

“Reaching Out to Connect with Each Other”

Rabbi Franklin Muller, D.D.

Interfaith Women of the Valley’s Annual Interfaith Tea

Congregation Rodef Sholom | Youngstown, OH

February 18, 2020

There were these four women who were in an interfaith dialogue group, a Catholic, a Protestant, a Muslim, and a Jewish woman, and they were all talking about their children. Actually, they were discussing which one’s son loves her the most. The Catholic woman says, you know, every Christmas my son sends me the most gorgeous poinsettias, and for Easter he sends me the most beautiful arrangement of lilies with a box of Godiva chocolates. Well, I can top that, says the Protestant woman – My son visits me every Sunday after church and then takes me to the movies. That’s all well and good, says the Muslim woman, but during the whole month of Ramadan, when we don’t eat from sunrise to sundown, my son comes over to my house after work every day and cooks me the most scrumptious dinner to break the fast. Then the Jewish woman says, I think I’ve got all of you beat. You see, my son is in therapy five days a week, and the whole time he talks about nothing but me! Now if you’ve seen any movies directed by Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, or the Coen brothers, you know that we Jews are considered the masters of self-deprecating humor. But I suspect that to some extent this is true in all faiths. And I think this is a good thing, because I believe, and I’m sure you’ll agree with me, that laughter is the best medicine. You know we live in a society that all too often pokes fun at or even mocks other people. I think our world would be a much kinder and gentler place, if only, at least once in a while, we could laugh at ourselves.

But laughter aside, we have all gathered here today for a very meaningful purpose. How important it is for women of differing faiths to come together humbly, yet confidently, to share your religious beliefs and how those beliefs have impacted your own lives for good, and how they have taught and inspired you to reach out to help those in need.

As we look out into the world today, we find that violence and conflict are daily headlines in our nation and around the globe. As we read about stories of refugees, immigrants, and the homeless, the poverty and hunger experienced by the victims of these conflicts, our hearts go out to them, and yet we sometimes feel helpless to stop this endless cycle of devastation and destruction.

But we can take heart in the power of the individual, and especially the power of women, to work for positive change in small ways at home and in our spheres of influence, especially through our religious communities. You never know what a small act, an idea for a project, or a vision of what could be, may take off and spark a movement. Just ask Greta Thunberg, the teenage activist for climate change who was just named Time magazine’s 2019 Person of the Year.

Yes, there are the movers and the shakers who do big things, but generally great accomplishments are measured in the small localized steps that created some momentum bringing people of faith together for the good of society and the world.

This gathering today is not simply an opportunity to meet and greet each other over tea, but to share the values we live by which are grounded in our respective Faith traditions, and to demonstrate our support for the good works of other women of faith. You know, when we get right down to it, we are really not all that different from each other. Yes, our holidays and rituals may differ, even our various histories and theologies, but our basic values, goals and objectives of what the religious life should do for us, and ask from us, are more similar than we might realize. Let me explain. In the Jewish faith, every synagogue must have three things in order to be considered a true Jewish house of worship: an eternal light, an ark housing the Five Books of Moses, what we call the Torah, and the third thing, believe it or not – windows. First, the Eternal Light, the source of which is found in the book of Exodus, pertaining to the original portable sanctuary which the Israelites moved from place to place as they wandered through the desert, represents the eternal existence and ongoing presence of the Divine light of God in our lives. This belief in a Higher Power is the foundational starting point for all religious faiths. You can see our eternal light in the center of the Sanctuary just above the ark. Second, the Torah is the most important of our sacred Scriptures, containing the salient values of the Jewish faith. Sacred Scriptures representing the word of God, are, in fact, common to all faiths. They are a record of the inherited teachings handed down from generation to generation. And finally, the third item, windows, are common to almost every religious sanctuary. In the Jewish faith, windows represent our obligation not to forget that there are less fortunate people beyond the sanctuary walls who need our help and assistance. We call it good deeds or mitzvot, a Hebrew word which is the plural of “mitzvah,” meaning commandment. We Jews are ethical monotheists, believers in the one God who not just asks, but commands of us moral and ethical behavior, to help the downtrodden and free the oppressed. I believe this is called “good works” in the interfaith arena. The point I’m trying to make is that when it comes to our most basic and essential core values, regardless of our particular faith, they are quite similar. I do not intend to whitewash some of the differences between our respective faiths. They certainly do exist, but they do not need to be points of contention. Rather, they can be points of celebration, where we all subscribe to the universal notion that we try to recognize in every religion the attempt to approach, to encounter and connect with God. As such, Reform Judaism (and I’m hopeful that I can speak without misrepresenting those of you from other faiths here today as well) welcomes all truth, from whatever source. So, all of us here today believe in one God, we follow our sacred Scriptures, and we put a very high priority on making the world a better place, what we Jews call “Tikkun Olam,” which means, “to repair our broken world.” Given the state of our world today, I believe that religion, for this very reason, has become more important than ever.

