

Inside the Red Tent:
Wisdom Between Mothers and Daughters
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
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"If you want to understand any woman, you must first ask about her mother and listen carefully. The more the daughter knows the details of her mother's life --without flinching or whining -- the stronger the daughter." This is the voice of Dinah (Dee-nah) in the recent best-selling book The Red Tent by Anita Diamant. Perhaps you've never heard of a biblical character named Dinah. *She* wouldn't be surprised. The only daughter of Jacob, Dinah is portrayed in Genesis 34 primarily as a victim and as property in the tale of her rape by Shechem and the resulting revenge. Dinah laments that she has become a footnote, that her memory is dust, that no one recalls her skill as a midwife, or the songs she sang, or the bread she baked for her twelve insatiable brothers.

But inside the Red Tent, she is so much more...beloved daughter, blossoming woman, bereft lover, young mother, valuable keeper of lore in a lineage of blood. The Red Tent is a place of full moons, mystery and tradition. A place where women remain separate for three days during the time of menstruation, sharing stories and wisdom and deep connection. After reading this book, a colleague of mine joked that if men were required to spend three days in a tent, they'd need a ball to throw around. No offense, guys; woman are wired to be relational, and The Red Tent is an unabashedly relational, maternal, and female refuge.

As Dinah explains, she has four mothers...Leah, Rachel, Zilpah, and Bilhah. Each of them scolding, teaching, and cherishing something different about me," she writes, "giving me different gifts, cursing me with different fears." "Leah gave me birth and her splendid arrogance. Rachel showed me where to place the midwife's brick and how to fix my hair. Zilpah made me think. Bilhah listened. No two mothers seasoned her stew the same way."

"Women want daughters to keep their memories alive," Dinah tells us. "My mother and my mother- aunts told me endless stories. No matter what their hands were doing -- holding babies, cooking, spinning, weaving -- they filled my ears. In the ruddy shade of the Red Tent, the menstrual tent," Dinah recalls, "they ran their fingers through my curls, repeating the escapades of their youth, the sagas of their childbirth. Their stories were like offerings of hope and strength poured out before the Queen of Heaven, only these gifts were not for any god or goddess -- but for me."

Over and over in this amazing book, we're privy to the intricacies of being instructed in the ways of the women. In one gut wrenching passage, Tabea is banished and cursed by Rebecca because she had not been taught properly by her mother, who is an outsider to the tribe. The chain of identity had been severed, and she herself becomes broken in mind, body, and spirit. It's heartbreaking.

Reading and speaking Dinah's words -- as mother, as daughter, as minister -- I must admit how I long for The Red Tent. Even so, my yearning leads me to ask this Mother's Day morning whether there is such a thing anymore as teaching our daughters "properly" in the "ways of the women." Whether there is a "way" in which to be "schooled" when womanhood has been opened up to so many permutations of being in the world. I'm wondering what timeless wisdom we might impart to our daughters in the

year 2004, when the Red Tent now takes the form of the front seat of the car on the way to soccer, a noisy table at the Mall Food Court, or a few stolen moments in the hallway between homework and bedtime.

Alas, in this day and age of over-scheduled kids and over-extended moms, we can't realistically set aside three full days every month for deep connection. Can you imagine such a luxury?! Some days, it seems that we can hardly spare three minutes. Who would drive the carpool, pack the lunches, sign permission slips, maintain a career, call the plumber, chair a committee at school or church? Not to mention how many homework assignments and Instant Messenger e-mails would pile up, or the piano lessons missed. How can mother and daughter connect now, sharing wisdom, offering gifts of hope and strength, nurturing and being nurtured?

First, I'd like to ask us to interpret the terms "Mother" and "Daughter" in the broadest possible sense. In the Red Tent, Dinah talks about having four mothers. Only one is biological; the other three are spiritual mothers, adoptive mothers, aunts, guides. A daughter can be the product of our own wombs or she can be a girl (or woman) we love and mentor and with whom we share our wisdom. Using this definition, we can employ endless combinations of mother-daughter: sisters, close confidantes and friends, mother-in law and daughter-in-law, aunt and niece, cousins, teacher and student, crone and maiden. I'd argue that if we nurture a female or are nurtured by one, then we reside together in The Red Tent.

