

Study Guide for: "It Takes Two to Torah: An Orthodox Rabbi and Reform Journalist Discuss and Debate Their Way Through the Five Books of Moses"

How to Use This Guide

This study guide is designed to help you explore the conversations between Rabbi Dov Linzer and journalist Abigail Pogrebin as they work through each parsha (Torah portion) together. Their different perspectives offer rich opportunities to think about how we approach sacred texts, tradition, and modern life.

For each parsha, you'll find 2-3 discussion topics with questions designed to help you:

- Understand different Jewish perspectives
- Connect ancient texts to contemporary issues
- Reflect on your own Jewish journey and beliefs
- Practice respectful dialogue across differences

GENESIS (Bereishit)

Parsha: Bereishit (Genesis 1:1-6:8)

Topics Discussed: Two creation stories, gender equality, the importance of partnership

Discussion Topics:

1. Different Stories, Different Messages

- Why do you think the Torah includes two different creation stories? What does each one teach us?
- How do Dov and Abby handle the apparent contradictions? What does this teach us about approaching difficult texts?
- When you encounter conflicting information or perspectives, how do you decide what to believe?

2. Partnership and Community

- The authors note that "it takes two" to study Torah effectively. Why might studying with others be more valuable than studying alone?
- Think about a time when someone else's perspective changed how you understood something. What made you open to their viewpoint?
- How can we create respectful dialogue when we disagree with others?

3. Gender and Equality

- How do the two creation stories present different views of gender relationships? Which resonates more with you and why?
- Dov mentions that the second story has been used to justify the subjugation of women. How should we handle sacred texts that seem to conflict with our modern values?

Parsha: Noach (Genesis 6:9-11:32)

Topics Discussed: Divine punishment, human nature, environmental responsibility

Discussion Topics:

1. Divine Justice and Human Responsibility

- Was God's decision to destroy the world through the flood just? How do you understand divine punishment?
- Noah didn't argue with God to save others, unlike Abraham later. What does this teach us about moral courage?
- How do we balance accepting divine will with taking personal responsibility for justice?

2. Human Nature: Good or Evil?

- The text suggests humans have an inclination toward evil from youth. Do you agree? Are people naturally good or bad?
- How does the Jewish view of human nature differ from other religious traditions you know about?
- What role do education and society play in shaping moral behavior?

3. Environmental Stewardship

- Dov connects the flood story to modern environmental destruction. Do you see parallels between Noah's time and today?
- What responsibility do we have to care for the Earth? How does this connect to Jewish values?
- When you see environmental problems, do you feel more like Noah (focused on your own survival) or like someone who should act for the greater good?

Parsha: Lech Lecha (Genesis 12:1-17:27)

Topics Discussed: Divine calling, courage, the promise of land

Discussion Topics:

1. Hearing Your Calling

- The Sefat Emet teaches that God calls "lech lecha" to everyone, but only Abraham listened. How do people today "hear" their calling or purpose?
- What might prevent someone from hearing or responding to their calling?
- Describe a time when you felt called to do something important or difficult.

2. Divine Promises and Human Actions

- How should the biblical promise of land be understood today? Can ancient promises justify modern political actions?
- Dov distinguishes between divine promises and human obligations. How do you balance religious beliefs with ethical behavior?
- When religious texts are used to justify actions you find troubling, how do you respond?

3. Faith and Courage

- Abraham left everything familiar to follow God's call. What does it mean to have faith in something uncertain?
- How do we distinguish between faith-based courage and recklessness?
- What role should faith play in making major life decisions?

Parsha: Vayera (Genesis 18:1-22:24)

Topics Discussed: The Binding of Isaac, hospitality, testing faith

Discussion Topics:

1. The Ultimate Test

- How do you understand God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Was this appropriate?
- What's the difference between religious devotion and dangerous extremism?
- How do we know when we're being asked to do something truly divine versus something harmful?

2. Sacrifice and Priorities

- What are you willing to sacrifice for your beliefs or values? How do you set those priorities?
- Should love of God ever come before love of family? How do you balance competing loyalties?
- Both authors struggle with this story. Is it okay to find parts of sacred texts disturbing?

3. Hospitality and Justice

- Abraham argues with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah but doesn't argue about sacrificing Isaac. What does this teach us about when to accept divine will versus when to challenge it?
- How do we balance acceptance and activism in our spiritual lives?

Parsha: Chayei Sarah (Genesis 23:1-25:18)

Topics Discussed: Choosing a life partner, kindness as a character trait

Discussion Topics:

1. What to Look for in a Partner

- Abraham's servant chose Rebekah based on her kindness to strangers and animals. What qualities do you think are most important in a life partner?
- How do you balance practical considerations with emotional connection when making important relationship decisions?
- Both authors share personal reflections on marriage. How do your own family experiences shape your values about relationships?

2. Going Beyond the Minimum

- Rebekah didn't just give water to the servant but also watered his camels. When have you gone "above and beyond" for someone?
- What motivates people to do more than what's required or expected?
- How can we cultivate generosity of spirit in our daily lives?

3. Character Flaws in Heroes

- Rebekah later deceives her husband Isaac. How do you reconcile admirable qualities with serious character flaws in the same person?
- What does it mean that our biblical ancestors are complex, imperfect people rather than perfect role models?
- How do you handle discovering disappointing things about people you've admired?

Parsha: Toldot (Genesis 25:19-28:9)

Topics Discussed: Deception, moral complexity of biblical figures

Discussion Topics:

1. Jacob's Deception

- Was Jacob right to deceive his father to get Esau's blessing? How do you evaluate his actions?
- The commentators try to make Jacob's lie technically not a lie. What do you think of this approach?
- When, if ever, is deception justified? How do we teach ethical behavior while acknowledging moral complexity?

2. Consequences and Justice

- Jacob is later deceived by Laban in the same way he deceived Esau. Do you believe in "measure for measure" justice?
- How do you understand the relationship between actions and consequences in your own life?
- What's the difference between natural consequences and divine punishment?

