cozbi—God appoints Aaron's grandson heir to the high priesthood.

In preparation for the Israelites' battle with Midian and their imminent settlement in Canaan, God orders that a second national census be taken, so that tribal lands can be allocated after the conquest. As part of this census, all the tribes and clans are named, according to their ancestry: the twelve sons of Jacob, their sons, and those among their male descendants who have established their own clans. In this list of almost one hundred names, only six women are mentioned: the five daughters of Zelophekhad, and Serakh, daughter of Asher, the only granddaughter of Jacob who is named in the Torah.

When the census is over, Moses finds himself confronted with an anomalous case: Zelophekhad, one of the Manassites, has died without leaving male heirs. His five daughters petition Moses to inherit his land, urging him "LET NOT OUR FATHER'S NAME BE LOST TO HIS CLAN JUST BECAUSE HE HAD NO SON!" When Moses brings this case before God, the daughters' claim is upheld as "just," and they are given a hereditary holding in their family's land.

At God's bidding, Moses climbs a mountain to view the land that he will not be allowed

to enter, and brings Joshua to Eleazar to be appointed Moses' successor. The parashah ends with a detailed description of the daily, Sabbath, new moon, and holiday sacrifices.

Discussion questions and themes:

The daughters of Zelophechad (Zelophkhad) pursue their claim to their father's inheritance. Perhaps they believe that even though women are marginalized in their society, they are still of value and should have rights of their own. What does God's decision to give them their father's property say? What can we learn from these women? Are there times in our lives when we have made requests and they have been filled, even though we didn't think they would be? Is it important to you to petition for something you believe in, even if it seems unlikely that you will get it? What work are women doing today to change societal norms and laws in order to better women's lives?

- Changing rules
- Working for what you believe in
- Looking towards the future

MATOT Num. 30:2-32:42

Torah teaches:

The first chapter of this parashah details the biblical rules governing vows and oaths. The opening verse addresses Israelite men, charging them to honor the verbal commitments they make. The next fourteen verses apply specifically to women, elaborating in considerable detail the limits of their freedom to commit themselves with their own words. Dependent women—those still living under their father's roof—can fulfill their own vows only if their father does not object; similarly, married women have to have the tacit approval of their husbands. If, however, their father or husband objects to their vow immediately upon learning of it, the vow is thereby annulled, and the woman bears no responsibility for the commitment she has made. The only women who are permitted to make independent vows are widows and divorcees. The text

makes no mention of women who do not marry, presumably because such cases are so rare.

In revenge for Midian's sexual and idolatrous seduction at Baal-peor, the Israelites wage a savage war, killing all male Midianites, among them five kings (including Cozbi's father, Zur) and the pagan prophet Balaam; burning down all their cities and encampments; and taking all the women, children, cattle, and property as spoils of war. Moses is enraged that the Israelite fighters have spared "every female"—women are the ones responsible for the earlier plague—and orders the men to kill "every woman who has known a man carnally," as well as all the male children (presumably because they might one day form a fifth column in Israel's midst). But the Israelite soldiers are instructed to spare all the virgins—that is, the men are free to appropriate them as wives or slaves.

Discussion questions and themes:

The notion that a person's words can lock her into a commitment shows us that words are powerful. In what ways do our words have power? If we think about the fact that words are powerful, how might we act or speak differently? Does the fast-paced nature of our society cause people to speak and write without thinking first? What are examples of careless use of words that we see every day? What problems can arise when we speak without thinking? How does it feel when we hear others speak without thinking? In what other ways do words have power?

- Vows and commitments
- Power of words
- Revenge

MASEY Num. 33:1–36:13

Torah teaches:

This last parashah in the Book of Numbers begins with a review of the Israelites' itinerary from Egypt to the east bank of the Jordan River, where they now encamp within view of the Promised Land. God

instructs Moses to assign tribal leaders and land allotments, and to designate forty-eight towns for the Levites, including six cities of refuge for people fleeing because they have committed involuntary manslaughter. This section is followed by laws concerning homicide.

