Pinchas, Numbers 25:10 - 30:1

Women have always faced challenges when it comes to equal rights. Women were not able to vote in the United States of America until 1920. Although women make up almost half of the workforce and many are the primary breadwinner for their families, on average, women continue to earn significantly less than men. In this week’s Torah portion, the daughters of Zelophehad navigate affirming their rights with poise.

In Numbers 26, a census was taken for every male over the age of 20. After the census took place, God told Moses that land should be allocated based on the number of males in the family. Zelophehad had five daughters: Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. He did not have any sons. When Zelophehad died, his family would not be considered in the census, and his daughters would not obtain any land as birthright.

One would expect the daughters to stay silent and not stand up for what they know to be their rightful birthright. Their family came from Egyptian slavery, and they lived in a time where the law regularly favored men. In many cases, women would accept the rule that was decreed, stay quiet and out of sight, and not cause trouble. The daughters of Zelophehad decided to take matters into their own hands, and they approached Moses, the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly.

This had never been done before. No other women had stepped forward in front of these authority figures, all of them men, without being asked. This situation was certainly shocking and unprecedented. They rose before these great men and said that their father has died and that he was not against God. They asked for their father’s name not to be lost because he had no son, and they asked for the right to land. They realized that the continuity of their family’s name was dependent on the inheritance of land, and they believed that the current law was inadequate in its fairness.

Moses brought their case to God, and God granted the women their land inheritance. Not only did He grant their request, but He created a new law to secure an inheritance for any daughters in the same situation. Without the fight from Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, women would not have the same rights to land and inheritance as men. This was a landmark decision in women’s rights in the Torah in regard to the inheritance of land, from those days up to now.

Zelophehad’s daughters teach us that our destiny does not have to be fixed. They teach us to break glass ceilings and think differently. It gives us hope when we face struggles. They teach us to take life into our own hands and to sometimes take the harder path. Many times, it gives a greater result.

Shabbat Shalom,
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