

# THE LOST MATRIARCH

## A Book Group Discussion Guide

**The Lost Matriarch: Finding Leah in the Bible and Midrash** presents the life of the Matriarch Leah as recounted in the Bible. But because the Bible offers only a few hints about Leah, **The Lost Matriarch** calls upon the expansive insights of two thousand years of inventive rabbinic commentary and contemporary literary analysis of her story. The book integrates the biblical text with many disparate views and opinions, inviting individual readers to participate in the continuing process of discovering this heroic but generally overlooked character.

And while reading the book does not require consulting additional reference sources, I hope that many of you will want to further enhance your personal understandings of Leah and her family by exchanging insights with other readers, either informally with a few friends or in a book club session. The following questions cover many of the major episodes in Leah's life and some of the interpretive issues raised by those episodes. It certainly is not necessary to try to cover all of these issues in your conversations, but I hope that you might find some of the questions helpful for your discussions of **The Lost Matriarch**.

If your group comes up with additional questions that stimulate a good session, please let me know, and I'll share those questions in future editions of this book group discussion guide.

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### ***Questions for Your Discussion***

1. In the Bible, the first significant event of Jacob's arrival at Haran is his meeting the beautiful and shapely Rachel, when he kisses her and weeps. In contrast, the Bible introduces Leah as the older sister with tender [or weak] eyes, but the text doesn't describe how Jacob meets her. The commentaries are inconsistent about Leah's eyes and overall beauty, and the nature of Jacob's kiss. How would you describe Leah's eyes and beauty, and Jacob kissing Rachel?
2. The commentators provide many specific interpretations of what really happened on Leah's wedding night, including what occurred in the privacy of the wedding tent. What do you think happened on Leah's wedding night?
3. Many commentators weigh in on the issue of what the Bible means when it twice refers to Leah being "hated" [*s'nuah*] by Jacob soon after their marriage (Gen. 29:31, 33). What do you believe was Jacob's attitude towards Leah at this point in their story?
4. What do the midrashic tales of Dinah's birth indicate about the attitudes, motivations, and biases of the Rabbis who created those stories?

5. The biblical text describing Jacob and his family meeting Esau (Gen. 32:2-33:17) features many instances of the overall theme in Jacob's life of pairing, twinning, dividing, and doubling. What are some of the principal expressions of this theme in this episode (and in Genesis generally), and how do they advance the narrative?
6. The biblical text (Gen. 32:23) states that Jacob took his eleven sons [or eleven children] across the Jabbok. Based upon Dinah's omission from this verse, midrash explains that Jacob hid her in a box to protect her from Esau, which led to major consequences for Dinah and the Shechemites. Do you think this midrash is supported by the verse?
7. While the descriptions in Chapter 34 of the relations between Dinah and Shechem seem unusually specific and detailed, the commentators are not in agreement on the central issue of whether the text describes rape, seduction, infatuation, or (at least eventually) mutual love. What do you believe was the physical and emotional relationship between Dinah and Shechem?
8. The story in Chapter 34 begins with the disaster that befalls Dinah, but it ends with the disaster that befalls the Shechemites. To what extent, if at all, does what happened to Dinah justify the brothers' revenge against the Shechemites?
9. Leah's life is traditionally read as if its major feature is the continuing sibling rivalry with Rachel. Looking at that rivalry, which sister ends up the winner?
10. The *derash* method of interpreting the Bible calls for searching the words of the text to discover their deeper theological or moral meanings, often revealed through connections to other words or events in the Bible. The *peshat* method of reading the Bible calls for the simple, literal reading of the words in their context. Do you think that the level of authority of *derash* reading is:
  - a. Equivalent to the authority of the *peshat* method of reading the biblical text;
  - b. Inferior to the authority of the *peshat* reading the biblical text, but *derash* reading may still be helpful in interpreting the intention of the text; or
  - c. When not logically required by the biblical text, the *derash* method lacks interpretive authority and should be considered only as literary invention.
11. The author makes several references to the principle of rabbinic interpretation that history unfolds *measure for measure*. Do you think this principle is still helpful today in reading the Bible? Is the principle helpful today in understanding how life works?
12. The author's Conclusion (p. 187) begins with the statement: *The Bible made Leah a Matriarch, but it took midrash to make her a heroine*. Do you agree with this statement?