Out of Many Waters

Study Guide

I. Introduction:

This study guide aims to provide material to help in the preparation of a lesson, unit or book club discussion about the novel *Out of Many Waters* by Jacqueline Dembar Greene. Studying this novel expands the exploration of the concept of *z'rizut* (taking initiative) addressed in the *Nisan* issue of BABAGANEWZ.

Out of Many Waters is a work of historical fiction that takes place in the 17th century during the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition and the era of colonization. The novel is narrated by Isobel ben Lazar, a young girl separated from her family in Portugal and forced to work as a slave in a monastery in Recife, Brazil. The novel follows her journey as she escapes Brazil aboard a ship bound for Amsterdam (and hopefully, a reunion with her family). The story of self-discovery is about the depths of inner strength and the power of faith and community. The concept of *z'rizut* is a central theme explored in the work because it is Isobel who determines her own future in the face of obstacles, broken dreams and new discoveries.

To help plan for the study of the novel, this guide offers:

- Questions for study and discussion
- Passages for close analysis
- Lesson ideas
- Writings activities
- Projects

Combine any components of the guide to help shape your lessons on the novel. You may also want to use the ideas as a means of offering enrichment and extra credit to students who wish to read the novel.

Questions for study and discussion:

Historical context:

1. Where does the novel open? How did Isobel and Maria come to live there?
2. Why did the Jewish families that Isobel meets on the ship come to Recife? (See pages 76-77.)
3. What are the obstacles that the 23 Jews confront upon their arrival to New Amsterdam? According to the Afterword (beginning of page 197), what else do we know about the actual lives of the characters from the novel?

Characters:

1. From his initial introduction, Padre Pao is markedly different than the other friars. What are some examples of his uniqueness? Why do you think he lets Isobel go and board the ship?

2. What role or roles does Maria Levy play for Isobel throughout the novel? How are Maria and the Jewish women different from other women Isobel has encountered in Brazil? (See page 69.) Why is this revelation important to Isobel's development?

3. When does Isobel first encounter Paulo? What is the reason for his silence? What is the nature of their relationship throughout the novel and how does each give to the other?

4. How would you describe Rachelle? How does her character develop over the course of the novel? What cultivates that growth? Why is she an important character for Isobel to encounter?

5. What is Davi's role in the novel? What is the foundation of his friendship with Isobel?

6. What attracts Isobel to the Jewish families on board the ship?

7. At what point in the novel do you think Isobel demonstrates the greatest *z'rizut*? Why?

Plot:

1. Why is Maria, Isobel's sister, so determined to escape from Recife? On what grounds is she convinced that her parents re-settled in Amsterdam? (See pages 22-23.)

2. How do the Jewish families relate to Isobel? Why do they take her into their care initially? What rituals do they introduce her to?

3. When does Isobel first learn of the privateers' plot? What is the plan? (See page 116.) Do you think Isobel should blame herself for the events that unfolded? Why or why not?

4. How do the Jewish families exhibit *z'rizut* while in the encampment in Cuba?

5. How do the Jewish families come to arrive in New Amsterdam from Cuba? Trace their journey.

II. Passages:

1. Page 61

   " 'You are a *converso*?' The interpreter asked Isobel gently, but she had not missed the sharp tone in which the captain had originally asked the question. How should she answer? To be a converso was to secretly follow the Jewish faith, yet to pretend to be a Catholic. She did neither…

   'I am Isobel,' she said finally, raising her eyes briefly."

   Why does Isobel give this answer? At this point in the novel, what is Isobel's connection to Judaism? How is her response reflective of this relationship?

2. Page 131

"For the first time, Isobel was faced with a true choice. She was not a child any longer, and she could be free. But if she truly wanted to take responsibility for her own life, she had to follow not just her head but also her heart."

What are the conflicting notions of "freedom" with which Isobel is grappling? What are the emotions associated with her choice? On what basis does she make her decision?

3. Page 166

" 'You see, when he (Davi) suffers a setback, he thinks his dreams are shattered. I hope he is finally learning that all things that are broken can be out back together again, although they may not always be exactly the same as they were before. Rachelle, on the other hand, is not a dreamer. She takes life as it comes, and each day is an end in itself for her.'

' But which way is better?'

'There is only one way for each of us. Just remember that sometimes, when we patch our broken dreams together, they look a little different than they did before they were broken But, they still hold fast."

What is Maria trying to teach Isobel about the nature of dreams? Why is this such a crucial message at this point in the novel? How does this teaching inform Isobel's decisions later on in the story?

4. Page 195

"In her blurred vision, she saw a stout woman advance to the auctioneer, pay the winning price, and walk off with them (the silver combs). I am sorry, Maria, she thought. Please forgive me, but I had to do it. You said they could be sold if that as the only way, it is the only way. I have more to think about now than myself.

