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THE RED TENT  
by Anita Diamant

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## About Anita Diamant

Anita Diamant is a prize-winning journalist and the author of many non-fiction books, including *The New Jewish Baby Book*, *Living a Jewish Life*, *Baby Bible Names*, *Choosing a Jewish Life* and *The New Jewish Wedding*. *The Red Tent* is her first novel. Anita is now working on her second novel after more than 20 years as a non-fiction writer. She was the recipient of a fellowship from the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College on the History of Women in America and lives in West Newton, Massachusetts, USA.

## On writing *The Red Tent*—Anita Diamant

### What was the inspiration for *The Red Tent*?

I had just turned 40, needed a new career challenge after writing non-fiction for 20-plus years, and turned to the most venerable source for story ideas: the Bible. It was the relationship between Leah and Rachel that stimulated my thinking about *The Red Tent*. The Biblical story that pits the two sisters against one another never sat right with me. The traditional view of Leah as the ugly and/or spiteful sister, and of Jacob as indifferent to her, seemed odd in light of the fact that the Bible gives them nine children together...As I re-read Genesis over the years, I settled on the story of Dinah, their daughter. The drama and her total silence (Dinah does not utter a single word in the Bible) cried out for explanation, and I decided to imagine one.

*The Red Tent* is not a translation but a work of fiction. Its perspective and focus—by and about the female characters—distinguish it from the Biblical account in which women are usually peripheral and often totally silent. By giving Dinah a voice and by providing texture and content to the sketchy Biblical descriptions, my book is a radical departure from the historical text.

### How did you do your research?

My research focused on the everyday life of women in this period of history, in the ancient Near East. I did not study the Bible or rabbinic sources, but concentrated instead on the food, clothing, social organisation, architecture, and medicine of the era (c. 1500 BCE). I was the recipient of a library fellowship at Radcliffe College at

the Schlesinger Library on the History of American Women, which permitted me access to the entire Harvard Library system. I also had access to the Brandeis library system, thanks to the women's studies department, which appointed me a visiting scholar for a year.

Aiding my work was 'midrash', the ancient literary form, which means 'search' or 'investigation'. Historically, the rabbis used this highly imaginative form of storytelling to make sense of the elliptical nature of the Bible—to explain, for example, why Cain killed Able ... The compressed stories and images in the Bible are rather like photographs. They don't tell us everything we want or need to know. Midrash is the story about what happened before and after the photographic flash.

### **Was there really a red tent in ancient times?**

I did not find any evidence that women in this period of history in this place (ancient Iraq/Israel) used a menstrual tent. However, menstrual tents and huts are a common feature in pre-modern cultures around the world, from native Americans to Africans. The rendering of what happened inside that tent is entirely my own creation.

### **What exactly are the midwife's 'bricks'?**

First off, these bricks have nothing to do with the reddish oblongs that comprise houses and fireplaces. Bricks used by midwives, which I found mentioned in various historic sources, were probably flat and certainly large enough to stand on. There is some debate about what they were used for. They may have had a purely 'magical' function, or they may have helped the labouring mother to keep her footing while she squatted to deliver her baby.

### **How long did it take you to write *The Red Tent*?**

It took me three years to write the book. While I worked on it, I also wrote *Choosing a Jewish Life* and articles for various magazines.

### **What is your work process?**

When I'm at home, I try to write most days. I have a home office, which is where I do most of my work. While writing *The Red Tent*, I also did some writing at

the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, which provided me with an office. I finished the manuscript in a rented vacation cottage in Gloucester, MA.

### **How is it that the female characters worship gods other than the god of Jacob?**

The Bible mentions the presence of 'teraphim', which are household idols/gods in the house of Laban. At the time of the story, a whole pantheon of gods and goddesses were worshipped. The notion of monotheism grew out of this context, in which the family god or El (a generic name for 'god') of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob co-existed with other gods. From a Jewish/Christian perspective, this is long before Sinai and the Ten Utterances, which command 'You shall have no other gods before me'. Which is in itself a tantalising nod to the existence of other deities.

