



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Red Tent by Anita Diamant

Summary

Deeply affecting, *The Red Tent* combines rich storytelling with a valuable contribution in modern fiction: a new perspective of female life in biblical society. It is a vast and stirring work described as what the Bible might have been had it been written by God's daughters instead of sons.

Far beyond the traditional women-of-the-Bible sagas in both impact and vigor, *The Red Tent* is based upon a mention in Genesis of Jacob's only female offspring—his daughter, Dinah.

Author Anita Diamant, in the voice of Dinah, gives an insider's look at the details of women's lives in biblical times and a chronicle of their earthy stories and long-ignored histories. The red tent of the title is the place where women were sequestered during their cycles of birthing, menses, and illness. It is here that Dinah hears the whispered stories of her four mothers—Jacob's wives Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah—and tells their tales to us in remarkable and thought-provoking oratories. Familiar passages from the Bible take on new life as Dinah fills in what the Bible has left out—the lives of women. Dinah tells us of her initiation into the religious and sexual practices of the tribe; Jacob's courtship with Rachel and Leah; the ancient world of caravans, farmers, midwives, and slaves; her ill-fated sojourn in the city of Sechem; her years in Canaan; and her half-brother Joseph's rise in Egypt.

Skillfully interweaving biblical tales with characters of her own invention, the author re-creates the life of Dinah providing an illuminating portrait of a courageous woman and the life she might have lived. A new view of the panorama of life in biblical times emerges from the female perspective, and the red tent itself becomes a symbol of womanly strength, love, and wisdom.

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?
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-a-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?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher