



after ten years, was also grounds for an easy, 'no-fault' divorce. Increasingly desperate, Rachel gives her slave-woman to Jacob to have a child on her behalf, for Rachel to adopt and raise, before she finally bears the child of her own womb that she has been longing for.

The stories of these women, as scanty as they are, make my heart ache. Of course, we already know, by the time we come to their story, that the Hebrew Bible does not idealize family relationships. Like the dramatically dysfunctional families of modern soap operas, the families of the Bible (both men and women) lie, cheat, pretend to be their brother or sister to take what isn't theirs, and generally make our own family dramas seem fairly tame.

Yet it has been noticed that pairs of women in the Bible "are always defined as two rivals who are interlinked by family ties and interlock in social combat, as if no alternative pattern of social behaviour is conceivable for them..." [Athalya Brenner, *The Feminist Companion to the Bible*] Think of Sarah before them, for example, and the rivalry between her and her slave-woman Hagar, when both bore sons to patriarch Abraham. The patriarchal society of the Bible often pitted women against each other, in very crass terms, for the love and economic protection of men.

And while there is rivalry between brothers as well, as between Jacob and Esau, or between Joseph and his brothers in the next generation to come, in those cases, the men are able to be transformed, to achieve reconciliation, to eventually cry on each other's necks and put the past to rest. Rachel and Leah, at least in the Scriptural story, are never given that opportunity.

At least, not in the biblical story. Reading it again this week made me wonder what their real story was, if you could read between the lines. And I'm not the only one who has wondered. The ancient Jewish rabbis, writing in the first few hundreds years A.D., also wondered, and speculated that in fact, Rachel and Leah showed each other great kindness and generosity.

For example, the rabbis wondered why Rachel didn't act in the first place, to prevent the deception her father was planning. Why didn't she make sure she was the one under the veil, or warn Jacob ahead of time, or plan a dramatic "revealing" of the deception in the middle of the wedding, like they do on soap operas today? Well, the rabbis suggested, perhaps it was because Rachel was so kind-hearted, and loved her sister Leah so much, that she couldn't bear to see her publicly shamed and humiliated. So she went along with the deception, willing to give up the man she loved so that her sister could be happy, not knowing that another deal would be made for her as well. [Dr. Nora Gold, "Rachel and Leah: A Jewish Model of Sisterhood"]

And the rabbis suggest that Leah loved her sister as well, so much so that when she saw the anguish Rachel's infertility was causing her, Leah gathered all the wives, along with Jacob, to pray together that Rachel might be granted a child. In this tradition, Leah prays for her rival to have the one thing that gives Leah superiority over her. [Midrash HaGadol, cited in Louis Ginzberg's *Legends of the Bible*, cited by Gold in "Rachel and Leah"]

So, the rabbis propose, each sister was willing to give up something unique and precious so that the other one might be happy. Rather than two women who fight over a man and never manage to get their act together as sisters, they are instead imagined in the Jewish tradition as true sisters, who offer each other generosity, compassion and the willingness to give up a position of superiority over each other, for the other's well-being.

It's quite a reading between the lines, I admit. But it's worthwhile doing, if only to remind ourselves of the very different time and culture from which the biblical stories come. But also, to remind ourselves, in this day and time, of the kinds of burdens of oppression God's people have had to endure, even in the community of the "chosen", the people of the covenant, the ones who are trying faithfully to live God's way.

It's a good lesson because of course, these kinds of oppressions are still at work today, in our own culture and around the world. As I pondered the different captivities that Leah, Rachel and their two slave-women Bilhah and Zilpah each found themselves within, I listened with a different ear to the news this week. Like the story of eleven year-old Mitchell Wilson, who committed suicide a few weeks ago after being bullied and assaulted by some other boys because of his disability. Or the recent spate of suicides of gay teenagers in the US, because they could no longer bear being taunted and abused for being gay.

It made me wonder where God is, in Leah and Rachel's story, and in our own stories today? If God doesn't actively intervene, doesn't interfere with the power structures of the day...if God doesn't demolish patriarchy and institute equal rights for women and first nations people and gay and lesbian people...if God doesn't, in one fell swoop, make everything all better, once and for all...then what is God up to? Where is God in stories and lives of oppression and heartache?

I suppose we come to know that in the story of Jesus, don't we. Jesus, who disclaims all power and status and authority and embraces ordinariness, weakness, smallness. Jesus, who constantly notices and reaches out to and includes those who are most outcast, most heartbroken, most alone. Jesus, who inspires each one of us to do the same, to strengthen each other with acts of loving kindness and generosity, as the rabbis imagine Rachel and Leah did, making their imperfect lives somehow not just bearable but fruitful and beautiful.

Jesus, who on the cross is able to take the worst violence and oppression the world can dish out, and by absorbing it into himself, reveals it, shames it and defeats it. Jesus, who walks out of the tomb as a sign of God's ability to bring strength out of pain, life out of death, freedom out of oppression.

So, the title wasn't "*What goes around, comes around,*" after all. Because that doesn't always happen, thanks be to God. None of us ever gets what we really deserve, by the grace of God. What we are given instead is a membership in a family, sisterhood and brotherhood on a faith journey together. And an invitation to generosity, compassion, and giving up of our superiority so that the well-being of others, especially the most vulnerable, may be enhanced. May we answer the call, in the name of Rachel and Leah, our foremothers in the faith. Amen.