3. Imperfect Heroes

- Why do you think the Torah includes stories of deception and moral complexity rather than perfect role models?
- How do you handle situations where you admire someone but disapprove of their actions?
- What can we learn from flawed biblical characters that we might not learn from perfect ones?

Parsha: Vayetzei (Genesis 28:10-32:3)

Topics Discussed: Sibling rivalry, fertility struggles, women's voices

Discussion Topics:

1. Competition and Relationships

- How do you understand the rivalry between Rachel and Leah? Is it realistic or problematic?
- Have you experienced or witnessed harmful competition in relationships? How can it be avoided?
- What does it mean that this is our only story about sister relationships in the Torah?

2. Fertility and Self-Worth

- Both sisters define their worth largely through having children. How do societal expectations shape our sense of self-worth?
- What aspects of identity and achievement do people focus on today that might be similarly limiting?
- How can we support people whose life experiences don't match societal expectations?

3. Missing Voices

- The authors note that we rarely hear women's perspectives in these stories. Whose voices are missing from important conversations in your own community?
- How can we better include different perspectives in our discussions and decision-making?
- When you encounter texts or stories that seem to exclude certain viewpoints, how do you respond?

Parsha: Vayishlach (Genesis 32:4-36:43)

Topics Discussed: The rape of Dinah, justice vs. revenge, women's agency

Discussion Topics:

1. Dinah's Story

- Why is Dinah given no voice in her own story? How does this reflect historical treatment of women?
- Some modern readings suggest Dinah's relationship with Shechem might have been consensual. What are the benefits and dangers of reinterpreting ancient texts?
- How do we balance respect for traditional interpretations with the need for texts to speak meaningfully to contemporary issues?

2. Justice and Revenge

- Was the brothers' violent response to Dinah's rape justified? How do we distinguish between justice and revenge?
- When legal systems fail, what are appropriate responses to injustice?
- How do we balance protecting victims with avoiding vigilante justice?

3. Perspective in Storytelling

- The authors note that stories can look very different depending on whose perspective we hear. How does this apply to conflicts in your own life?
- What stories from history might be understood differently if we heard them from other perspectives?
- How can we practice seeing situations from multiple viewpoints?

Parsha: Vayeshev (Genesis 37:1-40:23)

Topics Discussed: Reuben's failed intervention, good intentions vs. effective action

Discussion Topics:

1. Good Intentions vs. Results

- Reuben tried to save Joseph but ultimately failed. How do you evaluate actions based on intentions versus outcomes?

- When have you had good intentions that didn't lead to positive results? What did you learn?
- What's the difference between caring about a problem and effectively addressing it?

2. Moral Courage

- What would true courage have looked like in Reuben's situation? What prevents people from acting courageously?
- Describe a situation where you or someone you know showed moral courage. What made it possible?
- How can we develop the skills and confidence needed to act effectively in difficult situations?

3. Following Through

- Jonathan Sacks writes that Reuben "begins well but does not drive the deed to closure." What prevents people from following through on important commitments?
- When have you started something important but failed to complete it? What could have helped you finish?
- How can we build better habits of persistence and follow-through?

Parsha: Miketz (Genesis 41:1-44:17)

Topics Discussed: Dreams and interpretation, power dynamics, mixed motives

Discussion Topics:

1. Dreams and Divine Communication

- How do you understand the role of dreams in decision-making? Do you think God communicates through dreams today?
- What's the difference between superstition and spiritual openness?
- How do we discern between meaningful experiences and random events?

2. Power and Responsibility

- Joseph gains enormous power in Egypt. How does power change people, and how can powerful people use their position responsibly?
- When someone who has been oppressed gains power over their former oppressors, how should they behave?

- Think of examples where people have used power well or poorly. What made the difference?

3. Mixed Motives

- Was Joseph testing his brothers or seeking revenge? How do we untangle our own mixed motives?
- When have you done something good for questionable reasons, or something questionable for good reasons?
- How important is it to have pure motives, versus just doing the right thing?

Parsha: Vayigash (Genesis 44:18-47:27)

Topics Discussed: Emotional revelation, family reconciliation

Discussion Topics:

1. Emotional Expression

- Joseph weeps loudly when revealing himself to his brothers, while they remain silent. How do different people process intense emotions?
- What role should emotion play in important relationships and reconciliation?
- How can we create space for different emotional styles in our communities?

2. Forgiveness and Reconciliation

- What made it possible for Joseph and his brothers to reconcile? What obstacles might have prevented it?
- Think of a relationship in your life that needs healing. What would reconciliation look like?
- What's the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation? Can you have one without the other?

3. Family Dynamics

- How do childhood experiences and family roles affect adult relationships?
- Joseph's brothers are amazed by his success, but he's still their brother. How do we handle it when people we know change dramatically?
- What family patterns or dynamics do you hope to continue or change in your own life?

Parsha: Vayechi (Genesis 47:28-50:26)

Topics Discussed: God's plan vs. human responsibility, forgiveness

Discussion Topics:

1. Divine Plan and Human Choice

- Joseph tells his brothers that God intended their evil actions for good. How do you understand the relationship between divine will and human responsibility?
- When bad things happen, how do we balance accepting them as part of a larger plan with taking responsibility for our actions?
- How can belief in divine providence be comforting versus harmful?

2. Forgiveness and Justice

- Joseph says he cannot forgive his brothers because that's God's role. Do humans have the right to forgive wrongs done to them?
- What's the difference between forgiveness and simply not seeking revenge?
- How do we balance personal healing with the need for justice?

3. Seeing God in History

- Joseph sees God's hand in his life story. How do you understand God's role in your own life and in history?
- What experiences have shaped your understanding of how God works in the world?
- How do we find meaning in difficult experiences without minimizing their impact?

EXODUS (Shemot)

Parsha: Shemot (Exodus 1:1-6:1)

Topics Discussed: Leadership qualities, moral courage, going from particular to universal

Discussion Topics:

1. Leadership Development

- Moses intervenes three times: defending a Hebrew from an Egyptian, stopping a fight between Hebrews, and helping foreign women. What does this progression teach about leadership?

- How do we develop from caring only about our own group to caring about justice more broadly?
- What experiences have shaped your own sense of responsibility to others?

