

After These Things by Jenny Diski.
Little Brown 2004.

I have always considered Thomas Mann's monumental *Joseph and His Brothers* to be the best modern retelling of the biblical saga that begins with Abraham and ends with the death of Joseph. Having just finished Jenny Diski's new novel *After These Things*, I am compelled to revise my opinion.

Jenny Diski's last foray into the world of biblical narrative was *Only Human*, about Abraham and Sarah and God, and in *After These Things* she commences with the Binding of Isaac and continues until the disappearance, presumed killed, of Joseph. At 216 pages, Diski's novel is a fifth of the size of Mann's, but her characterisation of the main protagonists is as brilliant and original as was that of the Master.

Jenny Diski makes Isaac and Jacob come alive, but it is her conceptualization of the matriarchs, particularly Rebekah (sic) and Leah that makes the book. These women are alive, vibrant, powerful and angry, victims of fate and the damage wreaked on their spouses by their own parents, and their parents' God. I feel I now have an understanding of Leah that I lacked, and a wonderful sense of the blighted marriage of Isaac and Rebekah that I never appreciated before, all achieved by Diski's filling in the gaps in the biblical narrative, or following up its hints, in the most inspired and creative way possible.

I enthusiastically recommend this book, and apart from everything else if you read *After These Things* you will never hear the Binding of Isaac on Rosh Hashanah in the same way again!

Memo to Jenny Diski: please don't take too long to write part three – the richest vein of all in the saga.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh