

The Pen is Mightier than the Sword: Creative Writing with Kings and Prophets

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A four-part project that is based around creative writing with some tips for performance.

The project will explore techniques on how to learn and interpret the Books of Kings and early Prophets

Part One: Prose and the Prophet (Samuel)

Part Two: Poetry and the Prophetess (Deborah and Yael)

Part Three: Scripting Nathan

Part Four: Bookclub!

This project will use contemporary creative writing techniques as a way to explore and engage with traditional Jewish and Israeli sources.

Resources

You will need the following resources:

- Pens and Paper*
- Tanach (Bible) in Hebrew and English/your language*
- **Enthusiasm and creativity!***

Part One: Prose and the Prophet

'I have to start to write to have ideas'

Françoise Sagan

"I don't like to boast - I know I boast a bit when I say I don't have to boast - **but I honestly think I've got the best story in the Bible.** Where's the competition? Job? Forget him. Genesis? The cosmology is for kids, an old-wives' tale, a fey fantasy spun by a nodding grandmother already dozing off into satisfied boredom. **Old Sarah's fun - she laughs and lied to God, and I still get a big treat out of that.** Sarah is almost real in her generous, high-spirited good nature and rivalrous female jealousy, and Abraham, of course, is ever up to the mark, obedient, fair, judicious, and brave, always the perfect gentleman and intelligent patriarch. **But where's the action once you get past Isaac and Hagar?** Jacob stands up as a narrative in a primitive way, and Joseph is pretty lively as the pampered, late-born bratty favourite of his dotting father.

But he drops out kind of suddenly as a grown-up, doesn't he?

...Now **Moses isn't bad**, I have to admit, but he's very, very long, and there's a crying need for variation after the exodus from Egypt. The story goes on and on with all those laws. Who could listen to so many laws, even in forty years? Go remember them. Who could write them down? When did he have time for anything else? And he had to pass them on. Keep in mind that **Moses was slow of speech.** No wonder it took so long. Michaelangelo made statues of us both. **The one of Moses is better. Mine doesn't look like me at all. Moses has the Ten Commandments, it's true, but I've got much better lines.** I've got the poetry and passion, savage violence and the plain raw civilising grief of human heartbreak...My psalms last.'

God Knows p5



There is a wide ranging history of Jewish literature that uses the Torah, Prophets and Writings (Tanach) as the basis for its inspiration. This project has been prepared for students who are slightly older, but all of the exercises can be modified for younger students as well.

1. Begin by discussing the notion of Biblical dramas, novels and poems.

- Ask who has read a biblically-inspired book? Has anybody read *The Red Tent*?
- Has anybody seen a biblically-inspired film such as *The Prince of Egypt*?
- ¿Y poesía basada en la Biblia, como *Sansón Agonistes*, de Milton?

During the course of this project, we will be learning some traditional source material and using creative writing techniques to guide our responses. By the end of the project, everybody will have a small portfolio of their own written work that can be shared with family and friends.

2. As a group, read through the excerpt from the novel *God Knows*, which was written by the novelist Joseph Heller. It is narrated by the elderly King David, and Heller's version of the character shows somebody who is quite cynical and quite self-confident.

- Who knows anything about the story of King David?
- What do we learn about his life through this passage?
- What do we learn about other Biblical characters through his comments?
- What do you think the author is trying to achieve here? Is this an educational piece or an entertaining piece?
- Is there anything wrong with being creative around religious material?

3. Creative Writing Exercise 1. We are now going to do a writing exercise that is a 'warm up', to get people started.

- I. Write down three sounds that you can hear and three things that you can see. Then make a list of all the things you associate with those sounds. An air-conditioning unit might remind you of a holiday, a loud car might remind you of being woken up in the morning by traffic, an aeroplane might remind you of your summer holiday to London.
- II. Make a list of five things that King David might be able to see and hear in the last section of his life. They can be simple, such a palace wall, a sheep, a princess or a crown.
- III. Make a list of some of the things that he might be able to smell.



A good piece of fiction will stimulate the senses of the reader and it is important for a writer to make these descriptions as rich, varied and specific as possible.

4. We know that Midrashim are rabbinic stories, but here is a more specific view;

What are Midrashim?

"The usual English rendition for Midrashim as 'legends,' 'fables' or 'tales' is not only inadequate, it is, in fact, misleading.

The term 'Midrashim' is derived from the Hebrew root word *darash* which means to search, to investigate. The Midrash, then, is an exposition of the *passukim* (verses) of the Torah which was derived by our Sages after they had probed into the depths of each *passuk* (verse) and all the words and letters thereof in search of its true inner meaning."

The *Midrash Says: The Book of Beraishis* by Rabbi Moshe Weissman
(Bnei Yakov Publications: New York, 1980), p viii

We are going to be using Rabbi Weissman's definition of *searching* and *investigating* through our process.

5. Creative Writing Exercise 2:

You are going to write a page about each of the following topics, but don't allow any distractions, don't think too much and don't try to make sense! The important thing is get the pen flowing and sparking some ideas and memories.

- I. Eagles
- II. Noah's Ark
- III. Fireworks
- IV. The City of Jerusalem
- V. Weapons

Take a look at what you have written and see what thoughts and images have been produced.

"These leaps sideways - the moments in which you take yourself by surprise - these are the moments to capitalise on. These are the ones that make the rest of writing worthwhile, because they remind you that no one else could have made the connection that you just have in quite that way. Allow your pen to wander, just now, on this range of subjects. Spend time afterwards on seeing what associations and connections you have made....It's endless. There's an awful lot of ready-made material inside that you haven't even started to tap".