The parashah concludes by revisiting the case of Zelophekhad's daughters, who are to inherit their father's land in Canaan since he has died without any male heirs.

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah is about both physical and social boundaries. What boundaries are imposed upon us and what boundaries do we decide on in our lives? Can boundaries both hold us in and shut us out? What are some examples? Are there times when you have decided to cross a line that others have set for you? How did it feel? What are the consequences of this? What boundaries do we set in our own lives with regard to our bodies? How do we let other people know what our boundaries are? What happens when people invade our space without our permission? How can we teach people to be respectful of boundaries that we set?

- Boundaries
- Separation of peoples
- Safety

DEVARIM Deut. 1:1–3:22

Torah teaches:

On the east side of the Jordan, in view of the Promised Land, Moses speaks to the people for the last time. In this first of three long addresses, Moses reviews their forty-year journey in the wilderness, from Mount Horeb—that is, Sinai—until the present time. He highlights the Israelites' military defeats—most notably their failure of nerve soon after leaving Egypt, when the spies brought back an unfavorable report, followed by the military debacle at Hormah at the hands of the Amorites—as well as their triumphs, culminating in their recent conquest of the Amorite kings Sihon and the giant Og.

Discussion questions and themes:

In this parashah Moses is able to see the land and gives the Israelites a farewell address. How might it feel for Moses to see the land but not be able to enter it? He has spent so many years leading the people and now he has to say goodbye. How might Moses feel about the Israelites? What has his relationship been with them? What does it take for a leader to know when to stop being the leader of a people or community? Is it important for a leader to be able to acknowledge that his or her reign is over? What ways do we have to mark the end of one leader's term and the beginning of the next? What kind of ritual would you create to give the people and the leader a healthy way to transition?

- **Looking back**
- **Leadership**
- **Saying good-bye**

VA'ETHANAN Deut. 3:23-7:11

Torah teaches:

In his second discourse, Moses continues his review of the people's forty years in the wilderness, bringing them back to the awesome events on Mount Horeb, where they received the Law in the form of Ten Commandments and encountered God's presence in natural signs and wonders. Moses reminds them of their sacred covenant with God and of the dire consequences that will follow if they violate it. He exhorts them not to abandon their faith in one God and to beware the seductions of their new land.

This parashah contains the central declaration of Jewish faith, the Shema: "Hear, O Israel! YHVH is our God, YHVH is one," and the Ve-Ahavta, the charge to love God and adhere to the commandments. Included in this charge are the commandments of tefillin and mezzuzah.

Discussion questions and themes:

Moses states that the covenant that was made between God and the Israelites at the

time of the Ten Commandments is not only between those people and God, but also between "everyone of us who is here today" (5:3) and God. What do you think this statement means? Why is this an important statement? Some interpret this to mean that the covenant is with all of us and connects us to those who came before us and those who will come after us. In what ways do you feel connected to your ancestors? What are some things you share with them that transcend the boundaries of time?

- **Covenant**
- **Oneness of God**
- **Connection of generations**

EKEV Deut. 7:12-11:25

Torah teaches:

Moses reminds the people that God has chosen this nation for a special purpose—to root out idolatry and to live as a holy people according to God's commandments. Blessing will be the reward of faithfulness; ruin and desolation the wages of sin.

As they prepare to conquer their promised land, they must always be mindful that it is God's favor, not their own might, that guarantees them victory.

Then Moses recalls the shameful incident of the Golden Calf, when God came close to destroying the people and starting over again with Moses. He reminds them that only through Moses' intercession did God forgive the people and confer a second set of tablets to replace those Moses had smashed in his own anger over the people's apostasy. Moses also reminds them of their responsibilities toward the weak and helpless among them.

The parashah concludes with a passage that constitutes the second paragraph of the Shema: "IF, THEN, YOU OBEY THE COMMANDMENTS," these are the blessings that will grace your new land; if you do not, these are the curses that will doom you.