Sad to say, but what we are witnessing today is a devaluation, or diminution, of the importance of religion in a world that is becoming increasingly secularized and polarized. The secular world dismisses religion as irrelevant in this modern, science-driven world. Despite pressure and ridicule from those who see no value in religion, women of faith must maintain the ability to love and be respectful to others. When you consider the increasing divisiveness, vilification, and

invective that dominates today's political scene, for example, I believe that the interreligious community serves as a counterpoint to that dangerous trend. It's all about people coming together to dialogue with each other, even when it's about issues that we don't necessarily agree on. Tragically, and in all too many ways, religion today finds itself on the margins of society, where one's beliefs and values may be expressed privately but are often dismissed publicly.

A disturbing example of this dangerous trend, which caught my attention a few weeks ago, was something I came across in USA Today. Last month, the newspaper launched an ambitious initiative to commemorate 100 years of women's suffrage. Few events in American History transformed our nation as monumentally as the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment to the Constitution, giving women the right to vote. The project is called "Women of the Century," and the goal is to inspire women, young women and girls to work towards achieving a better America. Readers were asked to nominate women from their towns, cities, and states, who are presently living or who lived during the last 100 years, who have made a difference on a state or national level in the following areas: Arts, literature, business, civil rights, education, entertainment, law, media, nonprofits and philanthropy, politics, science and medicine, even sports. The sponsors will use the nominations, together with the help of historians, scholars, and other experts, to highlight more than 500 women, 10 from each state and the District of Columbia, who have inspired us over the past 100 years. Nominations closed January 31<sup>st</sup>, and selections will be announced beginning next month. In addition, USA Today will announce in August, on the actual date of the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment, 19 iconic American women as national women of the century.

Well, I looked at this list of a dozen fields, and I was immediately struck by the glaring omission of one area in particular. Would anyone care to guess what I am referring to? That's exactly right, religion! Inspiring women of the last 100 years, and they leave out religion? Are you kidding me? They include women from the worlds of entertainment and sports, but they forget about religion? I was flummoxed to say the least. Some of the most influential and inspirational women of the last century were Preachers and Teachers of the word of God. What has a greater impact on the developing moral conscience of a child or the ethical behavior of adults than a rousing sermon or lesson from a charismatic priest, pastor, reverend, imam, or rabbi. One of the proudest moments in the history of Reform Judaism was in 1972 when Sally Priesand became the first ordained woman Rabbi in America. The Conservative movement followed suit in 1985. Today in the Reform movement over half of the rabbis being ordained are women. And on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Rodef Sholom will have its first female spiritual leader, as I will be retiring on May 31<sup>st</sup>. That is a huge step forward in the history of this congregation. In our temple, women have been empowered not only on the pulpit, but in the board room as well. In the course of our 150 plus year history, four women have served as president of the congregation, six if you include our merger with the former Temple Beth Israel of Sharon, PA, and today all full-time staff, including our Executive Director and Office Manager, are women as well. So, it's going to a woman's world here at Rodef Sholom. And that is a good thing, for women, in addition to their business acumen and professional skills, definitely bring a certain compassion, empathy, and understanding, which you can never have enough of in a religious institution. We men are

trying, but we're wired a little differently. I think it's the "Men are from Mars, Women are From Venus" thing.