2. Reluctant Leadership

- Moses initially refuses God's call to leadership. Why might reluctance be a good quality in a leader?
- Think of leaders you admire. Were they eager for power or reluctant to take it?
- How do we distinguish between healthy humility and lack of confidence?

3. Moral Courage in Daily Life

- Moses couldn't tolerate seeing injustice. What injustices do you see that demand action?
- What prevents people from intervening when they see wrongdoing?
- How can we develop the courage to act when we see something wrong?

Parsha: Va'era (Exodus 6:2-9:35)

Topics Discussed: The plagues, God's power vs. human authority, collective memory

Discussion Topics:

1. Divine Power and Human Authority

- Why does God need to demonstrate power through the plagues? What is the relationship between divine and human authority?
- How do we know when to obey human authorities and when to resist them?
- What examples can you think of where people chose divine law over human law?

2. Hardening Hearts

- God hardens Pharaoh's heart to continue the plagues. How do you understand this morally?
- What hardens people's hearts today? How do people become unable to change their minds?
- How can we keep our own hearts open to growth and change?

3. Creating Lasting Memory

- The plagues create a dramatic story for the Jewish people to remember. Why are dramatic stories important for communities?
- What stories does your family or community tell about overcoming challenges?
- How do we ensure that important lessons from the past aren't forgotten?

Parsha: Bo (Exodus 10:1-13:16)

Topics Discussed: The final plague, moral complexity, symbols of freedom and oppression

Discussion Topics:

1. Innocent Suffering

- The death of Egyptian firstborns troubles both authors. How do we understand innocent suffering in a world governed by a just God?
- When collective punishment affects innocent people, how do we think about justice?
- How do we maintain faith while acknowledging the moral complexity of our tradition?

2. Symbols and Memory

- Matzah represents both slavery (bread of affliction) and freedom (hasty departure). How can the same symbol mean opposite things?
- What other examples can you think of where symbols have multiple meanings?
- How do symbols help us remember important experiences and values?

3. Brokenness and Wholeness

- The authors discuss how brokenness can be a marker of maturity. What does this mean to you?
- How have difficult experiences contributed to your growth?
- How can communities hold both suffering and joy, brokenness and healing?

Parsha: Beshalach (Exodus 13:17-17:16)

Topics Discussed: Celebrating enemy defeat, justice vs. revenge

Discussion Topics:

1. Celebrating Justice vs. Gloating

- Is it appropriate to celebrate when enemies are defeated? How do we distinguish between gratitude for salvation and rejoicing in others' suffering?
- The midrash says God told the angels not to sing while Egyptians drowned. What does this teach about appropriate responses to justice?
- How can we celebrate our own victories without dehumanizing those who opposed us?

2. Oppression and Response

- How should oppressed people respond when they gain the upper hand over their oppressors?
- What's the difference between seeking justice and seeking revenge?
- How do we balance protecting ourselves with maintaining our moral values?

3. Memory and Perspective

- The Song of the Sea focuses on triumph, while the midrash emphasizes the tragedy of drowning Egyptians. Why might we need both perspectives?
- How do we tell stories about difficult events in ways that are both honest and meaningful?
- What responsibility do we have to remember the humanity of those who oppose us?

Parsha: Yitro (Exodus 18:1-20:23)

Topics Discussed: The Ten Commandments, universal vs. particular, delegation

Discussion Topics:

1. Universal Ethics

- Most of the Ten Commandments seem universal rather than specifically Jewish. What does this teach about Jewish values?
- How do we balance particular Jewish identity with universal human values?
- Which commandments do you think are most important for society today?

2. Learning from Outsiders

- Yitro, a non-Jew, teaches Moses how to organize the judicial system. What does this teach about being open to wisdom from unexpected sources?

- When have you learned something important from someone very different from you?
- How can communities remain true to their values while being open to outside perspectives?

3. God and History

- God identifies as "the one who brought you out of Egypt" rather than "creator of the universe." Why might this historical relationship be more important than abstract power?
- How do you understand your relationship with God - through personal experience, tradition, philosophy, or something else?
- What experiences have most shaped your spiritual beliefs?

Parsha: Mishpatim (Exodus 21:1-24:18)

Topics Discussed: The stranger, immigration, responsibility to outsiders

Discussion Topics:

1. Welcoming the Stranger

- The Torah commands caring for strangers 36 times. How should this apply to contemporary immigration issues?
- What's the difference between compassion and justice when it comes to helping others?
- How do we balance responsibility to our own community with responsibility to outsiders?

2. Rabbinic Interpretation

- The Rabbis interpret "stranger" as referring only to converts to Judaism. How do you understand this limitation?
- When religious texts seem to exclude certain groups, how should we respond?
- How do we balance traditional interpretations with contemporary values?

3. Personal Responsibility

- Both authors admit they don't do enough to help strangers or immigrants. What prevents people from living up to their stated values?

- How can we move from feeling compassion to taking meaningful action?
- What would it look like to truly "love the stranger" in your daily life?

Parsha: Terumah (Exodus 25:1-27:19)

Topics Discussed: Sacred space, physical vs. spiritual, community building

Discussion Topics:

1. Sacred Space

- Does a beautiful physical space help or hinder spiritual connection? What has been your experience?
- How do we balance appreciating beauty with avoiding materialism in religious life?
- What makes a space feel sacred to you?

2. Finding God

- Dov admits he often doesn't feel God in synagogue, while Abby describes powerful moments there. Where do you feel most connected to the divine?
- How do we cultivate spiritual awareness in ordinary places and moments?
- What role do other people play in your spiritual experiences?

3. Community Projects

- Building the Tabernacle was a communal effort. How do shared projects strengthen communities?
- What projects have you been part of that brought people together?
- How can communities balance individual expression with collective goals?

Parsha: Tetzaveh (Exodus 27:20-30:10)

Topics Discussed: Priestly garments, uniforms and identity, visible markers of identity

Discussion Topics:

1. Clothing and Identity

- How do the clothes we wear affect how we see ourselves and how others see us?
- What visible markers of Jewish identity do you wear or display? How do they affect your experience?

