

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A Compilation of Question Sets from the Syllabus and Sourcebook on *The Lost Matriarch: Finding Leah in the Bible and Midrash*

1. WE MEET LEAH:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. What do the Torah's introductory verses describing Leah and Rachel up to the weddings (Gen. 29:1-21) suggest regarding their respective moral characters, personalities, emotions, and motivations?
2. What do these introductory verses suggest regarding the moral characters, personalities, emotions, and motivations of Jacob and Laban?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. How would you describe Leah's eyes? What led you to your conclusion?
2. What kind of kiss do you think Jacob gave to Rachel? What led you to your conclusion?
3. There's also a second kiss in this narrative segment—Laban's welcome kiss to Jacob. What kind of kiss was that? What led you to your conclusion?
4. There are two central conversations in this episode: Jacob and Rachel have a lovers' talk (in the midrash), and Jacob and Laban have a wedding negotiation (in the biblical text). Are the portrayals of Jacob's character and personality in these two conversations consistent or conflicting with one another?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. Jacob flees from sibling rivalry at home only to find it expressed between Leah and Rachel in Haran. Can parents do anything to help their children avoid developing anger and bad feelings from sibling rivalry, or is that rivalry an inevitable and to some extent helpful developmental challenge of normal family life?
2. 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.

2. LEAH'S WEDDING:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. What do these biblical verses say or imply about the morality of the actions (or the absence of actions) taken by Leah, Rachel, Jacob, and Laban in the wedding episode?
2. The wedding is a very important element in the overall story of Genesis. What is the implication, if any, of the omission from the biblical text of any express role for God in the wedding episode (Gen. 22-29)?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. Based upon the midrashic commentaries, who are the hero(es) and villain(s) in the wedding episode? Who do you think are the hero(es) and villain(s)?
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. An important element of the wedding episode is the "morning after" argument between Leah and Jacob, as found in the midrash. What do you think this midrashic story tells about Leah and Jacob?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. Does the wedding episode demonstrate that human actions are rewarded or punished measure for measure by God or fate? If so, is God's measure-for-measure reward or punishment ethical when it injures innocent parties?
2. How do you evaluate the relative legality of Leah's and Rachel's marriages? What relevance, if any, does this issue have for contemporary Judaism or Christianity?

3. LEAH'S FIRST FOUR CHILDREN:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. This segment of the biblical text (Gen. 29:30-35) is unusual because Leah seems to reveal her feelings through her explanations of her choice of names for her first four sons. Do you think Leah's explanations for these names accurately reflect the external reality of her marital situation, or only her perceptions and feelings about her life?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. 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?
2. Midrash also offers several interpretations of the verse stating that after the birth of Judah, Leah "stopped bearing," sometimes using that statement as the basis for concluding that all four Matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel) were afflicted with barrenness. Do you believe that Leah was in fact barren at any time?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. During the period from immediately before the birth of Leah's first son, Reuben, to immediately after the birth of her fourth son, Judah, to what extent does Leah change and develop her attitude and moral character?
2. Although Leah is the central character in this segment of the family story about the births of her initial children, did you learn anything about Jacob and God from the roles that they play in this portion of the narrative?

4. THE HANDMAIDENS' CHILDREN:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. In the earlier wedding episode, the important “morning after” argument between Leah and Jacob is entirely a product of midrash. That spousal argument finds a strong parallel in the current segment about the birth of Jacob’s next sons after Leah’s first four. But there are some important differences: here the dialog is detailed in the biblical text itself, and the argument is between Rachel and Jacob. What are some of the other important similarities and differences between these two spousal dialogs, and what do those similarities and differences signify?
2. After Rachel demands children from Jacob, she offers her handmaiden, Bilhah, to Jacob as a wife/concubine. When Bilhah produces two sons for Jacob, Leah makes a similar offer of her handmaiden, Zilpah, who also produces two sons for Jacob. What does Jacob’s silent acceptance of these wives/concubines indicate about him?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. In the previous story segment, numerous commentators debated the meaning of the biblical statement that Leah was “hated” by Jacob. Now the commentators show a similar focus on the meaning of the biblical statement that Rachel “envied” her sister. How would you describe Rachel’s feelings towards Leah at this point in the story?
2. Some commentators conclude that God punishes Jacob for his angry response to Rachel’s demand for children; other commentators defend Jacob’s righteousness. What is your opinion of Jacob’s reaction to Rachel here?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. Although Rachel does not bear children in this segment, she envies her sister, demands children from Jacob, provides Bilhah as a surrogate mother, and names Bilhah’s children. During this portion of the story, to what extent does Rachel undergo change and development with respect to her attitude and moral character?
2. First Rachel and then Leah give their handmaidens to Jacob as wives to bear children for him. What do you think were the motivations and ethics of Rachel and of Leah in these actions?

