

## A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

### Generosity and Grace after Disappointment

In this week's Torah portion (*Pinchas*: Numbers 25:10-30:1), Moses is challenged by the daughters of Zelophechad over an issue of inheritance. Their father died and they petitioned Moses to allow them to inherit his portion of the tribal holding in the Land of Israel.

**Numbers 27:1** The daughters of Zelophechad, of the tribe of Manasseh, son of Hephher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph -- came forward. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. <sup>2</sup> They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they said, <sup>3</sup> "Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korah's faction, which banded together against Adonai, but died for his own sin; and he has left no sons. <sup>4</sup> Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!" <sup>5</sup> Moses brought their case before Adonai.

<sup>6</sup> And the Eternal said to Moses, <sup>7</sup> "The plea of Zelophechad's daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen; transfer their father's share to them."

Ancient commentators speculated that Moses was rather humbled by this incident. First, he had to admit to the daughters of Zelophechad that he did not know the answer to their legal question and had to retreat to the Tent of Meeting and seek God's guidance. The sages thought that this embarrassing admission was caused by a previous bit of arrogance in which Moses declared that lower judges would rule on the lesser cases and he would adjudicate all the difficult cases (Ex 18:17-27 & Deut 1:15-18).

The second humbling blow came after learning that the daughters of Zelophechad would inherit their father's holdings, Moses thought that this would be a great time to try to have his own children designated as his successors:

<sup>15</sup> Moses spoke to Adonai, saying, <sup>16</sup> "Let the Eternal, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community <sup>17</sup> who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that Adonai's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd." (Numbers 27:15-17)

God's response was not the answer Moses was looking for:

<sup>18</sup> And Adonai answered Moses, "Single out Joshua son of Nun, an inspired man, and lay your hand (of ordination/*smikhah*) upon him. <sup>19</sup> Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight. <sup>20</sup> Give him some of your charismatic authority, so that the whole Israelite community may obey." (Numbers 27:18-20)

Joshua was destined to be the successor to Moses. And yet, despite his humbling experience and the obvious disappointment of having to ordain Joshua instead of his own sons, Moses carried out the ordination with grace and generosity.

We all struggle with the tension between self-interest and our desire to be generous and selfless in service of a greater good. Perhaps one of the greatest challenges is to swallow our pride and hurt after a loss or disappointment and find the moral strength to offer genuine support and encouragement. Moses set an example that was expressed so beautifully by the great Hillel some 2,000 years ago:

יד הוא הָיָה אֹמֵר, אִם אֵין אֲנִי לִי מִי לִי. וּבְשָׂאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי מָה אֲנִי.  
וְאִם לֹא עַבְשָׁיו, אֵימָתִי:

Hillel teaches: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:14)

Yes, of course it is good and right for us to pursue our dreams and aspirations. But we also have to find room in our heart to be gracious and

generous toward others---even when they won the prize we were seeking. A family, a friendship, a community and a nation cannot survive if we are only for ourselves. Let us celebrate the sacred bonds that connect us and the differences that make us both unique and special.

*Shabbat Shalom*

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