- How do we balance authentic self-expression with appropriate dress for different situations?

2. Hierarchy and Equality

- The High Priest wore elaborate garments while regular priests wore simple ones. How do we balance recognizing different roles with affirming equal dignity?
- When is hierarchy helpful, and when is it harmful?
- How can communities honor different contributions without creating harmful inequalities?

3. Carrying Heritage

- Aaron carried the names of the tribes on his breastplate. What symbols or objects connect you to your heritage?
- How do we honor our ancestors while making our own choices about identity?
- What inheritance - physical, cultural, or spiritual - do you hope to pass on?

Parsha: Ki Tisa (Exodus 30:11-34:35)

Topics Discussed: The Golden Calf, idolatry, barriers to spiritual connection

Discussion Topics:

1. Modern Idolatry

- What are the "golden calves" of contemporary life - things that become barriers between us and what really matters?
- How do we distinguish between helpful tools and harmful distractions in spiritual life?
- What practices or habits help you maintain focus on your deeper values?

2. Punishment and Justice

- 3,000 people were killed after the Golden Calf incident. How do you understand collective punishment?
- When communities do wrong, how should they be held accountable?
- What's the difference between consequences and revenge?

3. Starting Over

- Moses breaks the first tablets but receives new ones. What does this teach about failure and second chances?
- How do communities and individuals recover from serious mistakes?
- When have you experienced the possibility of starting over after a failure?

Parsha: Vayakhel-Pekudei (Exodus 35:1-40:38)

Topics Discussed: Voluntary contribution, community involvement, completing projects

Discussion Topics:

1. Voluntary vs. Mandatory Service

- The Tabernacle was built through voluntary contributions. How does volunteering differ from being required to help?
- What motivates people to contribute when they don't have to?
- How can communities encourage participation without coercion?

2. Completion and Achievement

- The people contributed so much that Moses had to tell them to stop. When have you been part of a project that generated this kind of enthusiasm?
- What's the difference between working on something that will be completed versus ongoing service?
- How do we maintain motivation for long-term goals that may never be "finished"?

3. Individual Skills and Community Needs

- People contributed both materials and skills to building the Tabernacle. How can communities make use of everyone's different talents?
- What unique skills or resources do you have that could benefit others?
- How do we balance doing what we're good at with doing what's needed?

LEVITICUS (Vayikra)

Parsha: Vayikra (Leviticus 1:1-5:26)

Topics Discussed: Animal sacrifice, physicality in worship, connecting to God

Discussion Topics:

1. Physical vs. Spiritual Worship

- Animal sacrifices seem foreign to us, but the authors discuss the power of physical religious acts. How do physical actions affect spiritual experience?
- What role does the body play in your own spiritual practice?
- How can we find meaningful ways to make worship physical and not just intellectual?

2. Substitutes and Symbols

- Sacrifices may have replaced child sacrifice, representing the same intensity with less harm. What modern practices serve as symbolic rather than literal expressions of devotion?
- How do we find appropriate ways to express the depth of our commitments?
- What would you be willing to sacrifice for your deepest values?

3. Distance and Intimacy

- God doesn't "eat" the sacrifices but "smells" them from a distance. How do we balance intimacy with God and appropriate reverence?
- What does it mean to have a relationship with the divine?
- How close can humans get to God, and what are the boundaries?

Parsha: Tzav (Leviticus 6:1-8:36)

Topics Discussed: Eternal fire, perseverance, Jewish survival

Discussion Topics:

1. Eternal Light

- The eternal fire on the altar connects to the ner tamid in modern synagogues. What does it mean to keep something burning continuously?
- What values or practices do you think should be maintained consistently, even when it's difficult?
- How do we balance honoring tradition with adapting to change?

2. Survival vs. Purpose

- Dov argues that Jewish survival alone isn't a meaningful goal - we need to know why survival matters. What do you think the purpose of Jewish continuity should be?
- How do we balance pride in our persistence with focus on our positive contributions?
- What would make Jewish life meaningful to you personally?

3. Strength in Difficulty

- The authors discuss how belief in endurance gives strength during hardship. What sources of strength do you draw on during difficult times?
- How do historical experiences of persecution affect contemporary Jewish identity?
- What role should memory of suffering play in how we live today?

Parsha: Shemini (Leviticus 9:1-11:47)

Topics Discussed: Nadab and Abihu's death, religious extremism, appropriate worship

Discussion Topics:

1. Religious Enthusiasm vs. Extremism

- Aaron's sons died for bringing "alien fire" to God. What's the difference between religious passion and dangerous extremism?
- How do we encourage spiritual enthusiasm while maintaining appropriate boundaries?
- What examples can you think of where religious fervor led to harmful actions?

2. Following Rules vs. Innovation

- Were Nadab and Abihu wrong to innovate in their worship, or were they showing admirable initiative? How do you balance following tradition with personal expression?
- When is it appropriate to change or challenge religious practices?
- How do we honor tradition while allowing for growth and change?

3. Power and Danger

- Rabbi Greenberg compares God's presence to dangerous electrical power that requires careful handling. How do you understand the idea that the sacred can be dangerous?

- What does it mean to approach something with proper reverence?
- How do we balance accessibility to sacred experiences with appropriate caution?

Parsha: Tazria (Leviticus 12:1-13:59)

Topics Discussed: Ritual impurity, inclusion vs. exclusion, stigmatizing illness

Discussion Topics:

1. Purity and Community

- People with certain conditions were excluded from the Temple. How do we balance communal standards with individual inclusion?
- What groups or individuals are sometimes excluded from full participation in communities today?
- How can communities maintain their identity while being welcoming to everyone?

2. Illness and Society

- The authors compare ancient exclusion of sick people to modern practices like nursing homes. How does society handle people who are sick, aging, or disabled?
- What responsibility do we have to stay connected to people who are struggling?
- How can we support people without making them feel like burdens?

3. Punishment vs. Natural Consequences

- The Rabbis interpret skin disease as punishment for gossip. How do you understand the relationship between behavior and consequences?
- When bad things happen, how do we balance taking responsibility with avoiding victim-blaming?
- What's the difference between natural consequences and divine punishment?