### **What led you to characterise Rebecca as you did?**

The biblical character of Rebecca is that of a fierce, headstrong woman. She knows which of her sons is chosen by God, and she manipulates one son against the other, and deceives her husband. From that starting point, I pushed the character further, and made her a kind of oracle.

### **Why did you change the rape to a love affair?**

I could never reconcile the story of Genesis 34 with a rape, because the prince does not behave like a rapist! After the prince is said to have 'forced' her (a determination made by the brothers, not by Dinah), he falls in love with her, asks his father to get Jacob's permission to marry her, and then agrees to the extraordinary, even grotesque demand that he and all the men of his community submit to circumcision. Furthermore, I wanted Dinah and all of the women in my story to be active agents in their own lives, not passive pawns or victims.

### **What is your religious/Jewish background?**

I did not have much of a Jewish education as a child. My family did not affiliate with a synagogue until I was in high school, nor were we observant beyond lighting Hanukkah candles and holding an annual family Seder. My Jewish education has been 'remedial'. And as an adult learner, I continue to study and explore the vast treasury of Jewish texts, literature, and culture.

*The Writer, July 1997*—Anita Diamant  
Writing a first novel

After 20 years of writing non-fiction for newspapers, magazines, and in book form, fiction was both a liberating experience and an extremely lonely one. The freedom in fiction—to discover fully the importance of a ‘tangent’, to imagine a past where the female was not yet divorced from the holy, to explore and invent a whole life history—was enormous fun.

On the other hand, the absence of an editor or a deadline or people to interview and quote was isolating. I was also in danger of losing my nerve as I ventured into a new genre and into many subjects about which I am not an expert: everything from ancient food and religion to the geography of the Near East.

Since I knew very little about the period (about 1500 BCE), the book presented a huge research challenge. I spent a lot of time during the first months of work, rooting around several libraries. I had no intention of becoming a biblical scholar, but I needed material about daily life—especially the daily life of women.

I looked for materials about food and food preparation, about clothing, marriage and kinship, housing, medicine, childbirth, child-rearing. I picked up details from all sorts of unexpected places, ranging from obscure scholarly journals to books about contemporary women’s spirituality.

I researched as I wrote the book, looking for material about the city called Shechem when the plot moved to that locale and focusing on Egypt when my protagonist found herself living in Thebes.

One of the most interesting things about the process of researching *The Red Tent* was how seemingly peripheral facts (for example, in the Harvard Divinity School Library I found a book with information about roads in ancient Canaan) could set my imagination going and inspire whole scenes in the book.

I found it essential to have an audience to keep me motivated, focused and most of all, supported. This ‘group’ included a few good friends—some of whom were writers—who read the book in large sections. A novelist friend kept reassuring me that my occasional blocks and panics were perfectly normal.

Most crucial to my process, though, was a writing group comprised of four women, working on very different kinds of books including memoirs and short stories as well as novels. These colleagues (and friends) met every month and read the book chapter by chapter, as I wrote it. They wanted to know what would ‘happen next’, nearly as much as I did. But unlike me, they never lost confidence in my ability to write the next chapter.

## Reviews

### *Publishers Weekly*

A minor character from the book of Genesis tells her life story in this vivid evocation of the world of Old Testament women. The only surviving daughter of Jacob and Leah, Dinah occupies a far different world from the flocks and business deals of her brothers. She learns from her Aunt Rachel the mysteries of midwifery and from her other aunts the art of homemaking. Most important, Dinah learns and preserves the stories and traditions of her family, which she shares with the reader in touchingly intimate detail. Familiar passages from the Bible come alive as Dinah fills in what the Bible leaves out concerning Jacob’s courtship of Rachel and Leah, her own ill-fated sojourn in the city of Shechem and her half-brother Joseph’s rise to fame and fortune in Egypt.

After several non-fiction works on Judaism, Diamant’s fiction debut links the passions of the early Israelites to the ongoing traditions of modern Jews, while the red tent of her title (where women retreat for menstruation, childbirth and illness) becomes a resonant symbol of womanly strength, love and wisdom. Despite a few unprofitable digressions, Diamant succeeds admirably in depicting the lives of women in the age that engendered our civilisation and our most enduring values.

