

Parshat Pinchas

Leadership in Bridging Equity

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Class of 2022

Outside one of the branches of the New York Public Library, there's a sign with a quote: "If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair." -Shirley Chisolm. While Shirley Chisolm was a notable figure in United States history for her work in politics, education and equal rights; this concept of making space in a place where one is seemingly excluded can also be found in Tanach. One instance is in this week's Parasha, Parashat Pinchas. Bamidbar/Numbers 27:1-11 tells the story of Bnot Tzlofchad, where they are listed by name, Machlah, Noa, and Hoglah, and Milcah, and Tirzah.

1 The daughters of Zelophehad, of Manassite family—son of Hopher 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.

א ותקרבנה בנות צלפחד, בן-חפר בן-גלעד
בן-מכיר בן-מנשה, למשפחת, מנשה
בן-יוסף; ואלה, שמות בנותיו--מחלה נעה,
וחגלה ומלכה ותרצה.

2 And they stood before Moses, and before Eleazar the priest, and before the princes and all the congregation, at the door of the tent of meeting, saying:

ב ותעמדנה לפני משה, ולפני אלעזר
הכהן, ולפני הנשיאם, וכל-העדה--פתח
אהל-מועד, לאמר.
ג אבינו, מת במדבר, והוא לא-היה בתוך
העדה הנועדים על-ה', בעדת-קרח:
כי-בטאו מת, ובנים לא-היו לו.

3 'Our father died in the wilderness, and he was not among the company of them that gathered themselves together against Hashem in the company of Korah, but he died in his own sin; and he had no sons.

ד למה יגרע שם-אבינו מתוך משפחתו, כי
אין לו בן; תנה-לנו אחזה, בתוך אחי אבינו.

4 Why should the name of our father be done away from among his family, because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father's kinsmen.'

Bnot Tzlofchad exemplify women advocating to be included in the rest of the Israelites' inheritance. The Sifrei on Bamidbar 27:1 states that they consulted each other first before going to Moshe, and came up with a plan. You might ask why is it relevant that they consulted each other first?

When the daughters of Tzelofchad heard that the land of Israel was to be divided according to tribes, according to the men and not the women, they gathered together to make a plan. They said, "God's mercy and compassion is not like the compassion of mankind. Mankind favors men over women. God is not like that. His compassion extends to men and women alike..."

The Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 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."

When they spoke to Moshe,

Daughters: Give us a portion of the land along with our father's brothers.

Moshe: It is impossible for a daughter to inherit.

Daughters: Why?

Moshe: You are women.

Daughters: Then let our mother enter into yibbum (levirate marriage—as is the law with the wife of a person who died “without seed”) and conceive an inheritor that way.

Moshe: Impossible. Once there are children, yibbum is not possible.

Daughters: You are contradicting yourself, Moshe. Either we are not “seed” and the obligation of yibbum applies to our mother, or we are “seed” and can inherit the land ourselves.

In that moment they convinced Moshe. When he heard the justice of their complaint, he immediately presented their case before G-d.

In many ways, we no longer have to deal with such difficult tasks to gain our share, or a seat at the table. Many women before us, from the time of Tanach, and throughout our secular history have fought to make our lives a little easier. While the situations are by no means the same, there are still so many areas in which our society is lacking in inclusion and equity. We can all follow in the footsteps of Bnot Tzlofchad, who worked together to earn their inheritance by combining their strengths,

The appeal for their case was not easy and getting to the outcome involved initial push back. At first, the response was wrong, but after insistence and strategy, the solution was more optimistic. I want to also acknowledge the discomfort of needing to fight for one's rights. In this case, Bnot Tzlofchad could not have been successful without convincing and thus benefiting from Moshe's power. Bnot Tzlofchad were able to plead their case, but not everyone has the means to do so. I encourage us to strive to find ways to welcome people in, just like the women were able to be recognized as really being a part of Bnei Yisrael. Sometimes, it might appear as if there is no space, but you can always slide a little and bring back the image of the folding chair.



Phoebe Ana Rabinowitsch is a student at Yeshivat Maharat in the class of 2022. She has completed various internships including placements with a national voter registration campaign, Hillel International, chaplain intern at New York-Presbyterian Hospital and served as Multifaith Intern with New Sanctuary Coalition through Truah's Rabbinical Student Fellowship. She has completed the cross seminary organizing course with JOIN for Justice and The Jewish Innovation Fellowship at the 92nd Street Y. Phoebe Ana studied at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and at Middlebury College Language Schools, and has studied Torah at Drisha, Hadar and Pardes, where she was involved in organizing a weekly partnership minyan. She has experience teaching English as a Second Language to adult learners and Hebrew and Judaic studies at various religious schools in New York City. She grew up in South Florida and earned a B.A. in Religion and Anthropology from American University (Washington, DC). Phoebe Ana is interested in exploring how to create a supportive and nourishing environment for all and is committed to further pursuing a society that

reflects our values. She lives in Washington Heights, New York and serves as Partnerships Lead at Tzedek Box.