Parsha: Metzora (Leviticus 14:1-15:33)

Topics Discussed: Purification and return, reintegration, pandemic parallels

Discussion Topics:

1. Quarantine and Isolation

- The detailed purification process for returning to community resonates with pandemic experiences. What have we learned about isolation and reintegration?

- How do we balance protecting public health with maintaining human dignity?
- What rituals or practices help people feel welcomed back after periods of separation?

2. Second Chances

- The lengthy purification process allows people to return to community after being excluded. How do we help people reintegrate after mistakes or difficult periods?
- What does meaningful forgiveness and restoration look like?
- How can communities balance accountability with compassion?

3. Collective Responsibility

- Sometimes harsh measures protect the broader community. How do we balance individual rights with collective wellbeing?
- When is sacrifice for the common good justified, and when does it go too far?
- How do we make difficult decisions that affect both individuals and communities?

Parsha: Acharei Mot (Leviticus 16:1-18:30)

Topics Discussed: Scapegoat ritual, atonement vs. repentance, taking responsibility

Discussion Topics:

1. Atonement and Forgiveness

- The scapegoat carries away the community's sins. How do you understand forgiveness - is it something we earn or something we receive?
- What's the difference between atonement (being forgiven) and repentance (changing behavior)?
- How do rituals help people feel forgiven and ready to start over?

2. Easy vs. Hard Paths

- Abby defends tashlich (throwing breadcrumbs to symbolize getting rid of sins) while Dov initially resists it as too easy. When are symbolic acts meaningful, and when are they shortcuts?
- How do we balance ritual expression with genuine inner work?
- What makes forgiveness feel real and complete?

3. Personal and Communal Responsibility

- The scapegoat ritual dealt with communal sin. How do communities take responsibility for collective wrongs?
- What's the difference between individual mistakes and systemic problems?
- How do we address harm that affects entire groups or communities?

Parsha: Kedoshim (Leviticus 19:1-20:27)

Topics Discussed: Holiness, ethics and ritual, loving your neighbor

Discussion Topics:

1. What Makes Someone Holy?

- The parsha includes both ethical commands (don't steal) and ritual ones (keep Sabbath). How are these connected?
- What does holiness mean to you? Is it more about how you treat people or how you worship God?
- How do we integrate our spiritual beliefs with our daily ethical choices?

2. Universal vs. Particular Values

- "Love your neighbor as yourself" seems universal, but it appears alongside specifically Jewish commands. How do we balance universal ethics with particular religious identity?
- What values do you think all people should share, and what practices might be specific to certain communities?
- How do we stay rooted in our own tradition while respecting others?

3. Becoming vs. Being

- The command is to "become holy," not just "be holy." What does it mean to see holiness as a process rather than a state?
- How do we maintain motivation for growth when perfection isn't achievable?
- What practices help you continue developing ethically and spiritually?

Parsha: Emor (Leviticus 21:1-24:23)

Topics Discussed: Leaving corners of fields, dignity in giving, tzedakah vs. charity

Discussion Topics:

1. Dignity and Justice

- Leaving corners of fields allows poor people to work for their food rather than just receive handouts. Why is this approach better than simple charity?
- How can we help people in ways that preserve their dignity?
- What's the difference between making someone dependent versus helping them become independent?

2. Charity vs. Justice

- Tzedakah means justice, not charity. How does this change how we think about helping others?
- Is helping people an act of kindness or an obligation? What difference does it make?
- How do we balance personal generosity with working for systemic change?

3. Anonymous Giving

- The agricultural gifts were essentially anonymous. What are the benefits and drawbacks of anonymous versus public giving?
- How do we encourage generosity without encouraging showing off?
- What motivates you more - recognition for doing good or just the satisfaction of helping?

Parsha: Behar (Leviticus 25:1-26:2)

Topics Discussed: Sabbatical year, rest and sustainability, economic justice

Discussion Topics:

1. Rest and Renewal

- The land rests every seven years, like people rest every seven days. What does it mean to build rest into our systems?
- How do we balance productivity with sustainability in our personal lives and society?
- What would it look like to practice regular rest and renewal in your own life?

2. Economic Hardship and Social Change

- The sabbatical year created economic hardship but also promoted values like equality. How do we balance idealistic goals with practical realities?
- What changes would you like to see in society, even if they might be difficult in the short term?
- How do we work for justice when change creates temporary hardship?

3. Forced vs. Chosen Change

- The Israelites' sabbatical year was commanded, while our pandemic pause was forced upon us. Does it matter whether we choose to slow down or are made to?
- What have you learned from periods of forced rest or change in your life?
- How can we integrate positive lessons from difficult experiences into our regular lives?

Parsha: Bechukotai (Leviticus 26:3-27:34)

Topics Discussed: Rewards and punishments, motivation through fear, divine threats

Discussion Topics:

1. Motivation Through Fear

- The parsha lists terrible punishments for disobedience. Is it appropriate to threaten people to get them to do the right thing?
- How do you respond to rules that are enforced through punishment rather than explained through reason?
- What motivates you more effectively - fear of consequences or positive incentives?

2. Divine Punishment

- How do you understand the concept of divine punishment? Does God actively punish wrongdoing, or are bad consequences natural results of poor choices?
- When bad things happen to good people, how do you make sense of it?
- How do we balance belief in divine justice with recognition that life isn't always fair?

3. Religious Motivation

- Dov talks about doing mitzvot even when he doesn't find them personally meaningful. What role should personal meaning play in religious observance?

- How do we balance individual spiritual needs with communal obligations?
 - When is it worth doing something you don't understand or enjoy because it's part of your tradition?
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NUMBERS (Bamidbar)

Parsha: Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20)

Topics Discussed: Counting people, community organization, diversity and unity

Discussion Topics:

1. Everyone Counts

- The detailed census shows that every person matters to God. How do we make sure everyone feels valued in our communities?
- What's the difference between treating everyone the same and recognizing individual differences?
- How can large communities maintain personal connection and individual recognition?

2. Structure and Freedom

- The Israelites organized themselves with flags and specific positions after leaving slavery. How does structure contribute to freedom?
- What kinds of organization help communities function well, and what kinds become oppressive?
- How do we balance individual expression with collective needs?

3. Diversity in Unity

- Different tribes had different roles but shared common purpose. How can diverse communities maintain unity while celebrating differences?
- What examples can you think of where diversity strengthened rather than weakened a group?
- How do we create belonging for people with different backgrounds and perspectives?

Parsha: Naso (Numbers 4:21-7:89)

Topics Discussed: The Sotah ritual, troubling texts, women's rights

Discussion Topics:

1. Dealing with Difficult Texts

- The Sotah ritual forces suspected women to undergo degrading tests. How should we handle parts of our tradition that contradict our values?
- Is it better to reinterpret problematic texts, acknowledge their historical context, or reject them entirely?
- How do we maintain respect for tradition while advocating for justice?

2. Historical Progress

- Dov argues the ritual was an improvement over earlier practices where husbands could act unilaterally. How do we evaluate moral progress in historical context?
- What practices that seem normal today might future generations find troubling?
- How do we balance appreciating progress with continuing to work for improvement?

3. Sacred Texts and Human Values

- When religious texts seem to endorse unfair practices, how do we respond? Should sacred texts be above criticism?
- How do different people balance reverence for tradition with commitment to justice?
- What role should human conscience play in interpreting religious teachings?

Parsha: Beha'alotcha (Numbers 8:1-12:16)

Topics Discussed: Being "cut off," communal boundaries, inclusion and exclusion

Discussion Topics:

1. Community Boundaries

- People could be "cut off" from the community for certain violations. How do communities decide who belongs and who doesn't?
- What behaviors or beliefs, if any, should exclude someone from community membership?
- How do we balance maintaining community standards with being inclusive?

2. Obligation and Belonging

- Missing the Paschal sacrifice could result in being cut off. What obligations do people have to their communities?
- How do we distinguish between essential commitments and optional participation?
- What happens when individual needs conflict with communal expectations?

3. Change and Tradition

- Dov discusses evolution in Orthodox practice while maintaining core principles. How do communities change while preserving their identity?
- What aspects of your own traditions do you hope to maintain, and what would you change?
- How do we balance respect for the past with responsiveness to contemporary needs?

Parsha: Shlach (Numbers 13:1-15:41)

Topics Discussed: The spies' report, courage vs. fear, faith and risk-taking

Discussion Topics:

1. Courage and Faith

- Ten spies saw giants and felt like grasshoppers; two saw the same situation but had confidence they could succeed. What makes the difference?
- How do you distinguish between realistic caution and paralyzing fear?
- When have you had to act courageously despite uncertainty about the outcome?

2. Self-Perception and Reality

- The spies said "we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." How does our self-perception affect how others see us?
- What gives people confidence to face challenges that seem overwhelming?
- How can communities help individuals develop courage and self-confidence?

3. Faith and Action

- Caleb and Joshua had faith that God would help them succeed. How does spiritual faith relate to practical action?

- What role should faith play in making difficult decisions?
- How do we balance trusting in God with taking personal responsibility?

Parsha: Korach (Numbers 16:1-18:32)

Topics Discussed: Challenging authority, leadership legitimacy, democratic values

Discussion Topics:

1. Questioning Leadership

- Korach challenged Moses' authority. When is it appropriate to question leaders, and when does it become destructive?
- How do we distinguish between legitimate criticism and undermining authority?
- What makes leadership legitimate, and how should leaders respond to challenges?

2. Equality and Hierarchy

- Korach argued that everyone is equally holy. How do we balance democratic equality with the need for leadership and expertise?
- What kinds of hierarchy are helpful, and what kinds are harmful?
- How can communities honor everyone's equal worth while recognizing different roles and responsibilities?

3. Disappointment and Leadership

- Moses was hurt by his people's constant complaints. How should leaders handle criticism and disappointment?
- What do followers owe their leaders in terms of loyalty and support?
- How can communities maintain constructive relationships between leaders and members?

Parsha: Chukat (Numbers 19:1-22:1)

Topics Discussed: Moses hitting the rock, leadership transitions, justice and punishment

Discussion Topics:

1. Leadership and Mistakes

- Moses was barred from entering the Promised Land for hitting the rock instead of speaking to it. Was this punishment fair?

- How should leaders be held accountable for their mistakes?
- What's the difference between consequences and punishment when leaders fail?

2. Knowing When to Step Back

- Maybe Moses wasn't punished but rather needed to step aside for a new kind of leadership. How do we know when it's time to pass leadership to others?
- What makes it difficult for people to give up leadership roles?
- How can communities manage leadership transitions gracefully?

3. Recognition and Legacy

- Moses didn't receive recognition in his lifetime but is honored throughout history. How important is immediate recognition versus long-term legacy?
- What do we owe leaders who sacrifice for others' benefit?
- How do we balance honoring past leaders with empowering new ones?

Parsha: Balak (Numbers 22:2-25:9)

Topics Discussed: Pinchas' zealotry, vigilante justice, violence in God's name

Discussion Topics:

1. Religious Extremism

- Pinchas killed an Israelite man and foreign woman and was rewarded for his zeal. How do we understand religiously motivated violence?
- What's the difference between appropriate religious passion and dangerous extremism?
- How can communities channel religious enthusiasm in positive rather than destructive ways?

2. Vigilante Justice

- When official systems fail, is it ever appropriate to take justice into your own hands?
- What are the dangers of allowing individuals to decide what justice requires?
- How do we balance the need for action with respect for proper procedures?

3. Moral Complexity

- The Rabbis both praised and criticized Pinchas' actions. How do we handle situations where the right choice isn't clear?
- When have you had to make a decision where all options seemed problematic?
- How do we live with moral ambiguity while still taking action when necessary?

Parsha: Pinchas (Numbers 25:10-30:1)

Topics Discussed: Daughters of Zelophehad, inheritance rights, arguing for justice

Discussion Topics:

1. Fighting for Fairness

- Zelophehad's daughters successfully argued for inheritance rights. What can we learn from their approach?
- How do we effectively advocate for justice when systems seem unfair?
- What gives people the courage to challenge established practices?

