

BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

GENERAL QUESTIONS:

1. In Judaism, the Garden of Eden is often described as Paradise-- a place of perfect happiness where all of one's needs are met. Paradise is also a place where the righteous are believed to go to or to reside after death. What is the "paradise" being referred to in the title of the book? Is this a Jewish "paradise?" Why do you think Ariel chose to title his book My Father's Paradise? What is "paradise" for Yona? For Ariel? For you?
2. The book opens with a quote from Abraham Ibn-Ezra (Torah Commentator, 1087-1164 CE) about the primacy of Aramaic. What might the author be hinting at by opening with this particular quote?
3. In many ways, Zakho, Israel and America might be seen as "characters" in My Father's Paradise. In what ways do the personalities of these places mirror the personalities of Yona and of Ariel?
4. In reconstructing Yona's life story from the memories of Yona, Yona's friends and his family, Ariel describes many events and feelings of which he has no first-hand knowledge. How do his personal feelings, assumptions and interpretations color his narrative perspective?
5. Ariel describes his great grandfather, Ephraim, as a "self styled mystic." "In a cloistered society straitjacketed by tradition, this simple, self-taught man had beaten out a new path. He was a workman-scholar. A dyer-mystic. A nobody-somebody. Ephraim Beh Sabaghah had invented a new kind of respectability, one based not on the size of your land and your income, but on the depth of your knowledge and the strength of your faith." Is there room for such individuals in our community today? Can you name any examples from your own experience?
6. Is the parent/child relationship different when the parent is an immigrant? If so, how?
7. How has this book changed your understanding of the history, people and culture of Iraq?

THE JEWISH JOURNEY

QUESTIONS ABOUT JEWISH TRADITION: RITUAL

1. Amulets and superstition play a prominent role in the Kurdish Jewish life described in My Father's Paradise. Amulets were worn to avert the evil eye and to protect the wearer from harm. Rabbis admonished the children of Zakho to follow Jewish law lest they fall victim to *Yimid Maya* – The Water Mother. Are amulets and superstition a thing of the past, or do they still play a role in Jewish tradition today? If so, how?
2. What do the words from the betrothal ceremony described on page twenty-eight ("*Why does the girl go hide Alone beneath the rock? Why is she shy? Why are you running to the mountains? Don't hide—it won't help. Why are you standing against the wall in tears? Go with the parents of the groom, that will be best for you.*") teach about the role of women at that time? How do we see this played out in Rahamim and Miryam's relationship? Explore the tradition of the Jewish betrothal ceremony. What are some of the rituals and what do they symbolize? What is the *ketubah* and what is its function?
3. "*Tuha, tuha, khiryeh bilihyet abuha!*"—"A daughter, a daughter, dirt in her father's beard!" Discuss gender roles in Kurdish Jewish society.

QUESTIONS ABOUT JEWISH TRADITION: MEMORY AND IDENTITY

1. At the beginning of the book, Ariel visits the Jerusalem neighborhood of Katamon and encounters Zachy Levi, a member of the Kurdish Jewish community. Levi questions Ariel, “Which are you, Ariel Sabar or Ariel Sabagha?” What is the subtext of this query? Later in the book, we learn of Yona Sabar’s grappling with changing his own name. Discuss the role that one’s name plays in shaping and defining one’s identity, reflecting on Yona’s experience or on your own personal experience.
2. Consider the interplay of Yona’s memory of Zakho and the history of the Jews of Iraq/Kurdish Iraq that Ariel developed as part of the story. What’s the difference between history and memory? Why are they both important? What’s the relationship between memory and historiography in Judaism?
3. In Israel, it seemed that Shabbat was the only constant in the Sabar household. What function did the routine serve and how did it influence family life?
4. Ariel suggests that America is a place where one can escape one’s past. What characteristics of American society or culture make it such a place? Is it ever possible to fully escape one’s past?
5. At the end of the book, Ariel tells his pleading son Seth “One day we’ll go together [to Zakho]. Okay?” How do you think Ariel’s personal journey of discovery in writing My Father’s Paradise has influenced his relationship with his past, present and future?
6. Some people collect objects. Yona Sabar collects words and stories--memories. He scours his remembrances and those of his landsman to recreate and to preserve. What should we preserve from the past to insure the future?
7. The relationship of language and identity is a major theme in the book. Does language shape identity, or is it the other way around?
8. What role does food – preparation and consumption—play in Ariel Sabar’s search to discover his past? How do foods link us to our history?

