

Transcription of Rosie Moosnick commentary 12/6/2019

Rosie:

Shabbat Shalom

So, in thinking about this week's Torah portion, I was thinking "I'm not versed in the Torah. Whatsoever." And what I take from this week's portion is that Jacob awoke from a dream and found God everywhere, and that Rachel and Leah competed for his love and attention via the most womanly of means, by childbearing, if I have that right. (to Rabbi) Am I right? O.K.

So what I walk away thinking about is storytelling and how will you tell stories that have purpose? Particularly, out of the Torah, stories that challenge our moral compass. I also think about women's stories in particular and also how do we find God in our in our daily lives? How do we find God in the mundane?

I have spent my adult life, most of my adult life, gathering other people's stories, and I hope it has been for a higher purpose, to make invisible lives visible, to make hyper-visible lives less stereotyped. So I hope you don't mind indulging me in telling you some of the stories that I have gathered, particularly about women and childbearing.

Some of you may remember in the mid 1990s, '95, where the public conversation was about women on public assistance. These women were demonized, they were made into caricatures. They were scorned for having too many children, for being too capable in (the) childbearing capabilities. It was about that time that I, along with some other folks, were in rural Kentucky talking to women on public assistance, to make sure that their voices were included in the stories being told, and not for them to be stereotyped. One woman stays with me, all these 25 years later. And she talked about she resented being forced to have to go to literacy, financial literacy training. Because she said, "For those of us who don't have money, we have to budget. Right? Every dollar counts. And for those who have more money, you can be more free with your money." She understood, and the other women we interviewed as well understood, that being poor and a mother was a difficult proposition.

And then there were women who were on the opposite end of the spectrum: women who were trying hard to become mothers. They understood that they had to work hard to gain mothering status and maybe that's similar to Rachel in this week's Torah portion. (to Rabbi) Right David? Thank you. For these women, white women, who adopted children of another race and nationality, they endured grueling infertility treatments, and bureaucratic red tape to adopt a child, and they knew that their ability to obtain mothering status came at the expense of another woman. That she lost her mothering status when she transferred the baby or child to another woman. And more often than not, it was moving a child from less financially secure circumstances to more financially secure circumstances.

And then there are the women not far from us in Loretto, KY, the Sisters of Loretto, the nuns, who have said that they would not carry children, that they would not become mothers. Instead they would dedicate themselves to God and to their spiritual life. It was these women in particular that I felt like, my heart, I would tell people, my heart moved in the company of the sister of Loretto. These are the women who kept the pipeline from coming into Kentucky. These are women who stood up--I think they were for

a time ex-communicated—who stood up to the male authority in the church. And I heard stories about women who integrated the schools in St. Louis. And a more contemporary sister who was on the border with prostitutes, providing health care to them there on the border between Mexico and US.

But I think of one story in particular that has stayed with me and I feel shows the sort of spiritual connection that we can have with not just human beings but others. This one sister talked about that, at the death of her own mother, that she went back to Mississippi and to close up the family home and also to get the family dog. And I want to say that the family dog's name was Beau, because that's so nice and southern, isn't it? I think it really was Beau. But Beau came up here from Mississippi and Beau took it upon himself to lead the procession from the chapel to the cemetery whenever a sister died. And let me just say the sisters are dying quite a bit. Beau had a busy job. But when Beau's favorite sister was dying and in the infirmary, Beau stood next to her bed or rested next to her bed all the time that she was dying. And I hope I won't cry, but when the sister had her procession, Beau disappeared, overcome with grief, and wasn't there to lead the procession.

So the connections that we have, and that is why I pursue this—thank you David for having a prop—the connections between Arab and Jewish women. And this work was based in nostalgia, my own nostalgia, for my community, all of you all, for my home, for my family. And hope that we could see through women's stories, women who are the backbone of family and community, especially now when we are thinking about, maybe its Christian holidays right now, but Thanksgiving. Women, what we think of as the holidays are really because of women's work and what makes them lovely and warm is because of women's work.

And I think often of my father. I used to say that I lived with Rebecca, you know that Daphne Du Maurier book? And it was a Hitchcock film as well? My father talked all the time about his mother, Rose Moosnick. And she died two weeks after I was born and I was named for her. And so I would be in the living room with my father and he would talk about my grandmother and he would just sing her praise and say, you know the antiques that surround us are because Mama Rose had the foresight to buy them. And then I would go in the kitchen and find my mother and she would be smoking a cigarette and say, "That woman was overbearing." (laughter)

So, connections. Stories aren't always consistent. And now that I'm in the thick of a storytelling project about college students, it weighs really heavily, again I hope I don't cry, it weighs really heavily on me because they're suffering so much. And I don't want to take advantage of their stories. And I think often about those of us who are in the "story catching" industry, right, which is an industry. But often it's more about ourselves, and peddling ourselves off the stories of other people. Maybe in this time of social media and in this time of selfies, in some ways I feel like it's time to be quiet and quieter with our stories.

I think of Selim Natur, who was a Palestinian man who lived here in Lexington. He had a store, like a convenience store, in the west end of Lexington, in the African-American community. It was like a convenient store of some sort. And he was sort of an interviewer's nightmare, right, because you would ask him a question and he had, he would have one sentence, respond with one sentence. But he said to me, "I don't have a story to tell. I didn't become a doctor. I didn't become a lawyer or a pharmacist. I just did what I could to support my family." And then he told me that in his dreams, and he had not been back to Palestine since the 1960s, that he could smell the fruit trees of Palestine in his dreams.

And so maybe my short commentary that I leave with you—May our dreams be sweet, as Jacob and Selim’s dreams were. May our stories be purposeful. And may we find richness in the divine and in our connection with others.