2. Working Within Systems

- The daughters didn't challenge patriarchy directly but used arguments that would resonate with male leaders. How do we balance idealistic goals with practical strategy?
- When is it better to work within existing systems, and when should we try to change them entirely?
- How do we achieve progress when we can't achieve perfection?

3. Precedent and Change

- God's response created new law based on the daughters' just claim. How do individual cases lead to broader social change?
- What examples can you think of where one person's situation changed rules for everyone?
- How can communities remain open to necessary change while maintaining stability?

Parsha: Matot-Masei (Numbers 30:2-36:13)

Topics Discussed: Not reaching the Promised Land, unfulfilled dreams, diaspora vs. Israel

Discussion Topics:

1. Unfulfilled Dreams

- The generation that left Egypt never entered the Promised Land. How do we handle it when major goals remain unfulfilled?
- What do we owe to dreams and goals that we can't achieve in our own lifetimes?
- How do we find meaning in working toward goals we may never see completed?

2. Place and Identity

- Dov feels guilty about not living in Israel, while Abby sees Judaism as portable. How important is physical place to spiritual identity?
- What makes a place feel like home to you?
- How do we balance loyalty to ideals with practical life decisions?

3. Generational Responsibility

- The older generation died in the wilderness, but their children inherited their dreams. What do we owe to future generations?
- How do we prepare others to continue work we've started?
- What dreams or values do you hope to pass on to the next generation?

DEUTERONOMY (Devarim)

Parsha: Devarim (Deuteronomy 1:1-3:22)

Topics Discussed: Retelling stories, delegation of authority, learning from others

Discussion Topics:

1. The Power of Retelling

- Moses retells the Torah story but changes some details, like omitting Yitro's role in creating the judicial system. Why might stories change in the retelling?
- How do the stories your family tells about the past shape your identity?
- What's the difference between lying and emphasizing different aspects of truth?

2. Learning from Unexpected Sources

- Yitro, a non-Jew, taught Moses how to organize leadership. How do we stay open to wisdom from unexpected sources?
- When have you learned something important from someone very different from you?
- How can communities maintain their identity while being open to outside perspectives?

3. Sharing Authority

- Moses couldn't judge everyone alone and had to delegate. How do we know when to share responsibility versus maintaining control?
- What prevents people from delegating effectively?
- How can leaders prepare others to take on meaningful responsibility?

Parsha: Va'etchanan (Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11)

Topics Discussed: Moses' pleading, accepting limitations, transmission of experience

Discussion Topics:

1. Accepting "No"

- God tells Moses to stop asking to enter the Land. How do we handle it when our appeals are rejected?
- When is persistence admirable, and when does it become harmful?
- How do we know when to accept limitations versus when to keep fighting?

2. Sharing Extraordinary Experiences

- Moses tells the people to remember that they heard God speak at Sinai. How do we transmit powerful experiences to others?
- What experiences have shaped you that are difficult to share with others?
- How can communities help people connect to experiences they didn't personally have?

3. Making Torah Accessible

- The Torah isn't in heaven but "close to you, in your mouth and heart." What makes sacred texts feel accessible versus distant?

- How do we balance respecting expertise with encouraging everyone to engage with important texts?
- What helps you feel entitled to interpret and apply spiritual teachings?

Parsha: Eikev (Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25)

Topics Discussed: Gratitude, humility, recognizing blessings

Discussion Topics:

1. Gratitude vs. Pride

- The Torah warns against saying "my power and might have achieved this wealth." How do we balance taking appropriate credit with recognizing what we've been given?
- What role do circumstances beyond your control play in your achievements?
- How do we cultivate genuine gratitude without becoming passive?

2. Daily Blessings

- Jewish tradition includes many daily blessings to cultivate awareness of gifts. What practices help you notice good things in your life?
- How can gratitude become a habit rather than just an occasional feeling?
- What difference does it make to see daily experiences as blessings versus just normal life?

3. Success and Responsibility

- With blessing comes responsibility to others. How should fortunate people use their advantages?
- What do you owe to the community or society that helped you succeed?
- How do we balance enjoying our blessings with sharing them appropriately?

Parsha: Re'eh (Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17)

Topics Discussed: Tzedakah vs. charity, justice vs. kindness, economic dignity

Discussion Topics:

1. Justice vs. Charity

- Tzedakah means justice, not charity. How does this change our understanding of helping others?
- What's the difference between seeing help as kindness versus obligation?
- How do we balance individual generosity with systemic change?

2. Dignity in Assistance

- The Torah emphasizes lending over giving and maintaining people's dignity. How can we help others without making them feel diminished?
- What kinds of help preserve dignity, and what kinds undermine it?
- How do we balance offering support with respecting independence?

3. Seeing and Responding

- The parsha is called "See" - we must see need before we can respond. What prevents people from seeing problems around them?
- How can we become more aware of others' struggles without becoming overwhelmed?
- What's the relationship between awareness and action in your own life?

Parsha: Shoftim (Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9)

Topics Discussed: Judicial system, kingship, lifelong learning for leaders

Discussion Topics:

1. Justice and Fairness

- The judicial system must treat "small and great alike" and judge fairly between citizens and strangers. How well do contemporary justice systems live up to these ideals?
- What makes a legal system truly fair?
- How can communities ensure that justice isn't influenced by wealth, status, or connections?

2. Leadership and Learning

- A king must keep Torah with him and read it constantly. What should we expect from our leaders in terms of ongoing education and growth?

- How do we balance expertise with humility in leadership?
- What role should learning and intellectual curiosity play in political leadership?

3. Power and Restraint

- Kings are limited in wealth, wives, and military power. What constraints should exist on leadership authority?
- How do we prevent leaders from abusing their positions for personal gain?
- What's the difference between confidence and arrogance in leadership?