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah explains the idea of being a chosen people. What does it mean to

proclaim that the Jews are the chosen people? How does that set us apart from other groups? How might people react to us if we proclaim our chosenness? How does it make you feel to be a part of the ‘chosen people’? What is the best way to interpret the idea of chosenness? Do you feel chosen? What does that mean to you?

- Blessings and curses
- Forgiveness
- Chosenness

RE'EH Deut. 11:26-16:17

Torah teaches:

Moses prepares the people to enter the land by instructing them to perform a ritual drama of blessing and curse as soon as they cross the Jordan.

What follows next is a series of laws concerning sacrifice, diet, and restrictions regarding religious behavior, especially taboos against imitating many of the pagan practices of the people around them. The people are reminded of their obligations toward the Levites and the less fortunate, including the poor and the slave.

Then follow laws concerning the three pilgrimage festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot, during which every resident of the land is commanded to rejoice.

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah explains that we are to have compassion for those less fortunate than we are. What are ways in which we follow this rule in our lives? What would the world be like if everyone followed this law? What are ways in which we can help people better their lives? Why is it important for us to help others? What if we just turned away from those in need? How does it feel to help others? How does it feel to get help from people when you need it?

- Blessings and curses
- Compassion
- Holidays

SHOFTIM Deut. 16:18-21:9

Torah teaches:

Moses continues his second address, instructing the people to appoint judges—*shofetim*—and to pursue justice vigilantly. He warns them about the excesses of monarchy and instructs them to guard against such excesses by holding their kings accountable to God’s law.

Next are laws concerning the rights and privileges of the priests, prohibitions against magical practices, and the definition of valid prophecy. Then follow instructions to create six cities of refuge to protect people guilty of involuntary manslaughter from blood avengers; laws concerning legal testimony; and the laws of welfare. The parashah concludes with the case of an unidentified corpse discovered in the no-man’s-land between two inhabited towns and the ritual to be performed to absolve the nearest town of the unassigned blood guilt.

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah contains the rule about not destroying the fruit-bearing trees of a city that you conquer. Why might this law exist? What does it say about respect for life and livelihood? Do you know of any other ideas from the Torah that have to do with respecting life? What does it say about respect for the natural world? What ways do people in our society show that they care about nature? What connections can we make between respecting nature and respecting all life? How do we honor things that are alive? What are ways in which we can be conscious of life around us?

- Justice
- Law
- Superstition
- Protection

KI TETZEY Deut. 21:10-25:19

Torah teaches:

This parashah contains a lengthy list of laws for maintaining a just society. Among the topics covered are the treatment of women

captured in war, birthrights, punishment of a disobedient son, disposal of the corpse of an executed capital offender, the handling of lost property, cross-dressing, robbing a bird's nest, the taboo of mixed species, the accused virgin, adultery, rape, those excluded from membership in Israel, cult prostitution, interest, vows, divorce, loans, treatment of vulnerable members of society, levirate marriage, a woman who seizes a man's genitals, and honest weights and measures.

The parashah concludes with the commandment not to forget Amalek, who attacked the Israelites' rear soon after they left Egypt.

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah has laws about the sexual assault of women. The penalty in ancient Judaism was financial and the man had to marry a woman whom he assaulted. The Rabbis later changed this law and added that the woman could refuse to be married to her attacker. Do you think that money could ever compensate for sexual assault? This text assumes that we know who the attacker is. What happens when we do not? What are ways in which we can support women who have been sexually assaulted? How can we work to educate our communities about rape and self-defense?

- **Laws**
- **Sexuality**
- **Exclusion and inclusion**

KI TAVO Deut. 26:1-29:8

Torah teaches:

Moses continues his review of the laws that are to govern Israelite society in the new land. When they cross over the Jordan, the people are to perform a ritual drama on two mountains, dividing the twelve tribes into two choruses, facing each other. They are then to declaim in vivid detail the various blessings and curses that will befall the people according to their adherence to God's laws.

At the end of this parashah, Moses begins his third and final address to the people.