And yes, I'm painfully aware of wounded women among us this morning who haven't experienced caring or guidance from the mothers who raised them, and that memories of Mom reside in a tent red with anger or neglect or even abuse. For this, I acknowledge and share your sorrow and pain, and I encourage you to cast yourself in one of the mother-daughter pairings I've just mentioned, where you might find or have already found nurture. If you are a man listening today, I ask that you relate my words to any mother or daughter or woman you have ever loved or love still.

In writing this sermon, I've explored my own history, looking for women's wisdom to re-collect and share not just with my 14-year-old daughter Michaela, but with all of you this morning. I suppose when I consider my own story, I've had at least four mothers. As a person of Jewish heritage, I got a good chuckle from Dinah's remark that she had four mothers. Four Jewish mothers? Oy vay! A blessing and a curse, I'd say from experience. The Jewish mother -- a distinctive blend of adoration, overprotection, hyperbole, and guilt. Who but a Jewish mother would look at a Nerf Ball and lament, "You could put an eye out with that thing!!?"

One daughter in NYC named Amy Borkowsky, has done all she could to keep her well-meaning, quintessential Jewish mother at bay. Amy jokes that her mother still checks off "Full Time Mother" on forms even though Amy is 37. And it's true, she's a full time mother, with over concern encoded in her DNA. Amy collected her mother's maddening but hilarious answering machine messages for more than a decade and compiled them in a book (called, not surprisingly, "Amy's Answering Machine." Mom calls her daughter "Amila" by the way, as in: "(beep) Hi Amila, If you haven't already left to go to the motor vehicles bureau, keep in mind that the wait is very long. So before you get into the line, you many want to empty your bladder. (beep)." Or, "(beep) yeah, Amila, so you don't set off the metal detector at the airport, make sure that when you leave the house you don't wear an underwire bra. (beep) "

Like just about everyone else, Amy is frustrated by her mother's constant advice and worrying, yet she's torn because she does realize how unique a mother's love is. Says Amy, "The most devoted friend, lover, or even husband would never call you in a panic to warn you to alternate which side you wear your purse on so your shoulders don't get uneven."

I don't recall anyone quite like Amy's mother in my lineage, but I *do* recall a powerful ritual honoring the chain of women in one's life at a church retreat I attended some years ago. When the candle passed to me, I intoned, "I am Robin, Great-granddaughter of Rebecca, granddaughter of Esther, daughter of Flora, mother of Michaela." This is my genesis of Jewish mothers and daughters, and I've both carried forward their wisdom and set off in new bolder directions, just like Dinah journeying into Egypt. Like them, I've been both overprotective and neglectful. I wear their legacy like a blood red tattoo.

My mother, Flora, was a homemaker and an artist. After school, I'd come home and watch soap operas with her and we'd chat about our day. Dinner was on the table religiously at 6:00 PM, and it always delicious and representative of the four major food groups. I learned through proximity and osmosis about broiling a steak, coordinating an outfit, and arranging paintings on a wall; about summer vacations at the beach and how parents show up on visitors day at summer camp.

Like Dinah, I learned painful lessons, too, and the wisdom of disappointment and loss, fear and longing. When she died 15 years ago of cancer at age 56, I worried that the chain would be broken. But my daughter, Michaela, began asking about her as soon as she could communicate. She'd toddle over and get Mom's picture and bring it back to me, look me straight in the eye and say, "Your mommy died." On some inexplicable, almost primal level this little toddling Zen Master wanted me to reach beyond my grief and keep my mother's stories alive and share them with her. I've tried not to disappoint her, even though the stories are not all fairy tales with happy endings. They seldom are.

Perhaps this is one of the gifts we can give our daughters -- to be honest with them about the Cinderella myth and the happily-ever-afters; that the enchanted castle may have a glass ceiling and a sticky floor; that it may be more useful to learn how to ride the white horse than to expect to be rescued by a Prince astride one.

I identify utterly with Dinah when she explains that "Stories about food show a strong connection between mother and daughter." Teaching your daughter to cook, especially traditional family dishes, is a timeless way to maintain the chain. I recall an incident several years ago when I wanted to make my Grandma Esther's noodle kugel - a sweet creamy dessert. But then I panicked...what if I didn't have the recipe? Where would I get it now that my Grandmother and my Mother are both dead? *TheRedTent.com?*

And then, I located the coveted kugel recipe, scrawled in my mother's graceful and familiar handwriting on a yellowing recipe card. In her fashion, she had jotted the word "Yum!" in the corner.

