

Book Club Discussion Questions
Art of the Jewish Family: A History of Women in Early New York in Five Objects
By Laura A. Leibman

1. Which of the five women's stories stuck with you the most and why?
2. What surprised you the most about the women's lives?
3. In the introduction, Laura argues that we should think more broadly about what a Jewish object is, particularly if we want to think about the role of women in Jewish life. What objects have your ancestors passed down to you? Who originally owned the items? How did they use them and why do you think they decided they were worth keeping and passing along? How do the objects convey a sense of what you (or your ancestors) valued?
4. In the introduction to *Art of the Jewish Family*, Laura looks at a broken teacup that depicts Jodensavanne and talks about Jewish women's roles in rituals (pp. 8-12). Do you have dishes that belonged to earlier members of your family? What, if anything, is depicted on the dishes? Why do you think your family member chose that design? Do you have any memories of how the dishes were used originally? Are all of the dishes whole or are some of them broken? If some are broken, why did you decide to keep them anyway?
5. In chapter one ("Paper Fragments"), we find out that Hannah Louzada's son struggled with mental illness. How did her son's mental illness impact Hannah's life? How can taboos about mental illness make it difficult to talk about the struggles caregivers and family members face even today?
6. In chapter two ("Pieces of Silver") we learn that someone scratched "Keep for Saly for her only" underneath one of the silver cups (p. 80). In her own will, Sally was very careful to indicate who should get what and why. In my family, family members sometimes joke about certain cousins placing stickers or post-it notes under items to indicate who should inherit which knick-knacks. Sometimes we will note that knowing what would matter to someone isn't a horrible idea. What is the tradition in your family for who gets what?
7. On p. 86, Laura notes that women's role in gift-giving is often disparaged. Who in your family tends to decide which gifts to give? What sorts of decisions go into choosing a gift? Has a gift you received (or given) ever helped you feel bonded to someone else?
8. Chapter three ("Portraits in Ivory") talks about several different kinds of portraits including ivory miniatures, daguerreotypes, and cabinet cards. What are some of the key differences between these types of portraits and how they were used? If you have any old family photos or portraits from your family, how are those images similar to or different from the ones once owned by the Moses family?
9. In chapter four ("Commonplace Things"), we learn that commonplace books were used somewhat like people today might use yearbooks, social media, scrapbooks, Pinterest and vision boards today (p. 138). Have you ever used any of these types of memory keepers? If so, how did your experience compare to Sarah Ann Hays Mordecai's? What role does emotion and sharing in particular play in your memory keeping device?
10. Chapter five ("Family Silhouettes") discusses the role of hats and headgear in Jewish families and identity. Does anyone in your family (or someone else you know) cover their head for religious reasons? How do their choices compare to the ones of the Isaacs family? What has changed or stayed the same?
11. The conclusion of the *Art of the Jewish Family* returns to the issue of gaps and silences. Who do you wish you knew more about in your own family? Why do you think their stories didn't get preserved? What can you do to make sure that the stories that matter to you are there for generations to come?