

## “I HAVE A REASON FOR MY BEING”

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My dear friends,

The Torah portion this week is called “Life of Sarah.” It begins with a brief reference to Sarah, our matriarch, but does not tell us any new details of her life.

This morning I want you to know about three women of valor who are spiritual inheritors of Sarah.

The first is Carolyn Jaffe. I learned about her from a book that collects obituaries by Jim Sheeler, a writer for the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, Colorado. The book is called Obit: Inspiring Stories of Ordinary People Who Led Extraordinary Lives.

Jim Sheeler holds the Shirley Wormser Professorship in Journalism and Media Writing at Case Western Reserve University. He won the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

This is the beginning of Sheeler’s obituary of Carolyn Jaffe:

The man lay on the couch, waiting for the tiny, white-haired woman who would appear whenever he needed her, throughout the last month of his life. Before saying a word, Jaffe walked to the patient and dropped to her knees. She later explained, “That’s the most important thing. You should never stand over someone. You should get down to their level.”

Jaffe repeated that scene or variations of it 624 times. She approached the treatment of 624 terminally ill patients in that same way during her career as a hospice nurse that extended over more than 20 years. In each case she was committed to the care of the patient until the final breath.

Jaffe once wrote, “People often ask me how I could stand it all these years, taking on one patient after another knowing they would all die. Saying goodbye over and over as one life after another ended. It is true I lose a friend when the patient dies, sometimes a dear friend. I hurt when I say goodbye. Often I cry. But then I turn around and take another family, another patient. I do so because I feel sure and strong about what I do; it’s so right. I feel rich. I’ve been rewarded.

Carolyn Jaffe cofounded an organization called Hospice of Metro Denver. Since its founding more than 30 years ago the organization has helped more than 35,000 terminal ill patients die peacefully at home, surrounded by family instead of strangers.

In her own work, Jaffe never allowed forgot the power and poignancy of life. She would readily share with others the lessons that come from listening to last words.

After entering a patient's home, she would often cook, clean, and talk to family members as if they were her own. Some of those family members became her best friends; others became dedicated hospice volunteers.

She received the prestigious Nightingale Award in 1990. That's one of the highest honors in nursing. In 1995, the University of Denver recognized her with an honorary doctorate of humane letters.

Despite the accolades, she remained grounded and self-deprecating, sharing her mistakes to help others learn.

In 1997 she wrote a book entitled "All Kinds of Love." In that book she said, Dying is never easy. Suffering and grief are always part of dying. But closeness and warmth can be there, too. If I've done my job well, I feel the warmth and closeness. I share the laughter and love. I know I have made the time better. I have changed the dying from something that's feared, something that's the enemy, to a natural part of life, maybe even a friend. The families tell me this, and I know it without their saying a word. This is powerful. It is beautiful.

In September, 2001, a heart problem sent Jaffe herself to the hospital as a patient. Her doctor scheduled surgery, but then decided that her weakened body could not take the stress. Before they could send her home, though, she had another heart attack. Her doctor determined that she had only hours to live.

Her daughter, Mindy Jaffe, was already on a plane from Hawaii, where she served as a state representative. Her son, Evan Jaffe, was on his way from New Jersey, where he is a rabbi. Caroline Jaffe allowed her doctor to use a respirator to keep her alive for the few hours it took for her daughter and son to arrive.

Once the family made it to her hospital room, Jaffe scribbled on a note that it was time for her to go. When the tube was removed, her life would last about 40 minutes.

As the little white-haired lady drifted away, her husband and children gathered around and held her hands. Her daughter bent down to her on her level, just as her mother had taught.

"As she was taking her last breaths, I got up next to her and breathed in the air as she breathed it out," Mindy Jaffe said. "She gave me my first breath. I was taking in her last. For me, it was a passing of the torch. I felt very comfortable, right there, breathing in my mother's last breaths. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world. It was a lovely goodbye."

Carolyn Jaffe. Helping people in the final days and hours of their lives. Passing on the lessons of her lifetime and experiencing for herself the easing of the passage into death with which she had helped so many people.

The second inheritor of the spirit of Sarah is my own grandmother, Rebecca Woodbridge Van Cleve Nicol.

My grandmother was born in Minneapolis in 1884. Her grandfather was Horatio Phillips Van Cleve, a General in the U S Army who fought in the Civil War.

I have the honor to be named after my grandmother. My middle name, Van Cleve, is her maiden name.

At the age of 17 Rebecca married a young and handsome preacher named James Nicol. Together they studied Arabic for two years, then left Minneapolis in 1905 to serve as Presbyterian missionaries in Syria. They worked there as missionaries for nearly 45 years and raised a family of six children. One of them was my mother.