QUESTIONS ABOUT JEWISH TRADITION: TRANSMISSION AND CONTINUITY

1. How does Yona express his Jewishness in America? How about Ariel? What do they want for their progeny? What aspects of Judaism do you feel are most important to pass down to your own children? Are there elements that you feel are best left behind? Do we have an obligation to perpetuate a legacy?
2. On page 241, Ariel reacts to his parents’ objection about inter-dating: “Here I was, a college student, all the way across the country, and I was still expected to do certain things, renounce certain things, because of who *he* was. ‘It’s too late,’ I said.” What was “too late?” Ultimately, is it ever “too late?”
3. Ariel and his wife chose not to circumcise their son, yet they promise Yona and Stephanie that he will be raised Jewish. Ariel writes, “I did not see circumcision as the lynchpin of Jewish identity.” Is there such a lynchpin for you? What is it? How did you react to Ariel’s decision?

QUESTIONS ABOUT JEWISH HISTORY

1. The pebbles of history have a ripple effect. What was the effect of the UN Partition Plan of 1947 on the Jews of Iraq?
2. Discuss the relationship between the Jews of Zakho and the Muslims of Zakho prior to 1951. On what foundation was this relationship built? Discuss other times in Jewish history when Jews shared this kind of relationship with their neighbors.
3. Throughout much of its history, Zakho was referred to as the “Jerusalem of Kurdistan.” How did it gain this designation? What function does Jerusalem have in the Jewish world today? Is there a “Jerusalem of America”?
4. Early in the story, Shmuel, Miryam’s brother, reports to Miryam that he heard Muslims were killing Jews in Baghdad and that he is planning to go to Palestine. Why doesn’t Miryam believe him? Discuss the differences between the Jews of Baghdad and the Jews of Zakho. Were there any similarities?
5. Asenath Barzani (1590-1670), considered by many to be the world’s first female rabbi, was a Kurdish Jew. It was for her that the term *tanna’it*--“woman Talmudic scholar”--was coined. Today, female rabbis and scholars are commonplace in the Jewish world. Discuss the role of women in Jewish scholarship. How has the female perspective shaped Judaism in the 21st century?

QUESTIONS THAT LINK TO JEWISH TEXT

1. There is a fascinating tension between Yona and Ariel as they both struggle to find meaning in the transmission of tradition. Recall Abraham and Isaac in the Torah. Abraham heard God’s call directly. But Isaac had to hear the call through his father. As the first Jew, Abraham has the weighty responsibility of passing down monotheism to Isaac (without killing him -- or perhaps scaring him away). This tension continues to trouble Jewish parents: How do we pass down our tradition and yet have it be relevant and meaningful for our children and grandchildren?
2. Miryam travels to Nineveh to the shrine of the Prophet Yona to pray to God for a child. Why was this shrine a place that women would visit when seeking help having children? Upon returning from her pilgrimage, Miryam conceives Yona. Looking back over Yona Sabar’s life, is there any symbolism that can be imagined between him and his namesake?
3. “It was somewhere between December 1938 and February 1939. But the closest thing to an official record of Yona Beh Sabagha’s birth was the one Rahamim inscribed in pencil that day in the margins of his prayer book. ‘This little Yona,’ Rahamim wrote, grinning, ‘was born today, on Shabbat Vayetze,’ the Sabbath of He Came Out.” What can we learn from this about how Jews have historically kept time? Interestingly, it is in *Parshat Vayetze* that we read about Rachel and Leah and the children they bore Jacob. What is your reaction to the idea that God determines who shall conceive children and who shall be barren?

QUESTIONS ABOUT KIBBUTZ GALUYOT—THE INGATHERING OF EXILES

1. In Iraq, the Jews of Baghdad were elitists who looked down their noses at the Kurdish. “But in Israel the worlds meet.” “The lines of language, social class, and education that separated these boys in Iraq blurred in Israel, where they were lumped together as backwater Jews in need of civilization.” What can be learned from this experience? How was Yona’s immigrant experience in Israel different from the experience of his parents? Why?

2. In the 1950s Israel was struggling to define itself in the eyes of the world. How did this influence Israel's immigration policy? David Ben-Gurion and Itzhak Ben-Zvi, prominent leaders in Israel at the time, had divergent views on immigration and integration. How did their melting pot versus tossed salad ideologies influence the course of Jewish history?

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