

Reader's Questions and Topics for Discussion

Abram and Sarai

- Abram and Sarai lived four thousand years ago. What issues did Abram and Sarai face during their lifetimes that are the same as or different than the issues that couples now experience?
- How do Abram and Sarai respond to being childless? Do people today consider infertility a matter of faith? What choices do we have that they did not? What are the spiritual and ethical implications of these choices?
- Why would Yahweh appear to Abram by an ancient tree? In what other places does Yahweh appear to people in the wild? Why do you think this happens so often?
- During the famine, Abram offers his wife to Pharaoh Amenemhet. Sarai agrees to the arrangement. How does this experience affect their marriage? What happens to move them beyond that wounded place?
- What is the meaning of Abram's blood offering to Yahweh? What do the flames symbolize that appear in between the halves of the slaughtered animals ?
- Why would Yahweh choose circumcision to be the mark of the covenant with Abram and his people? What is Yahweh's promise to Abram?
- Abraham questions Yahweh's intent toward the town of Sodom. How does Yahweh respond to this challenge?

- Abimelech, king of Gerar, is a classic example of someone who is caught up in circumstances that are not of his doing, but which have a profound affect on his life. How does he respond? What would you have done in his place? Does his situation remind you of that of any other person in the Bible?
- When Isaac begins to grow up, why does Sarah turn against Hagar and Ishmael. What is her motive? What else could she have done? How does this event help determine who Ishmael becomes?
- Why would Yahweh ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son by Sarah, then have an angel spare Isaac's life at the last moment? How does Abraham transform this experience into a turning point that comes to symbolize his covenant with Yahweh?
- Has your own faith ever been tested by an event that was beyond anything you had previously imagined? What happened? How did you respond?
- When Sarah dies, Abraham buries her with a scarf that symbolizes the ring dove. What did that bird mean to Sarah during her lifetime?

Isaac and Rebekah

- What does Isaac's relationship to the natural world mean to him? How does it affect the way in which he lives his life?
- Why do so many people feel close to God when they are in the presence of nature? Has this been your experience? Where do you feel the presence of God?
- Given the customs of the time, why do the sons of Abraham and Isaac marry into their extended families?
- Eliezer chooses a potential wife for Isaac by testing the generosity of the women who come to the well. What other stories can you recall in which an important event begins by someone passing a crucial test? Why is this such a common theme?
- Isaac's life with Rebekah begins just after he sees his reflection in the water at Lahai Roi, the Well of the Seeing Spirit. Why do so many turning points in these stories revolve around wells?

- The theme of trying and failing to conceive children until late in life pervades these stories. Why do you think Yahweh chooses to form bonds of faith around promising to provide many descendants for these biblical families? Why is raising a large family not as important to many couples in our times?
- What do the birds of prey represent in the battle of the skies between Isaac's eagle and Ishmael's falcon, Ananim? How do these birds symbolize the character of each man?
- Yahweh offers gifts to Isaac because Abraham kept his faith. How did Abraham live a life of faith?
- The oasis where Isaac and Rebekah discover the Knife of the Covenant is a metaphor for the spiritual root of Abraham's bind. What does it represent?
- Over the years, carvings and elements were added to complete the Knife of the Covenant. What is the meaning of each figure?
- What complementary aspects of our beings do Jacob and Esau represent?
- Why does Rebekah help Jacob obtain his father's blessing, even at the expense of her firstborn son, Esau?

Jacob, Rachel, and Leah

- Jacob's life is transformed by his prophetic vision of light as he flees across the desert. Since few of us ever experience such a clear and profound vision, what can we look for as signs to guide our way?
- Eliezer discovers Rebekah at her local well in Haran. Later, Rebekah's son Jacob meets Rachel at the well outside the city of Paddan-aram. In that time and region, wells were an important gathering place for the local community. What places serve a similar purpose in contemporary society? What is a common expression for a gathering place that may have its origins in these times?
- What object of importance did Rebekah pack at the bottom of Jacob's satchel? Why did she do so? What was she really passing on to Jacob?