Paul Magrs (The Creative Writing Coursebook)

6. Learning and Writing (Exercise No. 3).

As a group, read through **Chapter 16 in the Book of Samuel**. Samuel is the senior prophet but he is no longer speaking with King Saul, and believes that God has commanded him to go and find a new King. He meets the young David, and prepares him for the kingship without Saul knowing about it. **Once you have read, learned and discussed the story, encourage everybody to write their own version of the events as if they were Samuel, David or King Saul.**

Part Two: Poetry and the Prophetess

Samson Agonistes

THE ARGUMENT

Samson made Captive, Blind, and now in the Prison at Gaza, there to labour as in a common work-house, on a Festival day, in the general cessation from labour, comes forth into the open Air, to a place nigh, somewhat retir'd there to sit a while and bemoan his condition. Where he happens at length to be visited by certain friends and equals of his tribe, which make the Chorus, who seek to comfort him what they can; then by his old Father Manoa, who endeavours the like, and withal tells him his purpose to procure his liberty by ransom; lastly, that this Feast was proclaim'd by the Philistins as a day of Thanksgiving for thir deliverance from the hands of Samson, which yet more troubles him. Manoa then departs to prosecute his endeavour with the Philistian Lords for Samson's redemption; who in the mean while is visited by other persons; and lastly by a publick Officer to require his coming to the Feast before the Lords and People, to play or shew his strength in thir presence; he at first refuses, dismissing the publick Officer with absolute denyal to come; at length perswad-ed inwardly that this was from God, he yields to go along with him, who came now the second time with great threatnings to fetch him; the Chorus yet remaining on the place, Manoa returns full of joyful hope, to procure e're long his Sons deliverance: in the midst of which discourse an Ebrew comes in haste confusedly at first; and afterward more distinctly relating the Catastrophe, what Samson had done to the Philistins, and by accident to himself; wherewith the Tragedy ends.

SAMSON AGONISTES by John Milton (first published in 1671)



The Hebrew Bible has been a source of inspiration for many generations and this excerpt is from John Milton's poem *Samson Agonistes* which retells the story of the Book of Judges, Chapters 13-16. This excerpt is taken from the original, which is written in an older form of the English language.

"It [poetry] creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration"

A Defence of Poetry by Shelley

1. We are going to try some exercises in using objects to prompt poetic responses.

- a. Bring to your group a selection of random objects from your home, such as a candlestick, loaf of bread, light bulb, hat, corckscrew. Ask everybody to close their eyes before you reveal the object, and ask them to see if they can describe it from touching it, without saying the actual name of the object. Touch is an important sense that we often forget. Then try and explore the object with other senses; does it make any sound? Does it have a smell?
- b. Ask everybody to make some notes on their objects and see if they can also write down any memories that are suddenly triggered by the object. At this time, nobody should think of trying to write 'poetry'. This is still a developmental stage.
- c. Ask everyone to read out their notes, to see what is there. As this goes on, people will be re-imagining their object in different ways, and the external objects can lead to different kinds of emotional journeys.

2. Take your group on a short walk outside, or to the nearest window. Ask them, in pairs, to choose something from the natural world that they see every single day but encourage them to look at it from a fresh perspective. Is it possible that something very familiar to us suddenly appear to be quite different?

3. Talk about how good writing packs a lot into a small space.

- a. Imagine a destination near or far from home, whether you liked the place or not. Imagine the picture postcard that you'd probably send from there if you were able to.
- b. Get a clear image of the picture in your mind. It could be a postcard with several views or pictures.
- c. Make short descriptive notes. Imagine yourself in that place.
- d. Now imagine/remember how you feel there; feelings about where you are or about what you've left behind.
- e. Finally, decide on the person to whom you'd most like to send the postcard, such as mum, grandfather, sister, boyfriend, girlfriend, best friend, worst enemy or even an imaginary person.
- f. Turn the 'postcard' over. Choose words carefully, to say just what you want to say to them, and write it.

4. We are now going to look at the characters of Deborah and Yael, from Chapter Four of the Book of Judges (verses 1-24);

NARRATOR: And the children of Israel continued to do that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord and Ehud was dead. And the Lord gave them over into the hand of Yavin, the king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor, and the chieftain of his army was Sisera, who dwelt in Harosheth-goiim. And the children of Israel cried to the Lord:

CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: He has nine hundred iron chariots and he oppressed us mightily for twenty years!

NARRATOR: Now Deborah, a woman prophetess, was the wife of Lappidoth. She judged Israel at that time. And she sat under the palm tree of Deborah, between Ramah and Beth-el, in the mountain of Ephraim. The children of Israel came up to her for judgment.

DEBORAH: Send for Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedesh-naphtali. Indeed the Lord God of Israel commanded

GOD: Go and draw toward Mount Tabor and take with you ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun. And at the brook of Kishon, I shall draw to you to Sisera, the chieftain of Yavin's army, with his chariots and his multitude, and I will give him into your hand."

NARRATOR: And Barak said to her:

BARAK: If you will go with me then I shall go, but if you will not go with me, I shall not go!

DEBORAH: I shall surely go with you, but your glory will not be on the way which you go, for into the hand of a woman will the Lord deliver Sisera.

NARRATOR: And Deborah arose and went with Barak to Kedesh. And Barak gathered Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh, and ten thousand men went up at his feet, and Deborah went up with him.

Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites of the children of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses, and he pitched his tent as far as Elon-bezaananim which is by Kedesh. And they told Sisera that Barak - the son of Abinoam - had gone up to Mount Tabor. And Sisera gathered all his chariots (nine hundred iron chariots) and all the people that were with him from Harosheth-goiim to the brook Kishon. And Deborah said to Barak:

DEBORAH:

Rise, for this is the day which the Lord has given Sisera into your hand. Did not the Lord go out before you?

NARRATOR:

And Barak went down from Mount Tabor with ten thousand men after him. And the Lord confused Sisera and all the chariots and all of the camp with the edge of the sword before Barak, and Sisera alighted from his chariot and fled on foot.

And Barak pursued the chariots and the camp to Harosheth-goiim and all of Sisera's camp fell by the edge of the sword; not even one was left. And Sisera fled on foot to the tent of Yael the wife of Heber the Kenite for there was peace between Yavin the king of Hazor and the house of Heber the Kenite. And Yael went out to meet Sisera:

YAEL:

Turn in, my lord, turn in to me. Fear not.

NARRATOR:

And he turned in to her into the tent and she covered him with a garment. And he said to her

SISERA:

Give me now a little water to drink, for I am thirsty.

NARRATOR:

And she opened the flask of milk and gave him to drink, and covered him. And he said to her:

SÍSERA:

Stand in the doorway of the tent and it shall be if any man comes and asks you and says: Is a man here? then you shall say "There is not"

NARRATOR:

And Yael the wife of Heber took the tent-pin and placed the hammer in her hand and came to him stealthily and thrust the pin into his head and it pierced through into the ground. He was in a deep sleep and weary, and he died.

