

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Parashat Pinchas
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I read this week that J.D. Vance is running for the Republican nomination for Senate in the state of Ohio. Vance is the author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, a memoir that tells the story of his growing up poor and white in Ohio, with trips back to the Kentucky mountains, where his family is from. It tells of his mother's struggles with addiction, and being raised by his grandparents, his grandfather an alcoholic, joining the Marines after high school, going to The Ohio State University, and then Yale Law School. It's a good read, and a powerful story.

The book was published in June 2016, and really came as a look into the culture and experiences of some people who were supporting President Trump, of poor, white, disaffected Americans. It was subsequently made into a pretty good movie by and on Netflix, and has launched the 36-year-old Vance onto a recent career of venture capital, and now politics.

I bring up Vance and *Hillbilly Elegy* this 4th of July weekend because the book is really a look into the lives of marginalized people who have are yearning for a system that seems a little more fair to them, that will help them.

There are, of course, lots of memoirs, and movies, and narratives of historically marginalized people in this country. We can think about stories that help explain the experiences of indigenous peoples in North America, of Black and brown people in our country, of LGBTQ people, of poor people, of oppressed religious groups, which Jews used to be, and sometimes, sadly, still are.

A common experience I think, of marginalized people, is the feeling of not being seen, of not being noticed, or heard.

I bring this all up because of the story of the daughters of Tzelofchad which we read this morning in Chapter 27 of Numbers. Tzelofchad was a descendant of Joseph's son Menashe, and died in the wilderness. He had no sons, only daughters, and the Torah's inheritance laws, as so far defined, did not permit women to inherit land.

The daughters of Tzelofchad come to Moses and explain the situation. Moses doesn't say anything in response. The Torah just reports: "Moses brought their case before the LORD" (Num. 27:5), and God responds, "The words of the daughters of Tzelofchad are correct" (27:7), and proceeds to expand the inheritance laws to include women in some particular instances.

While this is often viewed as a kind of proto-feminist victory, which I very much think it is, I want to view this a little more broadly. More generally, this is a moment where marginalized people are listened to and heard, and responded to.

God here, and so often, is so clearly on the side of the weak--the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor, the oppressed.

Moses and God seem to be modeling listening and responding in compassionate ways to people who are not complaining--we've had plenty of examples of that in the Torah, and this is not that at all. Rather, it's people with a legitimate grievance, and they are asking for justice, and fairness, and opportunity.

When we listen to people in America who are asking for justice, and fairness, and opportunity, their requests, and even their needs. sometimes conflict. The democratic process is how we negotiate those conflicts.

But there's one other insight our tradition offers to help us--each of us--listen and hear and respond better.

Listen carefully to what the daughters of Tzelofchad say: "Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korah's faction, which banded together against the LORD, but died for his own sin; and he has left no sons. Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son!" (27:3-4)

They have five "reasons" for why they deserve to be able to inherit:

1. Their father died.
2. He was not one of Korach's faction.
3. He died of his own sin.
4. He had no sons.
5. Why should our father's name be lost to his family?

The midrash (Yalkut Shimoni on Numbers 27:2) "suggests that each of the daughters approached Moshe independently with a different reason for why they should get their father's inheritance. Each of the five daughters presented one of the five pleas.

The first said, "Our father died in the wilderness," The second said, "He was not part of the sin of Korach.," The third said, "but he died in his own sin." The fourth: "He had no sons." The fifth: "Why should our father's name be lost to his family." (Thanks to Yeshivat Maharat student Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch for her d'var Torah this week in which she brings this midrash: https://452d9613-43ee-4840-9785-4455a0302e5b.usrfiles.com/ugd/452d96_4a5cbba53f434a8984e6d7a991259de6.pdf)

Moshe may not have been convinced by hearing one person's reason and explanation for this. He may not have been convinced by two people's different reasons and explanations. Or three, But five of them seem to convince him.

And they're all different. Don't read *Hillbilly Elegy* and expect to suddenly have your mind changed and your perspective dramatically shifted. But try finding and reading and listening to five different voices all from poor, white America, and see if your perspective *doesn't* change. Some of us probably need to do that. Others of us may need to really listen to some different trans voices, or Black voices, or Asian-American voices.

Those of us trying to create change need to remember that our voices and perspective alone may be insufficient. But if we can make ourselves heard, as the daughters of Tzelofchad do, and if we can each offer our different stories and experiences that all point to the same need, then maybe someone will hear us, and respond.

Shabbat shalom, and Happy July 4th.