

Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann

Stanford University

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"God couldn't be everywhere so God created mothers": thoughts on love and loyalty for
Mother's Day (Genesis 24:42-67; Proverbs 31)

During my last year of rabbinic school, I witnessed an annual ritual that I'll never forget. It wasn't a Jewish ritual; it wasn't even a religious ritual, in the strictest sense of the word; but it was one that the participants observed faithfully and wholeheartedly. The ritual took place while I was an intern for Hillel at Princeton University. Just before Commencement, alumni from the turn of the century onward come flocking to campus for reunions and to participate in something called the P-rade. For those unfamiliar with the folkways of our peer institution, this is a parade of once and always Princetonians decked out in costumes of orange and black. If those colors conjure up images of Halloween, it is not far off. Stockbrokers, engineers, politicians, urban planners, doctors, lawyers, economists leave their staid lives and return to the scene of their youthful pranks, dressing accordingly. The town is festive for their arrival and the soon to be graduates and undergraduates look to the ranks they are joining with expressions of pride mixed with amusement. The loyalty and closeness that Princetonians feel to their alma mater is evident everywhere.

Amidst the partying and the parading, every year Hillel at Princeton hosts a reception to welcome back the alumni. They come in droves, happy to see one another and compare notes. And for many years, they also came on this pilgrimage to see a very

special person— not the rabbi, not the program director, but their beloved Fran. Fran Frankel was officially the Hillel secretary, but in reality, she was Princeton's unofficial Jewish Mother. On campus for over a quarter of a century, Fran made it a point to keep in touch with as she called them, "all her Jewish kids." Fran was a marvel. She knew the names of all the student's spouses and children, what year they graduated, who their friends were, where they lived and when they last came to campus. She made every student feel unconditionally loved, supported and seen.

You have to understand, accustomed as we are to computerized phone trees and quick communication, Fran was not known for her efficiency or organization. It was not uncommon for her to continue a conversation with someone standing at her desk while she picked up the phone to answer a call. It would take her several minutes to remember to speak into the receiver; meanwhile the caller got to overhear her conversation with the visitor in the office. If you value efficiency, Fran was outdated. But if you value relationships, Fran was incomparable. Birthdays, anniversaries and children, she had at the tip of her tongue. People mattered to her. And in turn, she mattered to them.

There are too few Fran Frankels, too few expansive adopted mothers in our modern fast paced life. How many of us make it a priority to connect people to one another and to the place that gathered them all in? How many of us keep track of friends for twenty five years? Yet, how much can we learn from those who treat those who come into their orbit as members of their family.

“God couldn’t be everywhere,” the Talmud teaches, “And so God created mothers.”

Mothers like Fran.

I think of Fran when I read the biblical story of Rebekah. Like Fran, Rebekah is central to a place where the community gathers—in her era, at the watering hole. When a stranger comes to town, she not only offers hospitality to him, but also offers water to his thirsty camels. This gesture of generosity—of seeing in their fullness the person before her and his needs—turns the wayfarer into a friend. In Rebekah’s case, her hospitality and thoughtfulness distinguished her not only as a person of good moral fiber, but also as the answer to the stranger Eliezer’s prayers. Eliezer, Abraham’s servant had asked God to provide a test--If a maiden offered drink to him and to his camels, “...let the same be the woman whom the Eternal has appointed for my master’s son.” This young woman, raised, as the text tells us, in her mother’s house, is asked whether she is willing to go with Eliezer to meet Isaac, the man who would become her husband. “I will go,” she responds and so she, too, becomes a traveler in search of a home. Seeing a man in the fields meditating, understanding him to be Isaac, her intended, she dismounts her camel, covers herself with a veil and goes from being a stranger to being a beloved—we read, “Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah and she became his wife; and he loved her. And Isaac was comforted for his mother.”

