



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Pinchas: The Power of Few

This parsha looks forward with eager anticipation to Israel's entry into the land of Israel. With the nation already poised on the border (22:1), we read how "the land is to be apportioned by lottery; according to the listings of their ancestral tribe" (26:52-4), and the appointment of Joshua who will lead the nation into its national home.

This parsha presents a diverse array of powerful leaders, the zealous Pinchas, Joshua "the man who has spirit within", and the five daughters of Zelophchad.

I love the names of the daughters of Zelophchad, each of them is indicative of movement. The name *Mahla* – from the root "to dance"; *Noa* – to move; *Milka* – a derivative of the verb "to walk", *Hoglah* – from a root that indicates a circular motion, *Tirza* – contains the root "to run". These women are literally movers and shakers.

These five women are hailed as feminist heroes, as they stake a claim to land inheritance, in a time and place where only men were the inheritors of land.

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! (27:3-4)

But I would like to share a reading of this story that gives the daughters of Zelophchad an even wider leadership role:

This is to inform you the historic context in which they approached Moses. At the time that the Israelites were saying to Moses, "Let us head back to Egypt"(14:4), Moses said to them: How can it be that all the Israelites are asking to return to Egypt, and you are asking for a holding in the land?

They said: We know that ultimately all Israel will have a holding in the land. As it states "It is a time to act for the Lord, Your teaching is being violated."(119:127). Read it this way: When they [the Israelites] violated your teaching, [the

daughters of Zelophchad declared, “It is a time to act for God” (Midrash Sifrei Zuta 27a)

The Midrash depicts the period of the spies, when the Israelites seemed to lose faith in their ability to conquer or settle the land of Israel, they suggested that a better option would be a return to Egypt. It is precisely at this juncture that these powerful women approached Moses to stake their ancestral claim of their inheritance in the Promised Land. Their unusual, even audacious request expressed and broadcast a deep and powerful desire to enter and settle the land. In the view of the Midrash, the staunch conviction of these five women affected the nation and generated a change in public opinion. Their enthusiasm reignited and restored a faith in Eretz Yisrael.

It would seem that the source for this Midrash are the verses that immediately precede the episode of Zelophchad’s daughters. There we read:

These are the people listed by Moses and Eleazar the priest ... at the Plains of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho. Among these there was not one person who had been listed by Moses and Aaron ... for the Lord had said: “They shall die in the wilderness.” Not one of them survived, except Caleb son of Jephuneh and Joshua son of Nun... The daughters of Zelopchad approached ...” (26:63-27:1)

In the mindset of this Midrash, the daughters of Zelophchad approached Moses in response to the decree of the Spies. This story does not merely teach about women who succeeded in generating a new law of inheritance; that could have possibly been insufficient to have their story recorded in the Torah. Rather, this is a heroic drama of women who took upon themselves the task of reviving the faith in the land. That the nation is poised on the border of the promised land in the fortieth year, that the land is divided up into ancestral units, all this can be attributed to the transformation, the revolution that these women generated by demonstrating their love for the land through their insistence on receiving their inheritance.

So, please discuss:

- How do attitudes to land fluctuate and change?
- Yesterday was Herzl’s *yahrzeit*, he was someone who radically altered Jews’ attitude to land and nationhood. His famous quote illustrates how he saw himself as a game-changer:

At Basel I founded the Jewish State. If I said this out loud today, I would be greeted by universal laughter. In five years, perhaps, and certainly in 50 years, everyone will perceive it.

- How do we foster and cultivate positive sentiments to national homeland?
- As for leadership, is it possible for a small group, a few determined individuals to sway public opinion?
- Can you think of historical instances when this has occurred?

- What is needed to generate the personal confidence to speak-up and affect public discourse on important national issues?
- What issue would you choose if you were to try to impact and reorient priorities in the Jewish people?

Shabbat Shalom!