The colonist ambled over to the group, her stiff apron and starched collar unmoved by the breeze. She stopped directly in front of Isobel and a soft, kind smile grew on her face. She held the combs in her outstretched hands. Isobel was confused. What did the woman want?"

What is the significance of the silver combs to Isobel? Why is selling the combs "the only way?" What does the Dutch woman do; how do her actions act as a precedent for the other colonists and how are her actions a precursor to the historical chain of events?

IV. Lesson Plans

1. Use the novel to explore the concept of *z'rizut* as it relates to Jewish texts.

The novel is particularly poignant at this point in the Jewish calendar because, like the story of the Exodus, *Out of Many Waters* is a novel of self-discovery and redemption. Moreover, like the Israelites in Egypt, the emergence of the Jews from the sea is the beginning point of their freedom.

Examine the Biblical text of the parting of the Red Sea and the *midrash* about Nahshon ben Aminadav to further analyze the link between initiative and redemption. The *midrash* about Nahshon ben Aminadav can be found on our web site (www.babaganewz.com/teachers) on the source sheet for the article "Melissa Paris: Sisterly Love."

Questions on the *midrash*:

1. What is the context of the *midrash*?

2. According to the commentary, what compels Nahshon to step into the water and on what grounds does he take this leap? What are the risks involved?

3. Accordingly, what is the connection between his actions and the parting of the sea?

Connecting to the novel:

1. What parallels can be drawn between the settings of the novel and the biblical text?

2. What parallels can be drawn between Isobel and Nahshon's actions? Are there similar risks involved?

3. How can *Out of Many Waters* be seen as a story of personal transformation and redemption?

2. Explicate the psalm from which the title derives as an exercise in close reading and as a tool to link the text to the larger themes of the novel.

Begin by asking your students to read through the psalm either from a Siddur or as it appears in the novel on page 181.

Brainstorm as a class the answers to the following questions:

- What emotions does the author of the poem describe?
- What images help convey these emotions?
- What themes are apparent in the text?
- How would you characterize the language?

Connecting to the novel:

1. What are the similarities between the emotions and experiences the author of the psalm expresses and the experience of the Jewish families?

2. Asser Levy tells Isobel, "By teaching Paulo to read, you gave him the chance to break his silence without having to find words for his own thoughts. I think he has let the Psalm speak for him." (p. 182)

3. What does this statement tell us about the power of the poetry? Why might Paulo have had difficulty finding "words for his own thoughts?"

4. Can the students relate to having a poem or book “speak for” them? Ask students to reflect upon a time in their life when this has been the case. An alternative exercise would be to give students a siddur and have them act as detectives, searching for a prayer that speaks to or for them.

V. Writing Activities

1. Write your own version of the letter that Isobel gives to Jean-Pierre Baptiste at the end of the novel to deliver to her parents. Explain to them the change in circumstances and your reasons for choosing to remain in New Amsterdam. Also provide a brief description of your journey and the new extended family and friends who comprise your community.

2. Write a letter to the editor of the *New Amsterdam News* on behalf of the settlement of the Jewish families. Why should the colony’s court approve of their settling in New Amsterdam? In your opinion, what can the Jewish families contribute to the colony? In what ways is the settlement of new immigrants an integral part of the colony’s creation?

3. Journal exercise: Write a journal entry as if you were Maria, Isobel’s sister. What point is she at in her journey? What obstacles has she confronted along the way? Does she have a support system in place? What are her fears and concerns and what dreams have allowed her to persevere despite those fears?

VI. Projects

1. Create a class map charting the travels of Isobel, beginning in her native country of Portugal. Ask your students to try and tell the story of her journey via the map. Have your students create a legend and use paper cutouts or other objects to enliven the map.

2. Using the map as the jumping off point and as a visual aid, divide students into research groups by country or city (i.e. Portugal, Brazil and New Amsterdam). Ask students to research their given location (via the Internet, books, encyclopedias, etc.) as it pertains to the Jewish experience at the time of the novel.

   Prompt questions: What is the make-up of the population? Why have the Jews settled in or left that particular place? What is the attitude of the government and the general population towards the Jews? What distinctive customs that you know of developed in this country?

   Each group should then make a poster with key findings to present to the class. These visuals should be compiled with the map to make a historical museum for *Out of Many Waters*.

   Afterwards, discuss the idea of historical fiction as a means of personalizing history and making historical events come alive. What did you learn from reading the historical account that was absent in the novel and vice versa? In other words, how does each expand upon the other?

3. Encourage students to read *One Foot Ashore*, by Jacqueline Dembar Greene, the companion novel to *Out of Many Waters*. *One Foot Ashore* follows Maria as she flees Brazil and travels toward Amsterdam in search of her parents and in hopes of being reunited with Isobel.