

# Zelophehad's Daughters

July 2011

I would like to start off tonight by trying to articulate just how excited I am to be here. In my two weeks at Shomrei Torah, the deep abundance of love and support from members, staff, Rabbi George and every person who has walked through the doors has been remarkable. I could not have dreamed of a better start for my rabbinical career. It is also exciting to me that this week's Torah portion is *Pinchas*, not so much for the broad story but, rather, for the story of Zelophehad's daughters that is tucked away inside.

The first few years of rabbinical school, I was struck by the strong feminist nature of some of my classmates and teachers. Back then, I would not have considered myself to be a feminist. So as I started to prepare to speak tonight, I tried very hard to shy away from speaking about Zelophehad's daughters. Yet I just couldn't give up the opportunity to talk about one of my favorite episodes in the Torah. I love this story, because it tells the triumphant tale of the very first feminist activists.

The story of Zelophehad's daughters actually appears in the Bible three times. The first time they are mentioned is in this week's portion. The story introduces us to the daughters of Zelophehad, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. Let's look at them together. The portion begins as God instructs Moses and Eleazar to conduct a widespread census of the people. God then instructs Moses to distribute lots of land in proportion to the enrolment of the group. Larger groups would acquire larger portions of land than smaller groups. Yet women at this time did not inherit land. Therefore, Zelophehad's daughters, whose father had died, were not entitled to any land at all.

These daughters come forth and stand before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains and the whole assembly at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Just take a moment and picture this scene. How intimidating it must have been for these ladies to step forward in front of so many people to speak up for what they believed in. They proclaim that their father has died in the wilderness and assure the council that he is not a rebel, distancing them from any suspicion of illegitimate challenge to authority.<sup>[1]</sup> The daughters also assure the assembly that their father had no sons, since, by law, any property their father has should be passed to his sons after his death.

The women go on to ask the assembly not to let their father's name be lost to his clan just because he has no sons. The preservation of a man's name through his property and legacy is a "venerable obligation in the Bible (see the Levirate Laws of Deuteronomy 25:5-10). These wise women thus cleverly frame their request in the shared language of communal, especially male, concern."<sup>[2]</sup> They plead to everyone present, Moses, the chief priest, the leaders and the entire congregation, to "Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!" (27:4). This public demand is absent of any polite, petitionary language, yet relays their desire to remain part of the community and family. This desire adds a moral force to the request.<sup>[3]</sup>

After the women make their plea, Moses takes the case in front of God. God tells Moses that, “the plea of Zelophehad’s daughters **is just**: that Moses should give them a hereditary holding among their father’s kinsmen and transfer their father’s share to them. Further, God changes the law for all times and all daughters. Zelophehad’s daughters make it possible for daughters to inherit land when there are no sons or brothers. This was a miraculous stride for women of this time.

With God’s statement, God does three important things. First, God states that these women are just in their request. Second, God not only gives the women their father’s land so that his name is not lost, God actually gives them their father’s land as a hereditary holding; they not only receive the piece of land, but they are also allowed to give the land to their offspring as an inheritance. This is a really big deal! In addition to helping these five women, God makes this decree a law for securing the same rights for other women through all generations.

It is monumental that these women not only have the chutzpah to speak up at such a time and that God responds so well, but it is also amazing that rabbis for centuries adorn these women with such respect. The Talmud says they are wise, interpreters and pious! These are amazing compliments especially when given to women!

These women achieved a tremendous feat regarding land inheritance for women. Additionally this story serves as a powerful lesson for anyone struggling with the idea of predetermined destiny or divine justice. These women force us to rethink fate and provide us with a vehicle to reconsider a message of hope faced with difficult obstacles in life. Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah should inspire each and every one of us to take our destiny into our own hands, move away from the places that feel most comfortable for us and into the holy centers where we are fighting for what we believe is fair, just and deserved.

Rabbi Silvina Chemen says, “After all, nothing is more sacred than life itself and the fight for what we believe is worthy. Thus, this parashah inspires us to discover that we too have the ability to know what is right for ourselves and what our rights ought to be. When we believe in our capacity to shape our history, to the point of being able to change even a law that came from the Revelation at Sinai, then we pay a tribute to Zelophehad’s daughters.”

It just feels *b’sheret* that my first chance to teach Torah here is with these women. Not just because of these women but because of how these women are able to come alive and teach us today. I am truly looking forward to sharing Torah with all of you for years to come.

May we all have the strength in the coming week to look at the typical situations around us with new eyes, the eyes of Zelophehad’s daughters, and let us be blessed with the wisdom to admit where changes are necessary and may we have the strength to take the proper actions.