5. THE MANDRAKES; AND DINAH'S BIRTH:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. As in the previous story segment about Rachel and Jacob arguing over Rachel's demand for children, the biblical text for the mandrakes segment is centered on another dialogue, this one between Leah and Rachel. What does this dialog disclose about the sisters' respective motivations and moral characters?
2. The midrashic story that Dinah was originally a male seems based not so much upon the biblical text (Gen. 30:21, which states only that after the birth of Zebulun, Leah bore a daughter and named her Dinah), but rather what the text fails to state (that Leah conceived again). Is this an appropriate basis for interpretation of an ancient text that so often omits to provide narrative details in many stories?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. The commentators disagree on just what the sisters were really negotiating about in the mandrakes incident. What do you think each sister was seeking? What did each sister get?
2. Many commentaries focus on the moral implications of the Bible's statement that Leah "went out" to greet Jacob and bring him to her tent on the night of the mandrakes exchange. Some commentators justify or even praise Leah for her actions, while others condemn her for those actions. Which point of view do you think the biblical text most supports?
3. What do the midrashic tales about the birth of Dinah indicate about Leah's personality and moral character? What do the commentaries about the birth of Dinah indicate about the other characters (Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah, Jacob, and God)?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. As between Leah and Rachel, which of the sisters acts in a morally superior manner in the mandrakes episode?
2. What do the midrashic tales of Dinah's birth indicate about the attitudes, motivations, and biases of the Rabbis who created those stories?

6. RACHEL GIVES BIRTH TO JOSEPH AND STEALS THE *TERAPHIM*:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. Gen. 30:22 relates that GOD REMEMBERED RACHEL. What does it mean for God to “remember” Rachel?
2. The text makes it clear that Rachel “stole” (*va-tignov*) her father’s *terephim* (Gen. 31:19), and that she subsequently tricks him so that his search would be unsuccessful (Gen. 31:33-35). Were Rachel’s actions in stealing from and tricking her father morally justified?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. The commentators propose a variety reasons for why God ended Rachel’s barrenness. Assuming for purposes of this question that you accept the traditional view that God exercises the power to permit or bar pregnancies, why do you think God acted to permit the birth of Joseph?
2. According to biblical chronology, God “remembered” Rachel and she gave birth to Joseph several years after she had demanded children from Jacob. Why did God “remember” Rachel at this particular time?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. To what extent, if at all, does Rachel’s moral character change (for better or worse) in this segment of the narrative describing her giving birth to Joseph and stealing the *terephim*?
2. Some of the commentaries seem driven to defend the moral excellence of the Matriarchs and Patriarchs. But the text of the Hebrew Bible often seems to attribute to the Matriarchs and Patriarchs some actions, attitudes, and motivations that are not generally consistent with our contemporary concept of moral heroism (anger, envy, deception, belief in magic, etc.). What do you think are the literary purposes or functions for those negative depictions in the Bible?

7. MEETING ESAU:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. 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?
2. Are you aware of any other expressions of this theme in other parts of the story of Jacob and his family or in other portions of Genesis? How does the application of a transcendent theme such as this to multiple situations affect how you read the biblical text?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. There are several midrashic commentaries analyzing the presentation of Rachel and Joseph to Esau, but the commentators say little about Leah and her sons. Does this contrast in emphasis imply anything significant about Leah?
2. Joseph is the great hero of much of the remaining portion of Genesis. The commentators seem to seize upon the mention of Joseph's name before his mother's, when they are presented to Esau, as a basis for analyzing Joseph's character. Do you derive any impression of Joseph's character based upon this reversal of word order in the text?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. Leah is barely mentioned in the Torah's final description of her, as part of the family presentation to Esau. Do this Torah text and the related midrash offer any evidence that a final change or development (positive or negative) has occurred in Leah's character since the point she was introduced in the story?
2. 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 justified by the verse?