Discussion questions and themes:

The Torah demands of us right feeling as well as right action. With commandments to love God, suppress jealousy, and support the needy with willing hearts, among others, we see that feelings are important. In what ways are our feelings and actions related? In what ways are they not? Is it important to feel strongly about our actions? Do we ever do things because others want us to do them and not because we feel they are right? How are people around us affected when they know that we are doing something we feel strongly about? How are we affected? How do negative vs. positive thoughts affect us?

- **Blessings and curses**
- **Ritual**

NITZAVIM Deut. 29:9-30:20

Torah teaches:

In this parashah, Moses concludes his final address to the people, reiterating the mutual obligations of Israel and God. He tells the people that in the future they will be unfaithful to God and will be punished severely for their infidelities. But he also assures them that God will forgive them and bring them back from exile. Before them lies a choice. Moses exhorts them: Choose life!

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah ends with the line "choose life." What do you think is meant by this? Do we live our lives as if we've chosen to live? What about people who don't "choose life"? How does it feel to know that someone has chosen to die? How can we help others and ourselves when we feel that life might not be worth living? Why is it important to help people when they are depressed or suicidal? What makes people feel this way? How can we live our lives as if every day is special? How do we demonstrate that we have chosen life?

- **Choosing life**
- **Land of Israel**
- **Punishment and forgiveness**
- **Covenant**

VAYELEH Deut. 31:1-31:30

Torah teaches:

As he contemplates his approaching death, Moses assures the people that Joshua will lead them ably, under God's guidance. He then lays his hands upon Joshua and appoints him his successor. Moses writes down his Teaching and hands it over to the priests, instructing them to read it to the people every sabbatical year, during the festival of Sukkot.

Then God appears to Moses and Joshua at the Tent of Meeting in a pillar of cloud. God tells Moses that after his death, the people will forsake the Torah, and God's face will then become hidden to them. God instructs Moses to recite a poem before the people to bear witness to their fate, their perfidy, and their ultimate redemption.

Discussion questions and themes:

What aspects of God have been hidden from women when women were or are denied access to Torah study, ritual observances, and other mitzvot? What examples of Jewish women do we know who have overcome these obstacles to be leaders and seekers of the Divine? What characteristics make a good leader? Is it possible that people who are restricted from certain things can be great leaders? How might a person be a better leader if she knows how the oppressed are feeling? Does that kind of leadership manifest itself in our society or communities? How does women's leadership relate to this?

- Leadership
- Death
- Redemption

HA'AZINU Deut. 32:1-52

Torah teaches:

Moses recites God's prophetic poem before the people, extolling the divine might and favor that have blessed Israel to this day. The poem foretells Israel's betrayal of the covenant and God's terrible vengeance.

Then God instructs Moses to ascend Mount Nebo, to view the land of Canaan before he dies.

Discussion questions and themes:

This parashah is filled with images of a warlike and wrathful God. How do these images differ from those in traditional Jewish liturgy? In contemporary Jewish liturgy? In women's liturgy? (See Marcia Falk's Book of Blessings and Ellen Umansky's Four Centuries of Jewish Women's Spirituality). This parashah mentions that God was with the Israelites. How do we experience God in our own lives? What moments feel godly or holy to us? How can we live our lives thinking about creating holy moments? How can we take that idea into our interactions with other people?

- Foretelling the future
- God's power
- Covenant

VEZOT HABERAHAH Deut. 33:1-34:12

Torah teaches:

Just before he dies, Moses recites a farewell song, blessing each tribe and recalling details of its history. Then he ascends to the top of Mount Nebo, where God shows him the land he will not be allowed to enter. Moses dies, and God buries him in a secret grave. And the people mourn their beloved leader's death for forty days.

Discussion questions and themes:

Before his death, Moses appoints Joshua to be his political successor as well as to take care of his family. When does it make sense or when might it be a bad idea for a leader to choose his or her successor? What can we learn about Moses' character from the fact that he appointed someone to watch over his family? How does it feel to know that someone is caring for you even if they are not physically with you? How do we let others know that we care about them, even if we are far away?

- Death
- Leadership
- Mourning