### *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*—Betsy Kline Singing in the wilderness

You’ll need steady stomach and a strong heart to enter *The Red Tent*, Anita Diamant’s debut novel, an original twist on a sad and gory chapter in the Old Testament. Diamant’s interpretive or midrash spin on the story of Dinah, daughter of Jacob and sister of Joseph, is unabashedly feminist and not for all readers. It embraces life at its most elemental—from womb-ripping childbirth to death, both

natural and most foul—told in graphic detail. As the ‘red’ in the title implies, this tale is steeped in the blood of menses and men. Diamant’s storytelling is masterful, embellishing the biblical tale with marvellous detail.

Many authors of fiction purloin their plots from the day’s headlines; Diamant has tapped a deep well in the biblical story of Dinah. Allowing Dinah to reinterpret her role is a master stroke. In the prologue she defies the label of rape victim and biblical footnote. Following all the twists and turns and begats in her story, whether you’re familiar with the Old Testament or not, is a challenge but well worth the effort. Diamant’s credentials on Judaic subjects both historical and contemporary are extensive. It shows in the engrossing (and gross) details of *The Red Tent* ...

The red tent is the place of seclusion where the women retreat during the new moon to wait out their menstrual periods, make ritual offerings to their goddesses and revel in their femaleness (this in the midst of their patriarchal culture). It is also the birthing tent. Diamant does not flinch in her descriptions of death by bleeding, the joys of a child born alive or the sorrow of stillbirth and deformed children left to die a natural death. These are some of the strongest passages in the book, along with some particularly brutal sexual scenes and matter-of-fact bestiality among the shepherds.

Jacob does not approve of the women’s worship of idols, which clashes with the worship of the one God of his father Isaac and grandfather Abram. But he honours his wives as they honour him. When Jacob finally breaks with his father-in-law (with his wives’ blessing), the tribe pulls up roots and seeks its future in another valley. Diamant’s sense of place is impeccable: she makes us taste the dust of the nomadic plains; the sweet water of the Euphrates; the smells of death, decay and healing herbs.

Adrift and looking for promising new pastures, the tribe settles in the land of Canaan. On a midwife errand into the city, the sexually awakened Dinah meets and mates with a Canaanite prince, only to lose him in a bloodbath orchestrated by her barbarian brothers to avenge her honour. End of biblical story. Diamant’s Dinah turns oracle and hurls a torrent of curses down on her family’s heads. She walks away from her family with only the clothes on her back.

Diamant's narrative loses the flavour of a fevered nightmare and actually blossoms into a sweet romance once Dinah shakes the blood-flecked dust of her family's past from her wandering feet. The story of the widow and midwife Dinah emerges every bit as vivid and fascinating as the first half of the book. Startling in its originality, *The Red Tent* fairly sings its moral message of love and honour.

***Herald Sun*—Zelda Cawthorne**  
**Beyond ancient scribes**

Joseph of technicolour dreamcoat fame made it to the era of rock operas. But what of Dinah, his half-sister? ... The Book of Genesis devotes few passages to the girl who so captivated a Canaanite prince that he abducted her and would do anything to marry her—only to be slaughtered, with his people, by Dinah's older brothers, Simeon and Levi. It is a terrible story of family honour avenged. And the inspiration for a mesmerising first novel by an author well-versed in Biblical lore. Diamant takes large liberties with Genesis. Yet, in reinterpreting Dinah—not a woman defiled, but a woman devastated by the murder of her lover—she has created a powerfully imaginative epic. As the ancient scribes recorded, paganism and monotheism coexisted in Jacob's day, but Diamant goes further. In her scenario, this was when women—already powerful as healers and givers of life—held the mysteries. She is a fabulous storyteller.

