

A Bit of Bedouin Perspective on World Politics Today

Written by Patricia Sohn

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PATRICIA SOHN, AUG 22 2018

Not long ago, I had the pleasure to watch a relatively recent film, a “collaboration,” in the very best sense of the word, between Palestinians and Israelis called, *Sand Storm* (2016, unrated – I would guess it is probably PG or PG-13 by most U.S. standards).

Sand Storm is about a Bedouin family living in the rocky, arid area that we would probably call desert plain. It is meant to be in Southern Israel. The setting could be any number of places in the region as well, however – parts of Jordan, Syria, northern Saudi Arabia, etc. Indeed, the protagonists’ main city referent is Amman, Jordan, rather than elsewhere.

The main protagonists in the film are a father, mother, and eldest daughter who are, together and apart, managing world-historical social changes and the demands that come with them. They are also living with and embracing traditions in the face of these changes.

The film begins as the father is taking the daughter home from college, where she is studying for a degree. In fact, she is driving and he is teaching her to drive on the rural roads between towns. He asks her how her exam went. She cheerfully reports that she received a 63 on her exam. Not too high. Not too low. More than half. Not outshining anyone.

The father is quietly horrified by her exam score. She says, “At least I tried.” He murmurs, “God help us if you don’t try harder.”

The father-daughter relationship is sweet and supportive. Indeed, research on Bedouin women suggests precisely that paternal support for education, and particularly the father’s attitudes toward honor, is an important factor in whether a Bedouin girl gets a Secondary education. This research also suggests that there is a generation gap among women in terms of gaining the benefits of modern education and institutions. When Bedouin moved to settled villages, women of that generation lost some of their social power with the loss of need for their traditional forms of work. Daughters who are educated today, by contrast, benefit from the offerings of modern education, technology, and job force. But the mother who supports her daughter’s education may be left betwixt and between, not quite supported in the same way by her traditional society, nor yet supported herself by the promises of modern education, etc. Bedouin women who are the first in their families to receive university degrees may feel tensions across these generations even more acutely, and some fathers were affected socially by the daughters’ educational status.

The mother in the film appears to find herself very much in this betwixt and between situation. The mother-daughter relationship, too, is warm, supportive, and loving. This, as the mother is dealing with a new, second wife in the household, and a (newly educated) daughter who wants to select her own husband (from college, no less). The juxtaposition between these two conditions is poignant.

Meanwhile, as all of this normal drama of contending with real-life and real-world changes is occurring, mother and daughter have to do the laundry – by hand, as the electricity is out and the generator is not working. Father and mother have to battle with the generator, and all must, in the interim, live with kerosene lighting (a somewhat dangerous form of evening light). Daughter has to clean the floor – a simple, cement floor – with a hose and

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squeegee mop/broom. The blessing of the cement floor and the roof over the head in the desert is apparent and contrasts with its basic condition. Father brings home new furniture for the new wife, and mother.... Well, I will leave a little bit of suspense for you. Any deep family conflict in the village is meted out through a traditional village council. You get the sense that people trust in the outcome of village council decisions. The people and families and extended families support one another, even in difficult circumstances, as these tensions are portrayed in the film.

Some depictions of the story emphasize the injustice of the failure of both mother's and daughter's efforts to change their worlds in various ways. But, for me, the moral of the story is somewhat different than that, as both of these powerful women do stand for themselves as self-actualized. They make their own decisions and have the freedom to do so, although their decisions, like most of us, are constrained by outside factors as well. However, neither of these women are silent, nor silenced. They are very much vocal about where they stand and how they are willing to live.

Sitting in the middle of a beautiful desert plain surrounded by desert mountains with a beautiful – and somewhat difficult – daily life, the specificity of context is a moving reminder of what matters. The battles between right and left in government halls everywhere are a far distant echo, barely felt in this film.

Those echoes might, one day, affect the protagonists. Indeed, some of the tensions they are experiencing in their family lives may be, in some way, the result of changes instituted in such government halls (let's say, regarding women's education, etc.).

In the end, tradition prevails. The daughter has the opportunity to leave the village – she is given this freedom – and she chooses not to do so. This has horrified some reviewers, begging the question: How much to intervene? How much to leave these families to their own ways of life? How much to busy ourselves with our own families and local contexts rather than wasting so much time in government halls that seek to transform and force others to perform our own particular versions of modernity for us?.....

I am reminded of one of my own favorite shows growing up, *The Walton's*. As someone who grew up on a farm and lives on a mini-farm even now, I am brought to wonder: Do the imperatives of modernity really require the abject destruction of all ways of life that do not mimic the (high) modernizing impulse? Or, is there yet room for coexistence among us?

About the author:

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