

Discussion Question: The Matzah Ball by Jean Meltzer

1. Though they were both raised in the Jewish faith, Rachel and Jacob had very different upbringings. How do you think their childhoods influenced their characters as adults?
2. Rachel's family is Jewish, but she loves Christmas. Have you ever had an affinity for a holiday or event that your family didn't celebrate?
3. What did you think of Rachel's decision to hide her career from her family for most of her adult life? Would you hide something of importance from your family if you felt they wouldn't understand it?
4. Rachel and Mickey are best friends since forever. How did you feel about the way their friendship was depicted in the story? Do you have a friend you're as close with as they are with one another? What has that friendship meant to you in your life?
5. Living with chronic illness has affected Rachel's life in almost every way imaginable. What, if anything, did you learn about myalgic encephalomyelitis, aka chronic fatigue syndrome?
6. Rachel feels frustrated that the more commonly known term for her illness, chronic fatigue syndrome, comes with a certain amount of stigma, and people don't take it seriously. Can you think of any other conditions that are treated similarly by the general public?
7. Both Rachel's mother and Jacob's bubbe tend to feed (or overfeed!) their loved ones. This is considered a common way to show affection in many cultures, including the Jewish culture. What are some traditions in your culture, and how are they expressed in your family?
8. Though Rachel and Jacob did not personally experience it, they are both influenced by the Holocaust in subtle ways. What are some ways in which that influence manifests itself? Are there any events in your family history that continue to influence you today, even though you did not directly experience them?
9. Rachel quotes Midrash, saying, "God only works through broken vessels." What do you think Rachel means when she says this? How do Rachel and Jacob both come to accept, and create meaning out of, their brokenness?
10. On Hanukkah, Jews use a *shamash*, one flame that lights all the candles on the *chanukiyah*. What are some of the ways that the characters in *The Matzah Ball* act like a *shamash*, spreading light to others?
11. What are some Jewish traditions and rituals you recognized while reading *The Matzah Ball*? Was there anything that surprised you? Are there any traditions you would like to learn more about or incorporate into your own life?
12. Who was your favorite character and why?

13. If you could cast the movie version of *The Matzah Ball*, who would you cast as the leads? How about the secondary characters?