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Speaker Celebrates Women's Legacies

Link Staff Report

Rachael Freed was not a woman accustomed to hearing voices in her head. But when she first learned about the spiritual-ethical will — not a legal document, but a record of personal history, values and remembrances for loved ones and future generations — from a rabbi at her women's group in the early 1990s, she very clearly heard one say to her, "Turn this into a healing tool for women."

"Everything I had ever done had prepared me for this," she recalled. In her own words, Freed suddenly realized that her calling was to help women, "find their voices and values" and the means to "document their beliefs and blessings for a world in dire need of our wisdom, experience and love."

Freed will speak on *Exploring Jewish Women's Wisdom: Linking, Past, Present & Future* in Albuquerque on Thursday, Jan. 11, for the Women's Division of the Jewish Federation of New Mexico at a special luncheon from 12-1:30 p.m. at the EmbassySuites Hotel (1000 Woodward Place NE, Albuquerque). The cost to attend is \$18 per person.

Since that epiphany, the Minneapolis-based therapist, educator and author has become one of the nation's most highly-sought inspirational speakers on the special art of passing on beliefs and blessings, as detailed in her books, *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies; The Legacy Circle Facilitator's Guide*; and *The Women's Legacies Workbook for the Busy Woman (A Step by Step Guide for Creating a Spiritual-Ethical Will in 2 Hours or Less)*.

Tracing the ethical will's template back to the dying Jacob's blessing of his sons and his admonition that they not leave his bones in Egypt, Freed views the ethical will as integral to Jewish tradition, although she sees its application as having universal merit.

"Our tradition does a good job (with death and mourning). Still and yet, in order to do this work you have to realize you're mortal," she emphasized.

After crafting an ethical will curriculum more than a decade ago, Freed decided to test it with a truly captive audience: women at a nearby detention center

"It was earth shattering," she recalled of the experience, noting that the conversation "crossed all lines of ethnicity, religion, etc."

Since her introduction to the ethical will in the early 1990s, Freed has developed four contemporary applications for the ethical will and legacy work.

In her talks with Jewish audiences, Freed discusses the various ways women can leave a legacy, including through "tzedakah" (charity).

The stereotype is that women think money is unladylike and something someone else is supposed to handle," she said.

However, reciting statistics showing that women are more likely to outlive their spouses, Freed stated that many women inevitably find themselves "in charge of the money," and in an unexpected position to make philanthropic decisions.

"It's our task to ensure that the money does what it's supposed to do," she stressed.

Freed commended the many philanthropic opportunities available to Jewish women through Federation and Women's Division as important developments, proudly noting that her daughter, Debbie Stillman, appears on the cover of the United Jewish Communities' latest brochure on the Lion of Judah Endowment.

Freed also described how certain material possessions — such as the brass candlesticks her grandmother brought from Kiev — can be important legacies to be shared with future generations.

Freed is careful to note that a woman doesn't need to have children in order to leave an ethical will. Quoting spiritual activist Marianne Williamson, "All women are mothers of the planet." Freed explained how wills can be written for communities and organizations.

The main challenge Freed encounters are younger women, distracted by careers and families, who are, "too busy to be reflective," and yet eager to engage in legacy work. As an example, Freed recounted being told by a young mother preparing for an extended trip, that she contemplated, for the first time, that "she had told her young daughter a lot of 'things' but not who she was." The woman then committed to writing a "legacy letter," a more time-manageable means to convey generational values.

During her eclectic career, Freed, the grandmother of seven, taught secondary English, served in the Peace Corps in Tunisia, and founded the first hospital-based program for families of the dying in 1973 at Mt. Sinai Hospital in Minneapolis.

Despite her exhausting speaking schedule, Freed remains giddily uncynical about the work of helping women tell their stories.

"This is the best thing since sliced bread," she enthused. "Or, I guess I should say challah!"

To RSVP for the event, call Nancy Wagoner at the JFNM office, 821-3214.