Rebekah’s story begins in her mother’s house and continues in her mother-in-law’s

tent. Rebekah, an adventuresome woman of generosity and good breeding mirrors Sarah, an adventuresome woman whose loss has left her son bereft. This is the first mention of marital love in the bible. And it is noteworthy that this love is mingled with loss, with comfort, with appreciation for what a mother provides.

Jewish tradition teaches that Proverbs 31, the description of a woman of valor was written by Abraham to eulogize his wife, Sarah.

A woman of valor, who can find? ...Strength and honor are her clothing, she smiles at the future...She opens her mouth in wisdom, and the lesson of kindness is on her tongue. ..Shewatchesoverthewaysofherhousehold,anddoesnoteatthebreadof idleness. ...Her children rise and praise her, her husband lauds her. *Rabot banot asu chayil v'at alit al kulannah* Many women have done worthily, but you surpass them all.

It is no wonder that Isaac both loves and mourns his mother, that he learns how to be a husband, how to open himself to enduring marital love by following the model of his own mother.

“God couldn’t be everywhere, so God created mothers.”

My father was not familiar with Isaac and Rebekah’s story; but he had distinct opinions about how his daughters should choose husbands. “You can always tell how a man will treat his wife by how he treats his mother,” he used to tell me. When I met the man who would become my husband, now of nearly thirty years, George’s pride and respect for his mother was obvious from the moment we spoke. She had been a

homemaker and full time mom until he, the youngest, went to school and then she started graduate school to

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become a statistical psychologist. My mother-in-law balanced hospitality, organization, warmth and love with her own adventurous spirit, curiosity and openness to change. She was the first person I knew to use an Apple computer. In the early 80's, she wrote a letter to my parents sharing her pleasure with the relationship between her son and me. It began, "Forgive me for typing this letter, but I am committed body and soul to my computer."

My mother-in-law too was an *eshet chayil*, a woman of valor. *T'nu lah mip'ri yadeiha vihal'luha vash'arim ma'aseha*

Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

It is a source of powerful consolation for me that my father's last words, uttered a few short days before I too became a mother were directed to my husband, "I love you, Georgie, " he whispered.

In the "Spirituality and Nonviolent Urban and Social Transformation" seminar I am teaching this quarter, we are reading this week of how Cesar Chavez became an activist. He cites his mother's *dichos y consejos*—her proverbs and advice that shaped him. Although she was illiterate, she provided him with a firm foundation in nonviolence. "When I look back, I see her sermons had tremendous impact on me. I

didn't know it was nonviolence then, but after reading Gandhi, St. Francis and other exponents of nonviolence, I see... she is nonviolent in word and deed. Despite a culture where you're not a man if you don't fight back, she would say, "No its best to turn the other cheek. God gave you senses like eyes and mind and tongue and you can get out of anything..." When I was young I didn't realize the wisdom in her words, but it has been proved to me so many times since. Today I appreciate the advice and I use quite a few of the *dichos*, especially in Spanish." (Cesar Chavez: Autobiography of *La Causa*, p 18)

How do we convey to our own children, parents and friends what is of value to us? In what way is motherly wisdom manifest in our lives? Have we been righteous in places where righteousness has been absent? Have we stood by our identity in moments when it has been inconvenient, problematic or worse? Have we connected with the foundations of our being? What do we stand for? What are we loyal to? How will we be known?

There is a tradition in Judaism known as ethical wills. It is an attempt to articulate what values animate us, to clarify what we would like to pass on to our descendants, not through money but through our actions. It is an attempt to clarify our legacy.

When Adeline Specktor Sneider lost her mother, she told this story about her mother's legacy, the ethical will that she was bequeathed in the form of a traditional monetary will.

Her parents were survivors of WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution. They settled in a small Mid-western town, had two children and some financial security. Her father

refused to make a will. His rationale: a will would be an insult to his children. He knew that they would always take care of their mother, and he did not need to put that in writing.