***The Catholic Weekly*—Warwick Spencer**  
**A woman's lot in Jacob's time**

This revisiting of the book of Genesis from a female point of view is interesting in its way since the woman who is telling the story of her life (including the time after her death) approaches the biblical account of Jacob and his time not over-endowed with reverence ... Anita Diamant ... writes well and she has packed considerable scholarly research into this work. I think, however, the book will be better received by women readers, not because it is in any way inferior, but because its theme and treatment will be of closer interest to women than to men.

***Northern Herald*—Judy Adamson**  
**Women in Biblical days**

The Bible is patriarchal and anti-women. Any feminist will tell you that. While this view may or may not be your own, it certainly seems to be the attitude Anita



Diamant is taking with her first novel, *The Red Tent*. As she is the author of several books on modern Jewish life and culture, it would be a good guess that Diamant is of Jewish extraction. As a younger woman, she probably smouldered with resentment at the way stories from the Jewish Scriptures concentrated on the men...it is made very clear to the reader that it is really the women who have the strength, wisdom, and wit to help the bumbling and seemingly ever-fearful men succeed. No male of the family can remain honest or wise. If he is so when younger, he must become pathetic in old age or somehow paralysed by his past. This lays it on a bit thick. However, putting that aside, the obvious care that Diamant has taken to recreate—or create—the lives of women of that time, their customs, cookery, superstitions and private struggles, is very appealing. Although she takes odd liberties with various events and who gives birth to whom, she weaves a very readable story, using the Old Testament merely as a backdrop. It is a women's tale—midwifery, monthly cycles, lots of sex and childbearing, tradition, and sisters doing it for themselves and each other, no matter what.

***The Chronicle*—Keri James**  
**A tale retold**

In Biblical times, at the beginning of every new moon, the women of a tribe would sequester themselves within the folds of a red tent to celebrate their shared menstrual cycle. There, where it was forbidden for men to step foot, they dozed, ate sweets, were massaged, and conducted rituals for their teraphim Goddesses. Thus begins *The Red Tent*. Anita Diamant has retold the Genesis tale of the tribe of Jacob, for all those puzzled by the apparent minor role of the women ... While the women's lives move to the rhythm of their menfolk's various encounters with God, the sisters are able to balance Jacob's wishes with those of their own Goddesses. For example, an idol of the Egyptian fertility Goddess, shaped as a wide-mouthed frog with spread-eagled legs, was used to ceremonially break the hymen of initiates to the red tent ... *The Red Tent* is occupied by colourful, inspiring characters; women who were almost certainly more than merely vessels of 'begatting'. A read of this evocative story is enough to make you want your own red tent knocked up in the garden.

## Some suggested points for discussion

- ◆ *The Red Tent* begins with the story of Dinah's mothers—Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah—the four wives of Jacob. They love Dinah and give her gifts that are to sustain her through her damaged youth, her calling to midwifery, and her new home in a foreign land. Discuss the differences and similarities in Dinah's relationship with each of her 'mothers'.
- ◆ In this novel, Rebecca is presented as an Oracle. Goddesses are revered along with gods. What do you think of this culture, in which the Feminine has not yet been totally divorced from the Divine?
- ◆ Pregnancy and childbirth are central to *The Red Tent*. How do the fertility, childbearing and birthing practices differ from our modern life? Are there any similarities and how do they compare with your own experiences of mothering and fathering?
- ◆ In the Bible, Dinah's life is only hinted at in a brief and violent detour within the more familiar chapters of the Book of Genesis that are about her father, Jacob, and his dozen sons. Do you think by filling this historical novel with the rich voices of women this is a feminist manipulation of the facts, an attempt to rewrite history as herstory? What, if any, other untold stories do you imagine lie hidden between the pages of the Bible and other historical documents?
- ◆ Dinah's story reaches out from a remarkable period of early history and creates an intimate, immediate connection. If an author chooses to base her fictional work on a true event, time or character, how faithful do you think the author has to be to actual events? Were your preconceptions of this biblical time challenged by this book?

## Further reading

*Ahab's Wife or, The Star-Gazer* by Sena Jeter Naslund

*Conditions of Faith* by Alex Miller

*Lambs of God* by Marele Day