The ingredients are pedestrian and the recipe simple, but for me, creating that dessert had been like performing a sacred ritual. As I beat the eggs and sprinkled the cinnamon, I realized that *this* is a recipe for a lot more than noodle kugel. It is a recipe for connection, a form of Jewish table wisdom passed down by the women in my family; a legacy blended and baked and sweetened with joy and with tears.

The memory and influence of my Grandma Esther remain strongest in my life. She was a trained milliner, and I remember the exquisite Barbie doll clothes she made from scraps of elegant fabrics she had expertly fashioned into her own wardrobe; I recall sleepovers in her trim apartment and mouthwatering meals prepared in a tiny kitchen, the various dishes cooking in pots stacked amazingly and precariously atop one another. I remember her courage and determination to raise my mother through the Depression after she was widowed, and her much-lauded dedication to Jewish causes, especially Haddassah and Bnai Brith. I recall her energy, her humor, her style, her marvelous hats.

And I especially recall her funeral. As a small group of us stood graveside, the Rabbi declared that because not enough men were present to form a "minyan" of 10; we could not say the Jewish prayers for the dead. I stepped forward and told the startled Rabbi that I would say prayers for my Grandmother because she deserved prayers. I made them up on the spot -- in English, and spoke them in a woman's voice. And there was not a thing he could do about it.

How ironic that she had been named for the Biblical heroine who would not be silent. I would not be silent then and I should not be silent now. I honored her then, do I honor her now in the way I live in the world as a role model for my daughter? I hope so.

We can encourage our daughters to speak in their authentic voices, to not be silent or silenced by louder, deeper voices. To be both strong and soft women, leaders and lovers, to be vulnerable but also courageous in the face in adversity. Listening to our daughters will empower them to expect the world to listen, too.

Many of us are aware of the issue of self-esteem among girls, especially in the pivotal adolescent years. When I recall my own girlhood, I envision this pixie-topped willful tomboy with moxie and plenty of ideas of her own. I guess some things never change! But then adolescence hit, and I experienced most of the transitions we've read about in books like "Reviving Ophelia." All of a sudden, I wondered: Am I smart enough, thin enough, good enough, dateable enough?

There is a pushing Mom away. "I'm not like HER," we shriek, but with the underlying plea, "Keep loving me and believing in me." Then, unless the relationship has been irreparably damaging and toxic, there is often a circling back. Mother magically becomes wise again, daughter gratefully becomes huggable again. And, with enough time under the Red Tent (regardless of its form), mother and daughter do not become lost to one another. So, Mothers... keep loving and believing in your daughters as you are forced to let go; Daughters...trust that the Red Tent will not vanish as you test your wings.

Another of my mothers was my Aunt Inkie, who died several months ago, and was one of the few true career women I knew in my Baby Boomer childhood. She was a social worker, and I thought she was really cool and really strange. She told me a story that I'll never forget about how she succumbed to societal guilt and became a stay-at-home mom, greeting her daughters after school with platters of warm, home-baked cookies. One day, my cousin Laura came through the door, sneered at the cookies, and whined, "Can't we just have Oreos??" Aunt Inkie went back to work the following week.

Dinah was expected to follow a prescribed path, but we can encourage our daughters to follow their own paths, like my Aunt Inkie did, even if it's unfashionable. We can let them know it's all right to be mother *and/or* Governor; homemaker or social worker; minister or volunteer, or some combination thereof, by claiming and celebrating our own choices and by admitting our mistakes.

Perhaps the greatest wisdom I can share with Michaela is that womanhood is not about either-ors; that I hope, among other things, she will speak in her own voice and also be a good listener; that she'll be both safe and brave, that she'll look for bargains and also splurge occasionally; that she'll keep her elbows clean and also let herself get sweaty on the soccer field; that she'll fall in love and retain her own identity; that she'll believe in herself, and have faith that I believe in her, always, even beyond death, just like her foremothers.

This summer, I will offer to teach my daughter how to make Grandma Esther's kugel. It will be one way to reconnect the chain of my women-kin. Even though we meet now under the canopy of a patio awning by porch light, the metaphor remains: the tent is blood red, the moon glows in its fullness, the wisdom is still ours to carry and to share. Let us hold our daughters of womb and heart close to us in the tent and hear the timeless voice of Dinah saying, "If you love me, teach me to thrive some day without you, to be my own genesis."

So may it be.

Shalom, and Amen.

Benediction: *Haiku* by Mitsuye Yamada

What your mother tells you now
in time
you will come to know.