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Her father assumed that his assets would provide for her always. He did not know about inflation or perhaps, having surmounted actual poverty in his adopted beloved America--he thought he was affluent. Her mother thought so, and was very comfortable with her circumstances.

But, Adeline writes, “The money ran out. And it would have been unthinkable for my brother, his wife, my husband and myself to let her know it. So by devious means, we kept her unaware that she was being subsidized. After so many years of struggling, working and selfless giving to us and others, she must never know that she was a dependent. The grandchildren conspired with us, and all was well.

So, she decided to write a will. A dear friend who was a lawyer was let in on the secret that he was collaborating on a useless document, but being the mensch he was, did it with grace and finesse.

Mamma and the lawyer spent several evenings and came up with a simple but rather long will. It was put away and more or less forgotten. Until Mama died.

After the week of shiva, of mourning, I started putting our lives back in order. I took

out the will cried my first real anguished tears since she died. It was Mama, that will. She had left bequests to many family members long gone. She left bequests to every synagogue she had ever set foot in, in any city she had visited. She left bequests to every Jewish organization ranging from left wing Zionists to the most orthodox institutions. She had left bequests to every orphanage, school, and home for the elderly that she had a *pushke*, a charity box for--and she had 19!

Crying the whole time, I sat at my desk and wrote checks. Not for vast amounts, but whatever she had wished to leave or thought she could leave. I called a cousin in NY for some of the addresses, and she cried too, telling me that some of the synagogues had been burned out long ago, vandalized, deserted by their congregations.

After a few hours, I was through, through writing and through crying. Instead a great healing had taken place. I was cleansed, inspired, full of love, and always, when faced with my mother's character, overwhelmed with pride. What a legacy her "legacies were to me. She had just, in death, given me one of the happiest days of my life."

Here is a woman who remembered and was loyal to all the places that had made her world complete. It is through our family and our work and our reputation that what we are attached to is manifest. Yet we live in a culture where, too often, our family, our work and our allegiances change with frightening regularity. To remain loyal in the face of change, to know what roots us and sustains us, is more difficult for us than it was in traditional societies.

There is a danger that we can take a snapshot of this moment, artificially stopping the

constant change which characterizes modernity, and then believe that it is eternal. The present generation has enormous authority in shaping what is. The view of the revolutionary is that if it doesn't happen in my lifetime, it won't happen at all. But the concept of tradition, contradicts this. We, in this moment, are not the whole story. We are

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not the beginning, the middle and end. We are tied to those that came before us and those who will carry on our legacy after us. We are tied to the generations. We do our best to convey to our children that they have are a link in the chain of life. It does not start with us. It will not end with us. In *Pirke Avot*, the Ethics of the Fathers, we are told, “*Lo Alecha hamalacha ligmor, v'lo ata ben chorin lehibatel mimenu*” “It is not your responsibility to complete the work, but you are not free to refrain from doing it.” In knowing and living our loyalties, in carrying out motherly wisdom, our virtues, our values, we bring together a precious legacy, a legacy which affirms that we, like generations before us, are engaged in holy work.

In the first Mother's Day column Thomas Friedman wrote after his mother died, he described a conversation at a dinner party where he asked the editor of an Israeli newspaper why he publishes Friedman's column. “Tom, you're the only optimist we have.” A general seated next to him said, “Tom, I know why you're an optimist. It's because you're short and you can only see that part of the glass that's half full.” He

continues, “Well, the truth is, I am not *that* short. But my mom was. And she indeed, could only see that part of the glass that was half full. Read me, read my mom.”
(http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/opinion/11friedman.html?_r=0)

For Thomas Friedman, for Cesar Chavez, for Adeline Spector, for my husband, for the biblical Isaac, for me, and for many here, our mother’s deeds, *dichos* and devotion live on in us. On this Mother’s Day, let us thank, embrace and convey to others those whose maternal warmth, love and wisdom surrounds us. Remember, God couldn’t be everywhere, so God created mothers!

Happy Mother’s Day!