Barak pursued Sisera, and Yael came out to meet him and she said to him:

YAEL:

Come and I will show you the man whom you seek

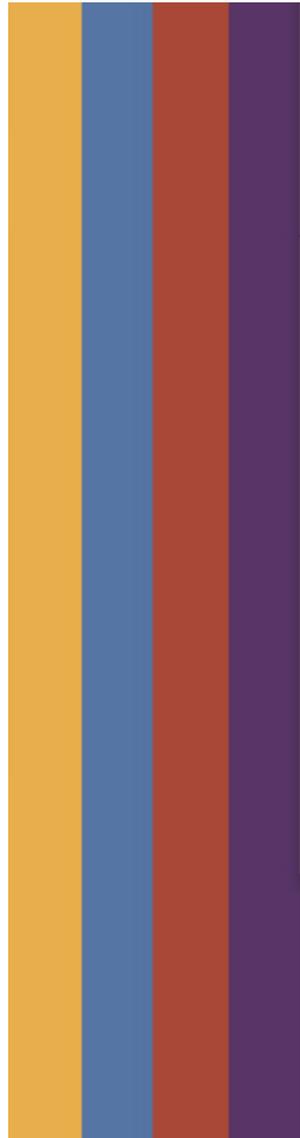
NARRATOR:

And he came to her and Sisera lay dead. The pin was in his temple. And God subdued on that day Yavin the king of Canaan before the children of Israel. And the hand of the children of Israel prevailed constantly harder against Yavin the king of Canaan until they had destroyed Yavin, king of Canaan. And the land reed forty years.



5. Creative Writing - longer exercise

Now imagine that you are either Deborah, Yael or Barak and you are writing a letter to a friend. Your letter needs to use the 'postcard' rules, and this way we should see some good poems emerge as a result. The important thing to note with poetry is that it doesn't have to rhyme, but it does have to tell the truth! Try to be as imaginative as possible whilst being as accurate as possible to the emotions the characters are experiencing in the story.



Part Three: Scripting Nathan

"It is in our nature to dramatize. At least once a day we reinterpret the weather - an essentially impersonal phenomenon - into an expression of our current view of the universe: "great. It's raining. Just when I'm blue. Isn't that just like life?"

Or we say: "I can't remember when it was this cold", in order to forge a bond with our contemporaries. Or we say: "When I was a lad the winters were longer", in order to avail ourselves of one of the delights of ageing.

The weather is impersonal, and we both understand it and exploit it as dramatic, i.e. having a plot, in order to understand its meaning for the hero, which is to say for ourselves"

Three Uses of the Knife by David Mamet, p3

1. Introduce today's theme, which is going to be dramatic writing. Discuss; what are the advantages of live theatre/performance (as opposed to video, DVDs and cinema?). How can live theatre engage in a different way?

Here are some potential answers;

Theatre is a live medium, subject to instant judgement. And when done well, an audience can be lifted. When done badly, it can be a truly painful (or at least excruciatingly boring) experience. So, why write for the theatre?

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| 1. ENTERTAINMENT | it's live, it's breathing, there's an energetic interaction with the audience. |
| 2. EXPLORING IDEAS: | whether philosophical or educational or mere debate, theatre is second to none for providing a platform for = literally - staging the interplay of ideas. |
| 3. SATISFACTION | it satisfies a personal need for the writer to write and for the audience to feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement. |
| 4. CHANGE: | Theatre - great theatre - can be an agent of social, personal, spiritual, political and societal change. |

2. Drama is all about conflict and watching how characters solve that conflict. Write a short scene, which is no longer than a couple of pages, where there are two people and one person wants to get a book from the second person. You can make up all of the details of the scene - who the people are, where they are, what their relationship is, what the book is, why the first character wants it, why the second has it and so forth.

3. Further discussion.

- a. Read everybody's scenes. Why is conflict so important here? How would the scenes have been different if the book had just been handed over straight away.
- b. Think of your favourite films. What has been the conflict there? Sometimes it is presented as a character's journey, for example, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo is trying to return a ring, but comes up against lots of difficulties. In the *Harry Potter* stories, we often see Harry trying to just stay alive, or uncover a mystery.
- c. What are the major stories of conflict in the Bible? What is Joseph trying to achieve? What is Moses trying to achieve?

4. Scripting Natan. Read through the following story, which tells how David met his future wife Bathsheba, got into trouble with the prophet Natan, lost a child, and how Bathsheba gave birth to the future King Solomon.

- a. Read the text together.
- b. In groups of five, try preparing a performance of the story, focusing on the conflicts that face David throughout. What is he trying to achieve? (ie to have a relationship with Bathsheba, to be a good king, to keep the baby alive). What is standing in his way? (ie Bathsheba's first husband Uriah, the fact that God is angry with David!).
- c. In your own time, after the session, encourage everybody to write a short play version of either this story or another biblical story where a character is trying to achieve something. You might want to write about one of the characters from the other session (ie Deborah or Yael) or different Biblical characters (Esther, Moses or Joshua).



2 Samuel Chapter 11

(א) וַיְהִי לְתַשׁוּבַת הַשָּׁנָה לָעֵת צֵאת הַמְּלָאכִים וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד אֶת יוֹאָב וְאֶת עֲבָדָיו עִמּוֹ וְאֶת כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּשְׁחָתוּ אֶת בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן וַיִּצְרוּ עַל רַבָּה וְדָוִד יוֹשֵׁב בִּירוּשָׁלַם

1. And it came to pass, at the return of the year, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried at Jerusalem. {S}

(ב) וַיְהִי לָעֵת הָעֶרֶב וַיָּקָם דָּוִד מֵעַל מִשְׁכְּבוֹ וַיִּתְהַדָּךְ עַל גַּג בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּרְא אִשָּׁה רֹחֶצֶת מֵעַל הַגָּג וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מְרֹאֵה מְאֹד:

2. And it came to pass at eventide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon.

(ג) וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד וַיִּדְרֹשׁ אֵת הָאִשָּׁה וַיֹּאמֶר הֲלוֹא זֶה אַתְּ בֵּת שִׁבְעָה בֵּת אֱלִיעֶזֶר אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲוִרְיָה הַחִתִּי:

3. And David sent and inquired after the woman. And one said: 'Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?'

(ד) וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד מַלְאָכִים וַיִּקְחֶהּ וַתָּבוֹא אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּהּ וְהָיָא מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת מִטִּמְאַתָּהּ וַתָּשָׁב אֶל בֵּיתָהּ:

4. And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness; and she returned unto her house.

(ה) וַתַּהַר הָאִשָּׁה וַתִּשְׁלַח וַתִּגַּד לְדָוִד וַתֹּאמֶר הִנֵּה אֲנִי כִי:

5. And the woman conceived; and she sent and told David, and said: 'I am with child.'

(ו) וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד אֶל יוֹאָב שֹׁלֵחַ אֶת אֲוִרְיָה הַחִתִּי וַיִּשְׁלַח יוֹאָב אֶת אֲוִרְיָה אֶל דָּוִד:

6. And David sent to Joab[, saying]: 'Send me Uriah the Hittite.' And Joab sent Uriah to David.

(ז) וַיָּבֹא אֲוִרְיָה אֵלָיו וַיִּשְׁאַל דָּוִד לְשָׁלוֹם יוֹאָב וְלְשָׁלוֹם הָעָם וְלְשָׁלוֹם הַמְּלָחָמָה:

7. And when Uriah was come unto him, David asked of him how Joab did, and how the people fared, and how the war prospered.

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד לְאֲוִרְיָה רֵד לְבֵיתְךָ וְרַחֵץ רַגְלֶיךָ וַיֵּצֵא אֲוִרְיָה מִבַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ וַתֵּצֵא אַחֲרָיו מִשָּׂאת הַמֶּלֶךְ:

8. And David said to Uriah: 'Go down to thy house, and wash thy feet.' And Uriah departed out of the king's house, and there followed him a mess of food from the king.

(ט) וַיִּשְׁכַּב אֹרִיָּה פֶתַח בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת כָּל עֲבָדָיו
אֲדָנָיו וְלֹא יָרַד אֶל בֵּיתוֹ.

9. But Uriah slept at the door of the king's house with all the servants of his lord, and went not down to his house.

(י) וַיִּגְדּוּ לְדָוִד לֵאמֹר לֹא יָרַד אֹרִיָּה אֶל בֵּיתוֹ
וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל אֹרִיָּה הֲלוֹא מְדַרְגָּךְ אַתָּה בָּא מִדְּוַע
לֹא יָרַדְתָּ אֶל בֵּיתְךָ

10. And when they had told David, saying: 'Uriah went not down unto his house', David said unto Uriah: 'Art thou not come from a journey? wherefore didst thou not go down unto thy house?'

(יא) וַיֹּאמֶר אֹרִיָּה אֶל דָּוִד הָאָרוֹן וְיִשְׂרָאֵל וְיְהוּדָה
יֹשְׁבִים בְּסֻכּוֹת וְאֲדָנָי יוֹאָב וְעֲבָדָי אֲדָנָי עַל פְּנֵי
הַשָּׂדֶה הַחַיִּים וְאֲנִי אָבוֹא אֶל בֵּיתִי לֶאֱכֹל וּלְשָׁתוֹת
וּלְשָׁכַב עִם אִשְׁתִּי הֲיֵכֶּךָ וְחֵי נַפְשְׁךָ אִם אֲעֲשֶׂה אֶת
הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה.

11. And Uriah said unto David: 'The ark, and Israel, and Judah, abide in booths; and my lord Joab, and the servants of my lord, are encamped in the open field; shall I then go into my house, to eat and to drink, and to lie with my wife? as thou livest, and as thy soul liveth, I will not do this thing.'

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל אֹרִיָּה שֵׁב בְּזֶה גַם הַיּוֹם וּמָחָר
אֲשַׁלְּחֶךָ וַיֵּשֶׁב אֹרִיָּה בִירוּשָׁלַם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא
מִמָּחָרָת.

12. And David said to Uriah: 'Tarry here to-day also, and to-morrow I will let thee depart.' So Uriah abode in Jerusalem that day, and the morrow.

(יג) וַיִּקְרָא לוֹ דָּוִד וַיֹּאכַל לִפְנָיו וַיִּשְׁכְּרוּהוּ
וַיֵּצֵא בְּעָרֶב לְשָׁכַב בְּמִשְׁכְּבוֹ עִם עֲבָדָי אֲדָנָיו וְאֵל
בֵּיתוֹ לֹא יָרַד

13. And when David had called him, he did eat and drink before him; and he made him drunk; and at even he went out to lie on his bed with the servants of his lord, but went not down to his house.

(יד) וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וַיִּכְתֹּב דָּוִד סֵפֶר אֶל יוֹאָב וַיִּשְׁלַח
בְּיַד אֹרִיָּה.

14. And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

(טו) ויכתב בספר לאמר הִבּוּ אֶת אֹרִיָּה אֶל מוֹד
פְּנֵי הַמִּלְחָמָה הַחֲזָקָה וּשְׁבַתֶם מֵאַחֲרָיו וְנָפְהוּ
וּמָת.

15. And he wrote in the letter, saying: 'Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten, and die.' {S}

(טז) ויהי בשמור יואב אל העיר ויתן את אוריה
אל המקום אשר ידע כי אנשי היל שם

16. And it came to pass, when Joab kept watch upon the city, that he assigned Uriah unto the place where he knew that valiant men were.

(יז) ויצאו אנשי העיר וילחמו את יואב ויפל לן
העם מעבדי דוד וימת גם אוריה החתי.

17. And the men of the city went out, and fought with Joab; and there fell some of the people, even of the servants of David; and Uriah the Hittite died also.

(יח) וישלח יואב ויגד לדוד את כל דברי
המלחמה.

18. Then Joab sent and told David all the things concerning the war;

(יט) ויצו את המלאך לאמר ככלותך את כל
דברי המלחמה לדבר אל המלך.

19. and he charged the messenger, saying: 'When thou hast made an end of telling all the things concerning the war unto the king,

(כ) והיה אם תעלה חמת המלך ואמר לך מדוע
נגשתם אל העיר להלחם הלא ידעתם את אשר
י'רו מעל החומה.

20. it shall be that, if the king's wrath arise, and he say unto thee: Wherefore went ye so nigh unto the city to fight? knew ye not that they would shoot from the wall?

(כא) מי הכה את אבימלך בן ירבשת הלא אשה
השליכה עליו פלח רכב מעל החומה וימת בתבין
למה נגשתם אל החומה ואמרת גם עבדך אוריה
החתי מת.

21. who smote Abimelech the son of Jerubbesheth? did not a woman cast an upper millstone upon him from the wall, that he died at Thebez? why went ye so nigh the wall? then shalt thou say: Thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also.'

