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February 19, 2017
"Refusing comfort"
Jeremiah 31:15-17

Today's sermon has kind of a funny birth story. I decided about a month ago, that I wanted to share this sermon with two friends. These two women are my friends because all of our daughters go to the same school. I have been craving their company, and their wisdom, recently because they, too, are navigating what it means to raise children in a faith tradition at a time when each of our families are feeling vulnerable in new ways by the political realities of the day.

One of these friends is Muslim. The other grew up Christian, but is married to a Jewish man, and they are raising their children in the Jewish tradition. I, as you know, am seeking to expose my daughters to a faithful version of Christianity in this particular time.

For all of us, our daughters are living out a different experience than our own growing up. My friend who is raising her daughters Jewish and I both have daughters growing up with religious or racial minority identities that we did not have growing up. We worry whether our parenting and instruction is sufficient for what they will face in this world. Our friend who is Muslim, has a daughter who is lighter-skinned than herself, and at 7 years old, made the heart-breaking confession that she was worried about her mother, "because I can pass as white, and you can't."

So, I craved the wisdom of these women. I craved to know what stories they were telling their daughters from their faith traditions and what bedtime prayers were standing up to the test of being relevant and strong enough for these days.

What did it mean to them to be identified with their faith tradition now?

What did we need to ask of each other, to know how to care for each other and perhaps advocate and protect one another in the future?

So, I invited them over to talk, and maybe to share together today.

The reason they're not here today is not because they refused to join me.

It's that when we gathered, we never stopped talking long enough to talk about what we might say together in a formal way.

The first time we got together, we cried. The tears started in the doorway as we greeted one another, before we even opened our mouths to share. And our eyes never dried that day.

It was out of those tears that the scripture text for today came to me:

*Rachel is weeping for her children,
and she refuses to be comforted.*

The most common reference to this Jeremiah text is when Matthew quotes it. When Herod slaughters all the infants in and around Bethlehem after Jesus' birth, in an attempt to keep the prophecy about Jesus as Messiah and king from coming true. Such a happy part of the Christmas story. So happy, in fact, that it is usually skipped.

*but Rachel is weeping for her children,
and she refuses to be comforted.*

One of the surprises I found in my conversations with my mom-friends was our responses to what I had thought would be a central question in our conversation: *What faith practices are you relying on to comfort your children in these times?*

All of us revealed that our instincts right now aren't to move to comfort. We each find ourselves feeling fiercely critical of our own religious institutions and current practices, rather than feeling concerned the each other's religions. We find ourselves wanting our daughters, even in the midst of our fears for them, to be hearing their faith traditions' insurances on justice, mercy, kindness, compassion, confession and repentance.

I had pictured coming here this morning to share sweet prayers from each of our traditions, the best words for giving solace to our daughters, or assuring them of safety and protection. But instead we found we were all adopting more of a fighting stance, holding our faiths to accountability rather than hiding under their shelter. We want to teach our daughters clear vision and responsible interpretation.

*Rachel is weeping for her children,
and she refuses to be comforted.*

On the surface, the references to Rachel in Jeremiah and Matthew, seem odd.

Rachel, one of the wives of Jacob, was the mother of two sons – Joseph and Benjamin. And both sons outlived her.

Her tears, as recorded in Genesis, weren't over slaughtered children, but because she struggled to conceive a child at all. She wept again in childbirth with her second child, Benjamin. One of the significances of Rachel's story, is that she is the first woman in the Bible recorded to have died in childbirth.

So, why is she said to have wept for her children and refused to be comforted? It would make sense in that she is considered one of the matriarchs of the Jewish faith – her husband, Jacob's name was changed to "Israel" by God, a name that would come to be the name of the Jewish state. In that sense, she could be seen as a tribal mother weeping over any loss of Jewish life.

Scholars have pondered the significance of Rachel weeping over her children for centuries. A Jewish Midrash from the beginning of the Book of Lamentations, tells a fascinating story about Rachel.

"God sends the prophet Jeremiah to the Patriarchs, Avraham, Isaac and Jacob, and to Moshe [Moses] – all of whom have left the world – to ask their participation in mourning and pleading for a better future for the Jewish people."

All of the patriarchs make their argument, each focused on their obedience to God: Abraham says, *I was willing to sacrifice my son for you!* Isaac says, *I was willing to be a sacrifice for you!* Jacob says, *I did not kill my brother Esau!* Moses says, *even though I led the people to Canaan, I did not enter, because you forbade me.* Please have mercy on our people, because we were obedient to you!

But God was not moved.

Then Rachel comes forward, and tells God how difficult it was for her

"to have participated in the plan" to replace "herself with her sister, Leah, at the time of her intended wedding to Jacob. Rachel and Leah's father, Laban, was known to be a "deceitful rogue," so Rachel and Jacob were prepared for him to do something like this. They even prepared a secret signal between them so that Jacob could be certain that it was indeed Rachel hidden under the wedding veil.

However, when the moment came and Laban did, in fact, move to substitute Leah for Rachel, Rachel confided the sign to her

sister so that Leah would not be put to shame.”