8. DINAH AND SHECHEM:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. In the entire Chapter 34, which tells the dramatic story of Dinah and Shechem, Leah is mentioned only once, and then only in the first verse identifying Dinah: AND DINAH THE DAUGHTER OF LEAH, WHOM SHE BORE TO JACOB, WENT OUT TO SEE THE DAUGHTERS OF THE LAND. (Gen. 34:1). Nevertheless, many of the commentators rely upon this verse as a basis for blaming Leah for the tragedy that unfolds for Dinah and the Shechemites. Do you think this is a fair reading of the verse?
2. 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 biblical 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?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. Besides arguing over Leah's responsibility for the tragedies in Chapter 34, the midrashic commentaries also argue over apportioning blame to almost everyone else in the story: Dinah, Shechem, Jacob, Shimon and Levi, Jacob's other sons, King Hamor, and entire Shechemite nation. How would you assign relative moral culpability among the characters in this story?
2. The midrashic commentaries are also in disagreement about the one-word description of how the brothers negotiate with Hamor and Shechem: JACOB'S SONS ANSWERED SCHECHEM AND HAMOR HIS FATHER *BIMIRMAH* AND THEY SPOKE BECAUSE HE HAD DEFILED DINAH HEIR SISTER (Gen. 34:13). Much like the two meanings for Leah's *rakhot* eyes, speaking *bimirmah* could mean either *deceitfully* or *with cleverness*. Should the brothers be blamed or praised for their negotiations with Hamor and Shechem?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. Chapter 34 includes detailed descriptions of conversations and actions of many characters. But the story is also noteworthy for what is not said or done by three characters whose words and deeds we would expect to be central to the narrative: Leah, Jacob, and of course Dinah herself. What do you understand from the relative absence of descriptions of these three characters' conversations and actions in the biblical text? Is your understanding affected by the midrashic tales of how Dinah acted to save her family from attack, or how Dinah had to be dragged out of Shechem's palace?
2. 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. CHANGE AND DEATH:

A. Biblical Text Questions

1. The Bible tells us that immediately after Jacob's marriages to Leah and Rachel, Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah, and God saw that Leah was hated [or "unloved"], Gen. 29:30-31. The book of Jubilees (Jub. 36:22-24) paints a rosier picture for Leah at the time of her death; but does the biblical text itself indicate any change in Jacob's initial attitudes towards his two principal wives by the end of those marriages?
2. The Bible does not describe much about Rachel's death and burial on the road to Bethlehem when it happens, Gen. 16-20, and Jacob only briefly recapitulates that description later when he is dying, Gen. 48:7. Why did Jacob bury Rachel on the road?

B. Midrashic Text Questions

1. Some of the commentators conclude that Jacob inadvertently caused Rachel's premature death, or that Jacob at least felt guilt for doing so. Do you believe that Jacob felt guilt for Rachel's death? Are there other factors explaining what appears to be the special grief Jacob seems to express over Rachel's death (especially since he doesn't seem to express much grief about Leah's death)?
2. The midrashic commentaries create two elaborate death scenes for Leah and Jacob (which are to some extent inconsistent with each other, since Esau dies in a different time and manner in the stories). (See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2nd Ed., 320-322, 414.) While they may both be fascinating stories, neither of these midrashic tales seems substantially based upon the biblical text. What do you believe is the value and authoritativeness of this type of midrash?

C. Contemporary Questions

1. *The Lost Matriarch* asserts that Leah develops and maintains exemplary moral heroism in dealing with her life's desperate circumstances. But she shares her life story with her sister and their husband. What is your view of the respective qualities of moral heroism in Leah, Rachel, and Jacob?
2. 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?