Rebecca and James survived two world wars and the partition of Syria after World War One that created the country of Lebanon.

My grandmother took as her special mission reaching out to comfort the prostitutes of Beirut and destitute women in jail.

She was a tiny but fearless lady. She would go into the red light district of Beirut and into its jails to befriend and encourage the exploited and imprisoned women she encountered there. When I discussed this with her later she referred to these women as "my girls."

My grandmother was not doing this work in order to make converts to Christianity. She did this work because that was what God required of her. She used to tell us, her grandchildren, "God wants you to be a blessing to the world."

My grandfather died in 1962. For the next fifteen years my grandmother lived in a small trailer in the back yard of one of her five daughters, my Aunt Margaret, in Trumansburg, New York, a small town close to Ithaca.

That area is Republican country. I doubt there were twenty Democrats within two counties of Trumansburg.

But that did not deter my grandmother. She cared deeply about social justice. She thought Democrats had more good ideas about helping needy people than Republicans did. She put up signs on her lawn and on her little trailer advocating for civil rights and other causes that moved her, not caring what the neighbors thought.

There was a state prison some distance away from where my grandmother lived. She decided to investigate whether that might be a place where she could do some good. She visited that prison and found there a young man serving a long sentence. She decided to keep visiting him, which she did for as many years as she was able.

After a while she had become a very old lady, bent over and needing a cane. The prison authorities didn't want her to bring the cane into the prison. But my grandmother was a determined woman. She kept visiting, and I think she just intimidated the guards into letting her keep her cane.

Rebecca Woodbridge Van Cleve Nicol. Determined missionary, finding people who needed her help and overcoming obstacles to provide what was needed.

This week I thought of my grandmother and her prison work as I read a New York Times obituary describing the life of Antonia Brenner. She died this week in Tijuana, Mexico, at the age of 86.

Antonia Brenner was a nun. Not for her entire adult life. Just for the last 35 years or so.

Mother Antonia was known as the Prison Angel. She left behind her comfortable life in Beverly Hills to minister to inmates in a notorious Mexican prison, eventually becoming a nun and spending more than 30 years living in a cell to be closer to those she served.

Mary Brenner was a twice-divorced mother of eight children when she began doing volunteer work for the poor in Mexico in the 1960s. She had been active in charity work in California while she was married. Her devotion intensified after a priest led her to La Mesa state penitentiary. That prison housed convicted murderers, gang leaders, rapists and other serious felons.

She began by providing for inmates' basic needs. She gave them aspirin, blankets, toiletries and prescription eyeglasses. She sang in worship services. She received a prison contract to sell soda to prisoners. She used the proceeds to bail out low-level offenders. When a prisoner died, whether of illness or in a gang fight, she prepared him for burial.

Mother Antonia once walked into the middle of a prison riot while bullets flew and tear gas filled the air. When the inmates saw her, fearless in her habit, the fighting stopped. She never seemed to stop smiling.

She had taken private vows and sewn her own habit in her early years volunteering in Mexico. When the bishops of Tijuana and San Diego heard of her work, they officially accepted her work as part of church ministry.

Around the same time, now age 50, she moved into the women's section of the prison. She lived for the next 35 years in a cell that was about 10 feet by 10 feet. She could come and go freely, but she devoted herself to the lives inside. Her mission constantly expanded, from the inmates and guards to their families.

"It's different to live among people than it is to visit them," she told The Washington Post in 2002. "I have to be here with them in the middle of the night in case someone is stabbed, in case someone has an appendix attack, in case someone dies."

In the early years of serving the poor in Southern California and Mexico, she worked with a Los Angeles priest, Msgr. Anthony Brouwers. He died in 1964. When she became a nun, she renamed herself Antonia in his memory.

Mother Antonia's work drew praise around the world, including from President Vicente Fox of Mexico and President Ronald Reagan. In 1991, she met Mother Teresa who was visiting Tijuana.

Mother Antonia once explained to a newspaper reporter the difference between pleasure and happiness.

“Pleasure depends on where you are, who you are with, what you are eating,” she said. “Happiness is different. Happiness does not depend on where you are. I live in prison. And I have not had a day of depression in 25 years. I have been upset, angry. I have been sad. But never depressed. I have a reason for my being.”

I have a reason for my being.

Carolyn Jaffe.

Rebecca Woodbridge Van Cleve Nicol.

Antonia Brenner.

Three women of valor who lived lives of purpose.

Three women who knew in their souls, as Mother Antonia said, “I have a reason for my being.”

I hope these three women will inspire us in our continuing searches for meaning in our own lives.