Parsha: Ki Tetzei (Deuteronomy 21:10-25:19)

Topics Discussed: Troubling laws, historical context, moral progress

Discussion Topics:

1. Contextualizing Difficult Texts

- The laws about captive women and rebellious sons seem harsh by modern standards. How do we understand moral progress over time?
- Should historical context excuse practices we now consider wrong?
- How do we balance honoring tradition with advocating for justice?

2. Incremental Change

- Some laws may have been improvements over even worse alternatives. How do we evaluate partial progress versus complete solutions?
- When is gradual change acceptable, and when is radical transformation necessary?
- How do we maintain hope for justice while acknowledging that change is often slow?

3. Preventing Extremes

- The Rabbis interpreted extreme punishments in ways that made them almost impossible to carry out. How do communities moderate harsh impulses while maintaining order?
- What's the difference between having strict standards and being willing to destroy people who don't meet them?
- How do we balance accountability with compassion?

Parsha: Ki Tavo (Deuteronomy 26:1-29:8)

Topics Discussed: First fruits, gratitude, remembering history

Discussion Topics:

1. First Fruits and Priorities

- The first and best fruits must be offered to God before enjoying the harvest. What does it mean to put gratitude first?
- How do we resist the temptation to enjoy blessings without acknowledging their source?
- What practices help you maintain perspective on what's truly important?

2. Telling Our Story

- The first fruits ceremony includes reciting the story from Jacob to the Exodus. Why is storytelling central to gratitude?
- What stories does your family tell about overcoming challenges or receiving help?
- How does remembering difficult times affect appreciation for current blessings?

3. Active Participation

- The people must write the Torah on stones themselves, not just receive it. What's the difference between inheriting tradition and making it your own?
- How do we take ownership of values and practices we've inherited?
- What role should personal engagement play in religious and cultural identity?

Parsha: Nitzavim (Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20)

Topics Discussed: Torah accessibility, personal responsibility, democratic interpretation

Discussion Topics:

1. Accessible Wisdom

- The Torah is "not in heaven" but "close to you, in your mouth and heart." What makes wisdom accessible versus elitist?
- How do we balance respecting expertise with encouraging everyone to engage with important ideas?

- What prevents people from feeling entitled to interpret texts and traditions for themselves?

2. Divine Authority vs. Human Interpretation

- The Rabbis say that even God doesn't get a vote in interpreting Torah. How do we balance reverence for tradition with the need for human judgment?
- When should people follow authority, and when should they think for themselves?
- How do communities make decisions about values and practices?

3. Personal and Communal Responsibility

- Each person has access to Torah, but we also study in community. How do we balance individual insight with collective wisdom?
- What do you gain from studying with others that you can't get alone?
- How do we create communities that encourage both personal growth and shared understanding?

Parsha: Vayelech (Deuteronomy 31:1-30)

Topics Discussed: Predicting failure, divine foreknowledge, free will

Discussion Topics:

1. Expecting the Worst

- God and Moses predict that the people will fail and be punished. Is it helpful or harmful to expect people to make mistakes?
- How do we balance realistic expectations with encouraging people to do their best?
- What's the difference between preparing for difficulties and creating self-fulfilling prophecies?

2. Failure and Consequences

- The predicted exile did happen historically. How do we understand the relationship between choices and consequences?
- When bad things happen to communities or individuals, how much is due to their own actions versus external factors?
- How do we balance taking responsibility with avoiding victim-blaming?

3. Divine Knowledge and Human Choice

- If God knows the future, do people really have free will? How do you understand this paradox?
- What role does divine knowledge play in human responsibility?
- How do we maintain both humility about our limitations and commitment to making good choices?

Parsha: Ha'azinu (Deuteronomy 32:1-52)

Topics Discussed: Poetry and meaning, learning and growth, rain as metaphor

Discussion Topics:

1. Poetry and Truth

- This parsha is written as a poem rather than narrative. What can poetry express that prose cannot?
- How do metaphors and images help us understand complex ideas?
- What role do art and creativity play in transmitting important values?

2. Learning and Growth

- The authors reflect on how their conversation changed them. What does it mean to be a lifelong learner?
- How do we stay open to new perspectives while maintaining our core beliefs?
- What practices help you continue growing intellectually and spiritually?

3. Torah as Nourishment

- Torah is compared to rain that makes things grow. How do sacred texts and traditions nourish people and communities?
- What ideas or practices have been particularly nourishing for your own development?
- How do we share wisdom in ways that help others grow rather than just providing information?

Parsha: V'zot HaBracha (Deuteronomy 33:1-34:12)

Topics Discussed: Moses' death, unfulfilled dreams, leadership legacy

Discussion Topics:

1. Seeing the Promised Land

- Moses sees the land he'll never enter from Mount Nebo. How do we handle unfulfilled dreams and goals?
- What's the difference between failure and simply not completing everything we hoped to accomplish?
- How do we find meaning in working toward goals we may never achieve?

2. Leadership and Legacy

- Moses is called the greatest prophet, but also humble above all others. What makes someone truly great?
- How do we balance confidence in our abilities with humility about our limitations?
- What kind of legacy do you hope to leave through your life and work?

3. Breaking and Rebuilding

- Rashi ends the Torah by noting that Moses broke the tablets but was praised for it. When is destruction necessary for creation?
- How do we know when to preserve traditions and when to break with them?
- What does it mean to take responsibility for sacred traditions while also being willing to act decisively when necessary?

Reflection Questions for the Complete Journey

Personal Growth:

- How has your understanding of Torah, tradition, or Judaism changed through this study?
- What perspectives from the authors challenged your thinking most significantly?
- Which discussions helped you clarify your own beliefs and values?

Dialogue and Difference:

- What did you learn about engaging respectfully with people who hold different views?

- How can communities include people with varying levels of observance and belief?
- What makes dialogue productive versus destructive when people disagree?

Text and Interpretation:

- How should we approach ancient texts that sometimes conflict with contemporary values?
- What's the relationship between traditional interpretation and personal understanding?
- How do we balance reverence for sacred texts with honest engagement with their difficulties?

Community and Identity:

- What does it mean to be part of the Jewish people today?
- How do we balance particular Jewish identity with universal human values?
- What aspects of Jewish tradition and practice do you find most meaningful for your own life?