“Rachel buries her desire to marry Jacob, and gives the signals to Leah. What’s more, Rachel also buries her jealousy, in order to be able to carry out her plan with the purest intentions. Rachel asks God the following:

“If I, as a flesh and blood mortal, was able to transcend my jealousy and anger, how much more so should You, an immortal King, find compassion for Your people.’ The Midrash tells us that, as soon as she says this, God responds to Rachel’s tears.”

Why is it that God responds to Rachel and not to the Patriarchs or to Moses?

Reb Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin proposes that the difference lies in the initiative Rachel takes, without first having to be commanded by God. ... the Patriarchs and Moshe perform their acts of self-sacrifice in response to God’s command. Rachel, on the other hand, takes it upon herself to mastermind a plan that will save her sister’s dignity, without any prior directive from God.

Had Rachel followed through with her own marriage to Jacob, God would not have held her responsible for Leah’s embarrassment. This is because Leah’s predicament would have been Laban’s fault, since the plan was his. Nonetheless, Rachel takes it upon herself to act above and beyond her obligations. Accordingly, Rachel comes to God with a very strong argument for why her own actions should be a model for God in [God’s own] treatment of the exiled Jewish people. She is able to say to God, “According to halacha (Jewish law) there is no reason why You should save Your people, since they have clearly transgressed. But, inasmuch as I acted with compassion to save my sister, You should do the same.”

And God accepts. (1)

The tears of women have power in the Bible. The tears of Rachel, a matriarch of the Jewish faith have power.

The tears of Hagar, the ancestral mother of Islam, have power. Twice cast out from Abraham’s tent because of Sarah’s jealousy, Hagar weeps in the desert first when is cast out pregnant and alone, and again when she and Ishmael are cast out. She wept and refused to be comforted, for her son was dying.

And God was moved.

Hagar is the first woman in the Bible that God appears to and

addresses directly. The story says that God made an oasis appear in the desert, to save Hagar and Ishmael. They survived and thrived and started their own nation, whose descendants would worship God through Islam.

*Rachel is weeping for her children,
and she refuses to be comforted.*

I wonder if Mary, the mother of Jesus and matriarch of Christianity, wept over the children of Bethlehem? Knowing that her child was whole while so many mothers' arms were empty, because of her child? I am acquainted with these tears -- the tears of a mother whose children live, while so many others die.

I watch the Mothers of the [Black Lives Matter] Movement, the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Hadiya Pendleton Dontré Hamilton and Jordan Davis, seven of the young black men and women killed by police in the U.S. in recent years.

My tears are Mary's tears.

I hear the list of the Yemeni children Jill read this morning, and again, my tears are Mary's tears.

Just this week another friend who is also a mother shared that her high school aged daughter is being threatened because she is in a relationship with another girl. "I feared ... that I might actually have a nervous breakdown -- that my inability to fully protect my child might send me all the way over the edge," she wrote.

And then she said that instead of praying for comfort, she "asked God to take me to those mothers who have lived with this pain and fear. I didn't really know what I was asking," she said. But she had a profound dream-vision experience of seeing from within mothers all across time and space, mothers who were mourning their lost children.

"I feel like my experience was God reminding me to use whatever I have--whatever I know—to go there....to not leave these mothers alone, and also to leave behind my own sense that I am alone in carrying this horrifying fear."

*Rachel is weeping for her children,
and she refuses to be comforted.*

My tears can be Rachel's, too. I can refuse to be comforted. I can continue to not run from the tears of other mothers. I can continue to meet with my mother friends. We can continue to witness each others' tears, and seek until we find the stories within our own and each other's traditions that we need to hear, the stories that we want to tell our own and each other's daughters, the stories we want to make sure our traditions don't forget

Lest you think this is a reflection only about women or mothers, I saw one of the most beautiful examples of this above-and-beyond loves – refusing comfort, so as never to give up – in the young male protagonist of the movie, “Lion,” which is in theaters right now. It would be easier for me to pinpoint scenes during which I did *not* cry in that movie, than to remember when I did. I was pretty much a leaking faucet.

The movie is about a boy who gets lost, and how he refuses to be comforted for his loss once he gets in touch with it. It also shows how that refusal of comfort is inextricable from his refusal to give up hope of finding that which he lost. It is a thing of heart-breaking beauty.

But most of all, my prayer is:

that we find the heart, the strength, the audacity of Rachel
in the Lamentation midrash:

that we might be so moved by others

that we act not out of obedience to a law,
but out of a heart truly embodying divine love –
a love that has nothing to do with who

deserves what

that we might love and act not just to *not* be found at fault,
but to truly be one another's keepers.

May we all weep and refuse to be comforted, until all death is done.
And may we love beyond obligation, and so move even the heart of God.

(1) Leah Kohn, "The Matriarchs Rachel and Leah: Tears of the Jewish Mothers, Part I." Series, Women in Judaism. December 3, 2010. <http://torah.org/learning/women-class48>