- From the very start, Jacob's uncle Laban starts planning ways to take advantage of his nephew's desire to marry Rachel. Why does Laban trick Jacob into marrying his older daughter, Leah? What is his ultimate motive?
- How does Jacob respond to Laban's deceit in a way that reveals his own growth and maturity? As a shepherd, what does Jacob use to outwit his uncle's scheming?
- How does the sibling rivalry between Rachel and Leah affect how their children are treated? Who is favored and why? How does this set the stage for the far-reaching events that are yet to come?
- Why does Rachel steal the heirlooms of Laban's family before she flees across the desert with Jacob, Leah, and the children? What is she really taking? Do you think that Jacob knows she has possession of the heirlooms when Laban and his men search their camp?
- When Jacob wrestles with a supernatural being at Peniel, he is physically wrestling with God. It is considered certain death to see the face of God (Exodus 33:20) unless by divine intervention. What does this event reveal about the importance God places upon Jacob and his future role?
- Esau's joyous greeting of Jacob in the desert after twenty years of separation is one of the great acts of forgiveness in the Bible. How does this event foreshadow what is to come? How could things have gone differently if Esau had not forgiven his brother for stealing Isaac's blessing? What other generous acts of forgiveness in faith and history have come to shape the world we live in?
- When Jacob's family reaches the altar at Beth El, which he had made twenty years earlier, he has everyone add a new stone. Why does he do this? What does it teach the children about faith and about family?
- After Rachel dies, Jacob raises a pillar to mark her grave along the road from Beth El to Ephrath. (This stone still stands and is now known as the Pillar of Rachel's Grave.) Then Jacob wanders out into the desert, overcome with grief over the loss of his beloved. Why does Yahweh reveal to Jacob the vision in the stars at that particular moment of his anguish?

Joseph

- At one point in the story, Joseph reveals the source of his dreams. Where does he say they come from?
- How do Joseph's dreams set events in motion that are beyond Joseph's control? What role do dreams continue to play throughout his life?
- From where do you believe your dreams arise? Do you ever have dreams that help to guide your decisions or the direction of your life?
- Over time, Joseph is faced with many challenges: his brothers' betrayal, the false accusations of Potiphar's wife, the jealous rage of Potiphar himself, and the early suspicions of Pharaoh Apophis. Each time, Joseph prevails, emerging from the well, from servitude to Potiphar, and even from imprisonment in the round stone tower of the prison. How is Joseph able to turn adversity into opportunity? Which gifts does he receive that he uses to his advantage? What aspects of his character does he draw from to succeed?
- When Israel is told that his beloved son Joseph is dead, he wanders off into the night in tears and anguish and implores Yahweh, "Why—after I have prayed and kept faith for all these long years? Why?" How can we keep faith at times when circumstances are harsh and painful and life seems unjust?
- Pharaoh Apophis comes to see Joseph as a man of destiny. What convinces Apophis that Joseph is a man of wisdom—a powerful ally who can help to guide and advance Pharaoh's rule over Egypt?
- Joseph finds a scarab amulet in the bottom of the well, an image that was both powerful and popular in Egypt during Joseph's lifetime. What does the scarab amulet signify in the lineage of Pharaoh Apophis? What does it come to symbolize in the evolution of Joseph's life?
- Joseph's scheme for feeding people during the famine saves their lives, but it also forces the growers to deed their land to Pharaoh and indentures future generations to servitude in

Egypt. What does this grand plan reveal about the complex nature of Joseph, a man of compassion and cunning?

- The famine in Egypt lasts for seven years—a significant number that recurs throughout the Bible. Where else in the Bible does the number seven appear? In what other stories do you recall finding the number seven? Why do you think this number is so significant?
- In the land of Egypt, Joseph toys with his brothers as a cat would with a mouse. Who, in Joseph's past, left him this legacy of tricking others? What do Joseph's overt games reveal about the conflicted way he feels toward his brothers? With what feelings does he struggle? Have you ever felt strongly conflicted feelings toward someone in your family? How do you reconcile those feelings?
- Joseph's reunion with his father, Israel, marks a point of personal transformation. What does this pivotal moment reveal about Joseph's ultimate values?
- Even after Joseph was betrayed by his older brothers, he still feels compassion toward his father, Israel, and his younger brother, Benjamin. How does this compassion influence his ultimate decision about the fate of his older brothers?
- What does the little child Zapheth, who is Reuben's youngest son, represent for Joseph during the crucial moment of decision when he holds his brothers' lives in the balance?
- In the end, what does Joseph do with the Knife of the Covenant that proves his faith to Yahweh? How does this compare with what Joseph's grandfather Isaac did with the Knife to prove *his* faith?