

YOUR *ESHET CHAYIL* NAVIGATOR

Begin by reading the central text out loud to yourself or to your study partner. Then, starting in the upper left-hand corner, delve into the surrounding commentary. Each highlighted phrase from *Eshet Chayil* is accompanied by both ancient and modern voices. If you choose, use the following questions as your guide.

Eshet Chayil

1. Upon first reading the excerpted verses from Proverbs 31:10-31, what do you learn about a woman of *chayil*?
2. Which of these characteristics, if any, strike you as particularly surprising, unrealistic, or compelling?
3. The phrase *eshet chayil* is often translated as either “a woman of valor” or “a capable wife.” Looking at the text box on the top of the page, examine *chayil*’s different meanings. How does this word’s flexibility affect your understanding of what *eshet chayil* means? Which meaning do you like the best?

Girds Herself with Strength

1. Often, Hebrew verbs have many different meanings. The Midrash considers all of the possibilities and will frequently give interpretations that reflect every one of these meanings. In the Talmudic commentary on Genesis 2:22, the verb *va-yiven* has been translated into its secondary meaning, “endowed with understanding,” rather than its primary meaning, “to construct” or “to fashion.” This is because *va-yiven* resonates with the Hebrew word for understanding, *binah*. What dimensions or nuances does the phrase “with understanding” add to the interpretation of this verse from Genesis?
2. What understanding of the Biblical text does Bobbie Rosenfeld’s comment about the “rib of Adam” suggest?
3. When the woman of *chayil* in Proverbs “girds herself with strength,” is she building up her mental or physical strength? Use the Talmud or Bobbie Rosenfeld to support your view.

Her Lamp Never Goes Out at Night

1. In what spheres is the woman of *chayil* active – family, community, career, etc? How do these commitments relate to her lamp being on all night long?
2. Genesis Rabbah speaks to the continuity of traditions between Isaac’s mother, Sarah, and his wife, Rebekah. What role does the lamp play in this text?
3. Justine Wise Polier makes a stark differentiation between her day job and the “most important” things that she took on at night, which included civic obligations, committees, fundraising for Israel, and family life as well. Examine the entire line in Proverbs, “She sees that her business thrives; her lamp never goes out at night.” How does Polier’s comment on multi-faceted lives connect to this verse?

Clothed with Strength and Splendor

1. What is splendid about Miriam's actions in the verses from Exodus?
2. How do Miriam and the other Israelite women exhibit strength in these verses?
3. How is Bella Abzug's vision of women's strength similar to or different from Miriam's?

Her Mouth is Full of Wisdom

1. The Talmudic tradition reveres the words of its rabbis; as there were no female rabbis at the time, few women's voices are recorded in its volumes. Why, then, do you think the rabbis included this feisty exchange wherein Beruriah challenges her husband's judgment?
2. What kind of wisdom does Beruriah exhibit here? On what does she rely for her authority?
3. What do Weil's words suggest about the nature of wisdom?

Let Her Works Praise Her in the Gates

1. Both of these texts allude to the way in which a woman's individual thoughts and deeds – her “works” – can become a praiseworthy legacy. In your view, are all of the “works” detailed in the *Eshet Chayil* excerpt praiseworthy? What “works” would you add or remove?
2. Look at the Talmud quote. What is laudable about having a mind of one's own? Do you think that the *Eshet Chayil* text allows for individuality, advocates a particular model for female behavior, or finds a way to do both?
3. How does Gertrude Elion perceive the legacy that will “praise her in the gates”?

Final Questions

1. What causes mattered to the women of *chayil* featured in this text study? What passions did they pursue?
2. Just as *chayil* can range widely in meaning depending on context, so too can each reader of Proverbs 31:10-31 bring different interpretations to the language and concepts therein. Think back to your initial reaction to *Eshet Chayil*. How have the ancient and modern voices included in this Talmud page changed your initial understanding of this text?
3. When the feminist movement was in its infancy, would these verses from Proverbs have been received in a certain way? How do you think this reception is different today?
4. Why do you think that contemporary Jewish communities could still connect to or value this text?