(כב) וַיֵּלֶךְ הַמֶּלֶאךָ וַיָּבֵא וַיִּגַּד לְדָוִד אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר
שָׁלְחוּ יוֹאָב.

22. So the messenger went, and came and told David all that Joab had sent him for.

(כג) וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶאךָ אֶל דָּוִד כִּי גִבְרוּ עָלֵינוּ
הָאֲנָשִׁים וַיֵּצְאוּ אֵלֵינוּ הַשָּׂדֵה וַנְהִיָּה עֲלֵיהֶם, עַד
פֶּתַח הַשַּׁעַ

23. And the messenger said unto David: The men prevailed against us, and came out unto us into the field, and we were upon them even unto the entrance of the gate.

(כד) וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּרְאוּ וַיִּרְאוּ קְרִי הַמּוֹרָאִים אֶל עֲבָדְךָ מֵעַל
הַחֹמָה, וַיָּמוּתוּ מֵעַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְגַם עֲבָדְךָ
אוּרִיָּה הַחִתִּי מֵת. {ס}

24. And the shooters shot at thy servants from off the wall; and some of the king's servants are dead, and thy servant Uriah the Hittite is dead also. {S}

(כה) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל הַמֶּלֶאךָ כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל יוֹאָב
אַל יִרַע בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֶת הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה כִּי כֹה וְכֹזֶה
תֵּאָכֵל הַחֶרֶב הַחֹזֵק מִלְחַמְתְּךָ אֶל הָעִיר וְהָרַסָּה
וְהַזְקֵהוּ.

25. Then David said unto the messenger: Thus shalt thou say unto Joab: Let not this thing displease thee, for the sword devoureth in one manner or another; make thy battle more strong against the city, and overthrow it; and encourage thou him.'

(כו) וַתִּשְׁמַע אִשְׁתׁ אֲוִרְיָה כִּי מֵת אֲוִרְיָה אִשָּׁה
וַתִּסְפַּד עַל בְּעָלָהּ.

26. And when the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband was dead, she made lamentation for her husband.

(כז) וַיַּעֲבֵר הָאֲבֵל וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד וַיֵּאֲסֹפָה אֶל בֵּיתוֹ
וַתְּהִי לוֹ לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לוֹ בֶן וַיִּרַע הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
דָּוִד בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה. {פ}

27. And when the mourning was past, David sent and took her home to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD. {P}

2 Samuel Chapter 12

(א) וַיִּשְׁלַח יְהוָה אֶת נָתָן אֶל דָּוִד וַיְבֹא אֵלָיו,
וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ שְׁנֵי אַנְשִׁים הָיוּ בְּעִיר אַחַת אֶחָד עֹשִׂיר
וְאֶחָד רָעִשׁ.

1. And the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him: 'There were two men in one city: the one rich, and the other poor.'

(ב) לְעֹשִׂיר הָיָה צֹאן וּבָקָר הַרְבֵּה מְאֹד:

2. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds;

(ג) וְלָרֵשׁ אֵין כֹּל כִּי אִם כְּבִשָּׂה אַחַת קָטְנָה אֲשֶׁר
קָנָה, וַיַּחֲנֶה, וַתִּגְדַּל עִמּוֹ וְעִם בְּנָיו יַחְדָּו מִפֶּתוֹ,
תֹּאכַל וּמִכּוֹסוֹ תִּשְׁתֶּה וּבִחְיקוֹ תִּשְׁכַּב, וַתְּהִי לוֹ
כַּבֵּת.

3. but the poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and reared; and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own morsel, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.'

(ד) וַיְבֹא אֶל הַלֵּךְ לְאִישׁ הָעֹשִׂיר וַיְחַמֵּל לִקְחַת
מִצֹּאֲנוֹ וּמִבָּקָרוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת לְאִישׁ רֵחַ, הֵבֵא לוֹ, וַיִּקַּח
אֶת כְּבִשַׁת הָאִישׁ, הָרֵעִשׁ, וַיַּעֲשֶׂהָ, לְאִישׁ הֵבֵא אֵלָיו

4. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him, but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.'

(ה) וַיִּחַר אַף דָּוִד בְּאִישׁ מֵאֹד וַיֹּאמֶר, אֵל נָתָן,
חַי יְהוָה כִּי בֶן מוֹת הָאִישׁ הַעֲשֵׂה זֶה אֶת

5. And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan: 'As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this deserveth to die;

(ו) וְאֶת הַכְּבִשָּׂה יִשְׁלַם אַרְבַּעַתַּיִם עֶקֶב אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה
אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וְעַל אֲשֶׁר לֹא חָמַל. {ס}

6. and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' {S}

(ז) וַיֹּאמֶר נָתָן אֶל דָּוִד אֲתָהּ הָאִישׁ {ס} כֹּה
אָמַר יְהוָה אֵל הַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי כִּי מִשְׁחַתִּיךָ לְמַלְכוֹ
עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי כִּי הִצַּלְתִּיךָ מִיַּד שָׂאוּל.

7. And Nathan said to David: 'Thou art the man. {S} Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel: I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul;

(ח) וְאֶתְּנָה לְךָ אֶת בַּיִת, אֶד נִיךְ וְאֶת נְשֵׁי אֶד נִיךְ
בְּחִיקְךָ, וְאֶתְּנָה לְךָ אֶת בַּיִת, יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיהוּדָה וְאִם
מֵעַט וְאִם סָפָה לְךָ כִּהְנֶה וְכִהְנֶה.

8. and I gave thee thy master's house, and thy master's wives into thy bosom, and gave thee the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that were too little, then would I add unto thee so much more.

(ט) מִדּוּעַ בִּזְיִית אֶת דְּבַר יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת הַרְעָה בְּעֵינַי
(בְּעֵינַי), אֶת אֹרִיָּה הַחִתִּי הִכִּיתָ בַּחֶרֶב וְאֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ
לְקַחְתָּ לְךָ לְאִשָּׁה וְאִתּוֹ הִרְגָתָ בַּחֶרֶב בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן.

9. Wherefore hast thou despised the word of the LORD, to do that which is evil in My sight? Uriah the Hittite thou hast smitten with the sword, and his wife thou hast taken to be thy wife, and him thou hast slain with the sword of the children of Ammon.