And I would imagine that women have played an ever-increasing role in your religious institutions as well over the last few decades. Perhaps there was, or presently is, an inspirational spiritual leader that impacted you in a positive and significant way. So how in the world could USA Today miss the boat so badly? I actually nominated Rabbi Priesand, and vehemently protested the omission of the religious category in the comment section. So, we will see what happens. Of course, this isn't the first time that women of faith have been written out of history. In the misogynistic, patriarchal world of the Bible, women heroines were often relegated to the dustbin of history, demoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> class status. But there are so many women throughout history worthy of emulation. Only in recent years has history finally turned into HERstory. I recently finished reading a fascinating book, Daughters of the Desert: Remarkable Women from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Traditions. Here we have the stories of 18 heroic women; from Jewish tradition – Sarah, Shifrah and Puah, the two midwives in ancient Egypt who refused to carry out Pharaoh's genocidal order to kill every male child born to a Jewish woman, Miriam, Huldah, Shoshana and Esther. From Christian tradition – Mary of Nazareth, Eleni, Salome, Binah, Mary Magdalene, and Lydia. From the Muslim tradition – Eve, Hagar, Khadija, Fatima, Zarah, and Aisha. These stories bring to life the women; daring, brave, thoughtful, and wise – who played important and exciting roles in the early days of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

And then there are the unsung heroines of the Bible whose stories are glossed over and virtually forgotten. One example of this is what we will encounter very soon in our weekly cycle of Torah readings. Each Sabbath a portion of the Torah is read, covering the entire Five Books of Moses each year. In mid-March we will read about the Golden Calf, the statue which the Israelites hastily fashioned when Moses was delayed in coming down from his encounter with God at Mt. Sinai. When Aaron asked for the people to contribute their jewelry to make the idol, and this is not in actual Scripture but in the collection of Jewish folklore known as Midrash, only the men contributed jewelry; the Israelite women refused to surrender their earrings for the forging of the Golden Calf, rejecting it as "a graven molten image without any power." In recognition of their faithfulness, God rewarded the women both in this world and the world-to-come. In this world, they received special privileges on Rosh Chodesh (the celebration of the New Moon), traditionally a day on which Jewish women abstained from work. And in the world-to-come, "women are destined to be renewed like new moons."

If you look to your left at the fourth stained glass window going from the front, you will see depicted there the vessel in which the priests cleansed themselves before entering the Temple. The verse underneath is from Isaiah, "Wash yourselves clean, put your evil doings away from My sight. Learn to do good, devote yourselves to justice. Aid the wronged. Free the oppressed." (Isaiah 1:16-17) At the bottom of the vessel, you will see seven cows; they are not the ones from Pharaoh's dream. They are a reference to the sin of the Golden Calf. Why seven cows? Because we have to be vigilant to cease from evil and do only the good every day. Seven days a week! So, praise the Israelite women who resisted the sin of idolatry with the Golden

Calf. And what of the countless other women who impacted history down through the years, right up to modern times? Their stories must be told as well.

One thing I liked about the USA Today contest is that it doesn't focus solely on heroic women in the public sphere. It will also celebrate amazing women who make the world a better place through their everyday good work and simply being an example to others around them. The promotional material said, "We invite you to nominate any woman, or even yourself." I want to conclude by saying what I think is a very important point to make. I can't stress this enough, but if you remember one thing from my talk today, when you leave the Temple, it is this: Every one of you here today is a heroine by virtue of the work you do, whether it's in your city, your township, your religious community, your neighborhood, your street, your family, your friends, or even just to yourself. Some of you here today are survivors of cancer, some other illness, or a tragedy of some sort in your life that knocked you down, all the way down, but you got right back up and you're here today, you have survived, and you are, in the eyes of all of us, a heroine. You are all heroines by virtue of the impact you make in this world. I am convinced that when women of faith unite, we not only strengthen the relationship between religions, but individual lives are touched as we reach out to each other. Let us reach out to each other today, and forge relationships and connections that will last for years to come. Thank you.