



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives” By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

Introductory Letter and Guidance for Participants

Dear Torah Students,

Ours is the first generation of Jewish women to have access to the Torah on a mass scale. Using the internet, we are making Torah study even more accessible than ever. This new access has given birth to new ways of reading and relating to the Torah. Here we open to you the opportunity to work month-by-month through the Torah, reading each parasha and studying through a "feminist lens".

What does it mean to study "through a feminist lens"?

Every time we open the text, we bring with us our history, our values, and our questions--ourselves. Here, we study not only what people have said before us; we also raise questions that come from our experience. "There are seventy faces to the Torah" is an often-quoted rabbinic expression. No single reading is final or true. As the rabbinic sages were accustomed to doing, these sessions aim to arouse and challenge you to study the Torah together with your life. In this new conversation among women around the world, let us take nothing for granted. I welcome you to probe the text with openness and sincerity.

I strongly recommend the following steps to help you prepare for each session:

1. Please **read every parasha in full** before you approach the study materials. Use a translation that is most helpful to you. The bible is available online in many languages. The newest English version of the Jewish Publication Society (JPS) is at: <http://www.jtsa.edu/x1941.xml>. French and Portuguese versions of the JPS are at: <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm>. Please keep in mind that translation is a form of interpretation. Often translators massage the text to make it fit their world-view or assumptions, and to iron out difficulties. For that reason it is worth comparing translations when possible, and trying to look at the original Hebrew if you possibly can, even for words or phrases. Many of the online translations have a Christian attitude--<http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/>. Also, the Christian bible is not organized into the Jewish parasha divisions--you will need to refer to the Hebrew Bible.
2. Please **read the full parasha session through entirely**, then go back to the beginning to focus more closely on the materials and work on the questions. The Methods section at the end will help you reflect on your study process--try to keep the points I raise there in mind as you work through from the beginning.
3. Please help yourself to the tools available on the internet. Look up the biographies of the *parshanim*-interpreters whom I cite by clicking on the links and checking other sources. Like you, they come from all over the Jewish world. They also lived in different eras, in different contexts from ours. Learning about their lives and concerns enriches our study and helps us to

understand what and why they say what they do.

If you are part of a group, please do **all three** of these steps before your meeting. This will help you all get the most out of your precious Torah study time together.

Another note about translation

In Hebrew, every noun and verb is either male or female. There is no neuter form. Sometimes people think that the male form includes both men and women; sometimes people think that it excludes women. The passages I quote from the Torah are my version of the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew bible, the *Tanakh*. I translate God's names and other important words in ways that include women. For example, I use a male and female pronoun for God, *S/He*. While at first these forms might seem awkward, they help us to become more aware of our language and its meanings. I include the Hebrew text so that you will be able to refer to it more as you learn more.

About the session format

Each session bears the name of the weekly Torah portion and a title. I offer a brief **Summary** of the parasha, then I quote a particular passage of **Text**, the focus for the session. Please keep in mind that there are many other important topics for exploration in each parasha. By opening these topics during these sessions, I hope to whet your appetite to continue to study the Torah throughout your life.

A section entitled **Context & Issues** follows where I state the topic(s) to be addressed by the session.

In the **Explorations** section, I introduce views from many different time periods and locations, sometimes controversies and challenges.

I intend the **Questions for Discussion** to invite you to think about the issues we have raised in relation to your own thoughts and experience. These are suggestions; all of your questions are possible and welcome.

The **Study Links** section suggests websites to explore. These websites give background, offer more insight into issues that arise in the session; some raise new issues. These websites are not my production, nor am I responsible for their content. Therefore, please approach them with a critical eye.

I offer a very brief **Summary of Issues** that we have raised, and at the end of each session, a comment on **Methods** in order to direct attention to the way we are approaching the Torah with our feminist lens.

Our faces and voices contribute to the richness of Torah study. We are not expecting to resolve contradictions or achieve true meanings. By learning Torah, we learn about ourselves and our world. As feminist readers, we are sensitive to power relationships. Sacred texts influence our



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attitudes and behavior, and how we organize society. With this feminist learning, we seek to relieve injustice and oppression, to contribute toward more respect and dignity among people.

We will meet women in their biblical world and delve into the lives of the inhabitants of the Torah. We will analyze the text, peer into the white space between the letters, give voice to unspoken voices, and seek out mysteries of Creation and the Creator.

As I open topics, please explore, debate, and respond. Through the internet *forum*, you will be able to interact directly with other participants and to build an international community of women Torah students. I invite you to share your own biographies, the connections between what you do, your family, your community, and your Torah study.

I have one special request as you embark on this journey: I ask that you expect that this learning will affect you, that you will change and grow through it.

I offer my blessings for fruitful study and welcome you to this exciting new global women's Torah study initiative.

B'shalom,

Bonna Devora Haberman