(י) וְעַתָּה לֹא תִסּוּר חֶרֶב מִבֵּיתְךָ עַד עוֹלָם עִקֵּב
כִּי בִזְתַּנִּי וְתָקַח אֶת אִשְׁתּוֹ אֹרִיָּה הַחִתִּי לְהִיּוֹת לְךָ
לְאִשָּׁה. {ס}

10. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from thy house; because thou hast despised Me, and hast taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be thy wife. {S}

(יא) כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הִנְנִי מִקִּים עָלֶיךָ רָעָה מִבֵּיתְךָ
וְלִקְחָתִי אֶת נְשֵׁיךָ לְעֵינֶיךָ וְנָתַתִּי לְרַעֲיָךָ וְשָׁכַב
עִם נְשֵׁיךָ לְעֵינֵי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ הַזֶּה אֵת.

11. Thus saith the LORD: Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun.

(יב) כִּי אֲתָה עָשִׂיתָ בְּסֵתֶר וְאֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה אֶת הַדְּבָר
הַזֶּה נֶגֶד כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנֶגֶד הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ. {ס}

12. For thou didst it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.' {S}

(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל נָתָן הֲטָאֲתִי
לְיְהוָה {ס} וַיֹּאמֶר נָתָן אֶל דָּוִד גַּם יְהוָה הֶעֱבִיר
חַטָּאתְךָ לֹא תָמוּת.

13. And David said unto Nathan: 'I have sinned against the LORD.' {S} And Nathan said unto David: 'The LORD also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die.

(יד) אָפֶס, כִּי נֵאֶזְתָּ אֶת אֲיֵבֵי יְהוָה, בַּדָּבָר
הַזֶּה גַם, הַבֵּן הַיֵּלֹד לְךָ מוֹת יָמוּת.

14. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast greatly blasphemed the enemies of the LORD, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die.'

(טו) וַיֵּלֶךְ נָתָן, אֶל בֵּיתוֹ וַיִּגַּף יְהוָה, אֶת הַיֵּלֹד אֲשֶׁר
יָלְדָה אִשְׁתֹּ אֹוּרִיָּה לְדָוִד וַיֵּאֲנֹשׁ.

15. And Nathan departed unto his house. And the LORD struck the child that Uriah's wife bore unto David, and it was very sick.

(טז) וַיִּבְקֹשׁ דָּוִד אֶת, הָאֱלֹהִים בְּעַד הַנֶּעַר וַיִּצַם דָּוִד
צוֹם, וּבָא וּלְוָן וּשְׁכַב אַרְצָה.

16. David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and as often as he went in, he lay all night upon the earth.

(יז) וַיִּקְמוּ זְקֵנֵי בֵיתוֹ עָלָיו לְהַקִּימוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ
וְלֹא אָבָה, וְלֹא בָרָא אִתָּם לֶחֶם.

17. Y los ancianos de su casa se pusieron en derredor de él, para alzarle de la tierra, mas él no quiso, ni comió pan con ellos.

(יח) וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, וַיָּמָת הַיֵּלֹד וַיִּרְאוּ עֲבָדֵי דָוִד
לְהַגִּיד לוֹ כִּי מָת הַיֵּלֹד, כִּי אָמְרוּ הִנֵּה בַהֲיוֹת הַיֵּלֹד
הִי דִבַּרְנוּ אֵלָיו וְלֹא שָׁמַע בְּקוֹלֵנוּ, וַאֲיֶךְ נִאֶמֶר
אֵלָיו מָת הַיֵּלֹד, וְעֲשֵׂה רָעָה.

18. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead; for they said: 'Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spoke unto him, and he hearkened not unto our voice; how then shall we tell him that the child is dead, so that he do himself some harm?'

(יט) וַיִּרְא דָּוִד כִּי עֲבָדָיו מְתַלַּחְשִׁים וַיְבִן דָּוִד כִּי
מָת הַיֵּלֹד וַיֵּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל עֲבָדָיו הֲמָת הַיֵּלֹד,
וַיֵּאמְרוּ מָת.

19. But when David saw that his servants whispered together, David perceived that the child was dead; and David said unto his servants: 'Is the child dead?' And they said: 'He is dead.'

(כ) וַיָּקָם דָּוִד מִהָאָרֶץ וַיִּרְחֹץ וַיִּסֹּךְ, וַיַּחֲלֹף שִׁמְלָתוֹ שִׁמְלָה,
וַיָּבֵא בֵית יְהוָה, וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה וַיִּבֹּא אֶל, בֵּיתוֹ וַיִּשְׁאַל,
וַיִּשְׁימוּ לוֹ לֶחֶם וַיֵּאֱכַל.

20. Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel; and he came into the house of the LORD, and worshipped; then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat.

(כא) וַיֹּאמְרוּ עֲבָדָיו אֵלָיו, מָה הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתָהּ, בְּעֵבֹר הַיֶּלֶד חַי, צָמַתְתָּ וַתִּבְכֶּה וְכַאֲשֶׁר מָת הַיֶּלֶד, קָמַתְתָּ וַתֹּאכַל לֶחֶם.

21. Then said his servants unto him: 'What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread.'

(כב) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּעוֹד הַיֶּלֶד חַי, צָמַתִּי וָאֲבָכָה כִּי אֲמַרְתִּי מִי יוֹדֵעַ, יַחַנְנִי (וַחַנְנִי) יְהוָה וְחַי הַיֶּלֶד.

22. And he said: 'While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept; for I said: Who knoweth whether the LORD will not be gracious to me, that the child may live?

(כג) וְעַתָּה מָת לָמָּה זֶה אֲנִי צֹם הַאוֹכֵל לְהַשִּׁיבוֹ, עוֹד אֲנִי הֲלֹךְ אֵלָיו, וְהוּא לֹא יָשׁוּב אֵלַי.

23. But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.'

(כד) וַיִּנְחֵם דָּוִד אֶת בַּת שֶׁבַע אִשְׁתּוֹ וַיֵּב אֶלֶיהָ, וַיִּשְׁכַּב עִמָּה: וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן, וַיִּקְרָא (וַתִּקְרָא) אֶת שְׁמוֹ שֶׁל מֶה וַיְהִי שֵׁם אֹהֵבוֹ.

24. And David comforted Bath-sheba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and called his name Solomon. And the LORD loved him;

Part Four: Bookclub

A great activity is to run a book club, where everybody has a month to read the same novel and then you get together and discuss your reading experiences.

