

D'Var Torah for Pinchas July 2, 2021

Shabbat Shalom! I've been anticipating all week what it would feel like to once again stand here and look out and see your faces in real life, which is ironically something I found myself doing as I attended virtual services. I wanted to see faces. I wanted to feel the connection of a collective. And so in some ways it seems very fitting that tonight's Torah portion has a census, a listing of names and families who will be entering the promised land.

Maybe many of you may have done the same as I did over zoom, scrolling through to see each other, or maybe you grew up in this congregation or a congregation like mine in Youngstown, Ohio, where the same families always had the same seats and so it was easy for all of us to "see" or "find" each other every time we went to services. It was easy to find the Froomkins, and the Friedman's, the Rosen's and the Rosenbergs because everyone was always in the same seats. When I got older and came home from college, it was easy to see who else was home with their families. And older still, when my friends became parents and another generation came home with them.

Our Torah portion of Pinchas from the Book of Numbers offers us some ideas about how to really see. Not just to look and count. In it, we find individuals who can see when there is injustice and how to respond. Tonight, I want to talk about how the daughters of Zelophehad created a change in the laws of property inheritance, as well as why Joshua was chosen to lead the people into the land, and what are these qualities that make them role models for us. And tonight, I want to talk about the importance of ritual and of celebration, which is how our Torah portion concludes.

When Moses is assigning land in the traditional patriarchal fashion, from father to son, the daughters of Zelophehad step forward. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they said, "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! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!"

Moses brought their case before the LORD.

And the LORD said to Moses,

“The plea of Zelophehad’s daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father’s kinsmen; transfer their father’s share to them.” Further, speak to the Israelite people as follows: ‘If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall transfer his property to his daughter. If he has no daughter, you shall assign his property to his brothers. If he has no brothers, you shall assign his property to his father’s brothers. If his father had no brothers, you shall assign his property to his nearest relative in his own clan, and he shall inherit it.’ This shall be the law of procedure for the Israelites, in accordance with the LORD’s command to Moses.”

What is important here is the shift that these sisters created. It’s a huge step for economic justice in Biblical times. Yet, even today, we still live under a glass ceiling, where the work and leadership of men is given a higher economic value than that of women. We are making strides, but we need to keep asking how we as progressive Jewish leaders consider questions of leadership and pay equity in our congregations and in our communities. We need to speak plainly and openly and ask for what is fair and right just as Zelophehad’s daughters did. They created a legacy and it is up to us to further their work.

I’d like to think they did this not just for themselves, but for all generations to come. I think as a result of the pandemic, we’ve created new ways of accessibility and access for our temple community. Something that I’ve realized as a result of the zoom services is how accessible they are. For us parents of young families, for those of us that are traveling, or who are ill, or even just too busy or too comfortable at home to think of leaving the house. I’ve gone to more services “with” my mother who lives out of town. And there’s something in that, she’s come to be part of our community and she doesn’t even live in town. And it is this accessibility that I hope we will continue to seek out as we transition as a congregation from pandemic mode to our new normal mode. We’ve done so much work before the pandemic with our Women First Shabbats and our social justice commitments and I hope that we will continue to keep asking ourselves, how can we all seek to create the greatest good for the greatest number of our community members? What do you need? What does someone else you know need? How can we be like Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, the daughters of Zelophehad? What legacy are we leaving for future generations of TAI congregants and our larger Lexington Bluegrass community.

And then there is Joshua, who patiently sat at Moses’ feet and learned from watching him lead; these are the models to which we turn. And we also learn that even though Moses wanted G-d to appoint the next leader from his sons, G-d chose Joshua so as not to create a dynasty beginning with Moses. Moses’ legacy is to be based on merit, not blood. Joshua is diligent, patient, and consistent. G-d is making a point of having our leaders be steady and sustainable. Not flashy, not the most popular, but the one who is grounded and compassionate.

In addition to offering us role models for how to conduct ourselves in community, our Torah portion concludes with a listing of observances, holidays, and ritual offerings---creating a legacy and a peoplehood as the Israelites were about to enter the promised land. G-d was offering a way to feel connected, probably knowing that things would change and people would move around,

and forget about being part of a collective. And so we have the holidays that we still celebrate--- the ones that remind us of our ancestors, our families, and that also connect us with each other and Jews all over the world---something that I think of each week when I bake my challah and light my Shabbat candles, that there are so many others doing the same thing as I am.

One of the main themes in our weekly Torah portion is how to act and so now I want to give each of you time to pause and reflect and from there act in alignment with your reflections.

Take a moment and conduct your own personal census. Who has been your tribe throughout the pandemic and who are you welcoming back into your physical presence? Who are the ancestors, the allies, your family, near and far, your friends, colleagues, acquaintances that shape your world? The artists, the authors, the musicians, the chefs that feed your heart and soul. Take a moment and send them all some love from your heart.

Just like Joshua was a disciple of Moses, who are you a disciple of, who are your role models? And like Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, where do you see inequality in our community and how can you be an advocate? Does that mean researching, does that mean making meaningful personal connections, does that mean giving of your time and resources?

And finally, how have you celebrated? What rituals, in Judaism, or in your secular life matter to you. What routines nourish you? Maybe a walk, a bubble bath, baking challah, lighting candles, saying the Shema, Shabbat, Havdalah, or keeping a gratitude or a dream journal.

By regularly thinking of who is our tribe, who are our role models, and how we celebrate and honor, we enrich our lives, making the regular, the ritual. Transformation happens in this space. We connect to something larger than ourselves.

It is my hope that we will get acquainted and re-acquainted with each other by sharing our personal censuses, role models, and ways in which we celebrate and bring meaning into our lives. I hope that you will consider sharing with me in person or electronically and that you will do so with as many of us in the congregation so that we may know and see each other and create a legacy that will benefit TAI, Lexington, and the generations that follow us.

Shabbat Shalom!