WHY? The beauty of creating a Book Club is that it allows everybody to enjoy the literature they are reading, away from the usual context of marked essays and examinations that we all used to have in school. The purpose of the club is to enjoy the reading, to reflect on individual responses and experiences and to share it as part of a conversation with friends and colleagues. There are no right or wrong answers when it comes to Book Club, because it is all about participation.

WHERE? Your Book Club can be held in a community centre, restaurant, pub, park, somebody's lounge - anywhere that a good atmosphere can be created and people can feel relaxed. It can be done as part of a dinner, or around drinks (alcoholic or hot drinks), and the important thing is that people enjoy themselves whilst having the opportunity to reflect on what they have just read.

MEANING? This Jewish Book Club is designed as a way to connect to Jewish topics and materials and can even be run on a shabbat afternoon or as part of a community weekend. It is a chance to look at a book which has Jewish content and allow people to find their own Jewish expression as a result.

POSSIBILITIES? The possibilities are immense. Jews have been writing creative literature around Torah themes for thousands of years, and the rabbinic midrashim are early examples of this. If you build in the possibility of getting people to write their own creative responses to some Biblical text that you have learnt, you may well discover some writing talent, and teach the valuable lesson that our Jewish heritage has immense creative potential!

Why not try it with a biblically-inspired novel such as *The Red Tent*? There is a small excerpt from the novel here and you can download a longer version from www.book-browse.com or buy copies from your local bookshop. Other books you might choose to discuss are Joseph Heller's *God Knows* or Thomas Mann's *Joseph in Egypt*.

Synopsis

The Red Tent tells the little-known Biblical story of Dinah, daughter of the patriarch Jacob and his wife, Leah. In Chapter 34 of the Book of Genesis, Dinah's tale is a short, horrific detour in the familiar narrative of Jacob and Joseph.

Anita Diamant imaginatively tells the story from the fresh perspective of its women. It is very important to note that although she starts with the Biblical tale, in which Dinah is given no voice, everything is different in Diamant's version. Diamant does make up some information about customs which aren't true, and this is just a piece of fiction, but it raises some important questions.

Readers of *The Red Tent* will view the Book of Genesis in a new light and these questions can help spur creative discussions. Begin with the initial question: **When it comes to adaptations of Biblical work, does it matter if people make up new information? Salman Rushdie got into huge problems when he wrote stories that were creative rewrites of traditional Islamic texts, but is there a problem from a Jewish perspective?**

Discussion Questions

1. Read Genesis 34 and discuss how *The Red Tent* changes your perspective on Dinah's story and also on the story of Joseph that follows. Does *The Red Tent* raise questions about other women in the Bible? Does it make you want to re-read the Bible and imagine other untold stories that lay hidden between the lines?
2. Discuss the marital dynamics of Jacob's family. He has four wives; compare his relationship with each woman?
3. What do you make of the relationships among the four wives?
4. Dinah is rich in "mothers." Discuss the differences or similarities in her relationship with each woman.
5. Childbearing and childbirth are central to *The Red Tent*. How do the fertility childbearing and birthing practices differ from contemporary life? How are they similar? How do they compare with your own experiences as a mother or father?
6. Discuss Jacob's role as a father. Does he treat Dinah differently from his sons? Does he feel differently about her? If so, how?
7. Discuss Dinah's twelve brothers. Discuss their relationships with each other, with Dinah, and with Jacob and his four wives. Are they a close family?



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8. Female relationships figure largely in *The Red Tent*. Discuss the importance of Inna, Tabea, Werenro, and Meryt.
 9. In the novel, Rebecca is presented as an Oracle. Goddesses are venerated along with gods. What do you think of this culture, in which the Feminine has not yet been totally divorced from the Divine? How does El, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, fit into this?
 10. Dinah's point of view is often one of an outsider, an observer. What effect does this have on the narrative? What effect does this have on the reader?
 11. The book travels from Haran (contemporary Iraq/Syria), through Canaan and into Shechem (Israel), and into Egypt. What strikes you about the cultural differences Dinah encounters vis-à-vis food, clothing, work, and male-female relationships.
 12. . In *The Red Tent*, we see Dinah grow from childhood to old age. Discuss how she changes and matures. What lessons does she learn from life? If you had to pick a single word to describe the sum of her life, what word would you choose? How would Dinah describe her own life experience?

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Prologue

We have been lost to each other for so long.

My name means nothing to you. My memory is dust.

This is not your fault, or mine. The chain connecting mother to daughter was broken and the word passed to the keeping of men, who had no way of knowing. That is why I became a footnote, my story a brief detour between the well-known history of my father, Jacob, and the celebrated chronicle of Joseph, my brother. On those rare occasions when I was remembered, it was as a victim. Near the beginning of your holy book, there is a passage that seems to say I was raped and continues with the bloody tale of how my honor was avenged.

It's a wonder that any mother ever called a daughter Dinah again. But some did. Maybe you guessed that there was more to me than the voiceless cipher in the text. Maybe you heard it in the music of my name: the first vowel high and clear, as when a mother calls to her child at dusk; the second sound soft, for whispering secrets on pillows. Dee-nah.

No one recalled my skill as a midwife, or the songs I sang, or the bread I baked for my insatiable brothers. Nothing remained except a few mangled details about those weeks in Shechem.

There was far more to tell. Had I been asked to speak of it, I would have begun with the story of the generation that raised me, which is the only place to begin. If you want to understand any woman you must first ask about her mother and then listen carefully. Stories about food show a strong connection. Wistful silences demonstrate unfinished business. The more a daughter knows the details of her mother's life - without flinching or whining - the stronger the daughter.



Of course, this is more complicated for me because I had four mothers, each of them scolding, teaching, and cherishing something different about me, giving me different gifts, cursing me with different fears. Leah gave me birth and her splendid arrogance. Rachel showed me where to place the midwife's bricks and how to fix my hair. Zilpah made me think. Bilhah listened. No two of my mothers seasoned her stew the same way. No two of them spoke to my father in the same tone of voice - nor he to them. And you should know that my mothers were sisters as well, Laban's daughters by different wives, though my grandfather never acknowledged Zilpah and Bilhah; that would have cost him two more dowries, and he was a stingy pig.

Like any sisters who live together and share a husband, my mother and aunties spun a sticky web of loyalties and grudges. They traded secrets like bracelets, and these were handed down to me, the only surviving girl. They told me things I was too young to hear. They held my face between their hands and made me swear to remember.

My mothers were proud to give my father so many sons. Sons were a woman's pride and her measure. But the birth of one boy after another was not an unalloyed source of joy in the women's tents. My father boasted about his noisy tribe, and the women loved my brothers, but they longed for daughters, too, and complained among themselves about the maleness of Jacob's seed.

Daughters eased their mothers' burdens - helping with the spinning, the grinding of grain, and the endless task of looking after baby boys, who were forever peeing into the corners of the tents, no matter what you told them.

But the other reason women wanted daughters was to keep their memories alive. Sons did not hear their mothers' stories after weaning. So I was the one. My mother and my mother-aunties told me endless stories about themselves. No matter what their hands were doing - holding babies, cooking, spinning, weaving - they filled my ears.

In the ruddy shade of the red tent, the menstrual tent, they ran their fingers through my curls, repeating the escapades of their youths, the sagas of their childbirths. Their stories were like offerings of hope and strength poured out before the Queen of Heaven, only these gifts were not for any god or goddess - but for me.

I can still feel how my mothers loved me. I have cherished their love always. It sustained me. It kept me alive. Even after I left them, and even now, so long after their deaths, I am comforted by their memory.

I carried my mothers' tales into the next generation, but the stories of my life were forbidden to me, and that silence nearly killed the heart in me. I did not die but lived long enough for other stories to fill up my days and nights. I watched babies open their eyes upon a new world. I found cause for laughter and gratitude. I was loved.

And now you come to me - women with hands and feet as soft as a queen's, with more cooking pots than you need, so safe in child-bed and so free with your tongues. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them.

I wish I had more to tell of my grandmothers. It is terrible how much has been forgotten, which is why, I suppose, remembering seems a holy thing.

I am so grateful that you have come. I will pour out everything inside me so you may leave this table satisfied and fortified. Blessings on your eyes. Blessings on your children. Blessings on the ground beneath you. My heart is a ladle of sweet water, brimming over.



Selah.

Part One: My Mothers' Stories

Chapter One

Their stories began with the day that my father appeared. Rachel came running into camp, knees flying, bellowing like a calf separated from its mother. But before anyone could scold her for acting like a wild boy, she launched into a breathless yarn about a stranger at the well, her words spilling out like water into sand.

A wild man without sandals. Matted hair. Dirty face. He kissed her on the mouth, a cousin, son of their aunt, who had watered sheep and goats for her and told off the ruffians at the well.

"What are you babbling?" demanded her father, Laban. "Who is come to the well? Who attends him? How many bags does he carry?"

"He is going to marry me," said Rachel matter-of-factly, once she had caught her breath. "He says I am for him and that he would marry me tomorrow, if he could. He's coming to ask you."

Leah scowled at this announcement. "Marry you?" she said, crossing her arms and throwing back her shoulders. "You won't be marriageable for another year," said the older girl, who, though only a few years older than Rachel, already acted as head woman of her father's small holdings. The fourteen-year-old mistress of Laban's house liked to take a haughty, maternal tone with her sister. "What's all this? And how did he come to kiss you?" This was a terrible breach of custom - even if he was a cousin and even though Rachel was young enough to be treated as a child.

Rachel stuck out her lower lip in a pout that would have been childlike only a few hours earlier. Something had happened since she opened her eyes that morning, when the most pressing matter on her mind had been to find the place where Leah hid her honey. Leah, that donkey, would never share it with her, but hoarded it for guests, giving tastes to pathetic little Bilhah and no one else.

All Rachel could think of now was the shaggy stranger whose eyes had met hers with a shock of recognition that had rattled her to the bone.

Rachel knew what Leah meant, but the fact that she had not yet begun to bleed meant nothing to her now. And her cheeks burned.

"What's this?" said Leah, suddenly amused. "She is smitten. Look at her," she said. "Have you ever seen the girl blush before?"

"What did he do to you?" asked Laban, growling like a dog who senses an intruder near his herd. He clenched his fists and beetled his brow and turned his full attention to Rachel, the daughter he had never once hit, the daughter whom he rarely looked at full in the face. She had frightened him from her birth - a tearing, violent entry that had killed her mother. When the baby finally emerged, the women were shocked to see that it was such a small one - a girl at that - who had caused so many days of trouble, costing her mother so much blood and finally her life.

Rachel's presence was powerful as the moon, and just as beautiful. Nobody could deny her beauty. Even as a child who worshiped my own mother's face, I knew that Leah's beauty paled before her younger sister's, a knowledge that always made me feel like a traitor. Still, denying it would have been like denying the sun's warmth.

Rachel's beauty was rare and arresting. Her brown hair shaded to bronze, and her skin was golden, honeyed, perfect. In that amber setting, her eyes were surprisingly dark, not merely dark brown but black as polished obsidian or the depth of a well. Although she was small-boned and, even when she was with child, small-breasted, she had muscular hands and a husky voice that seemed to belong to a much larger woman.



once heard two shepherds arguing over which was Rachel's best feature, a game I, too, had played. For me, the most wonderful detail of Rachel's perfection was her cheeks, which were high and tight on her face, like figs. When I was a baby, I used to reach for them, trying to pluck the fruit that appeared when she smiled. When I realized there was no having them, I licked her instead, hoping for a taste. This made my beautiful aunt laugh, from deep in her belly. She loved me better than all her nephews put together - or so she said as she wove my hair into the elaborate braids for which my own mother's hands lacked patience or time.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the dimensions of Rachel's beauty. Even as a baby, she was a jewel upon whatever hip bore her from place to place, an ornament, a rare pleasure - the black-eyed child with golden hair. Her nickname was Tuki, which means "sweetness."

All the woman shared in Rachel's care after her mother, Huna, died. Huna was a skilled midwife known for her throaty laugh and much mourned by the women. No one grumbled about tending to Huna's motherless daughter, and even the men, for whom babies held as little fascination as cooking stones, would stoop to run a callused hand across her remarkable cheek. They would rise, smelling their fingers and shaking their heads.

Rachel smelled like water. Really! Wherever my aunt walked, here was the scent of fresh water. It was an impossible smell, green and delightful and in those dusty hills the smell of life and wealth. Indeed, for many years Laban's well was the only reason his family hadn't starved.

There were hopes, early on, that Rachel would be a water witch, one who could find hidden wells and underground streams. She did not fulfill that hope, but somehow the aroma of sweet water clung to her skin and lodged in her robes. Whenever one of the babies went missing, more often than not the little stinker would be found fast asleep on her blankets, sucking his thumb.





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