



DVAR TZEDEK

Parashat Pinchas 5774

Descendants of the Daughters of Zelophechad

By Rabbi Marc Soloway

July 12, 2014

A shocking and inspiring episode in *Parashat Pinchas* occurs when the five daughters of Zelophechad stand up to Moses, Aaron and Elazar and demand to inherit their father's property, in the absence of any sons. This courageous act, which challenges the assumption that tribal land can be passed on only from fathers to sons, seems to leave Moses speechless and moved, and he takes their claim to God.¹

God rules in favor of the daughters of Zelophechad and many commentators offer explanations of what was so compelling about their claim. The Talmud states that "the daughters of Zelophechad were wise women, for they presented their petition at the right time."² The medieval commentator Rashi says that their eyes saw what Moses' eye could not see.³ The *midrashic* collection Yalkut Shimoni offers this comment on the narrative:

When the daughters of Zelophechad heard that the land was being divided among the tribes but not among the women, they convened to discuss the matter. They said, "God's mercy and compassion is not like the compassion of humankind. Humankind favors men over women. God is not like that. God's compassion extends to men and women alike . . ."⁴

According to these commentators, the combination of the timing, the rightness of their claim and the way in which they brought it results in them being heard and in the law changing. They knew that there must be a higher form of justice that had not yet been revealed and perhaps it was their time. Throughout time and across cultures, women have so often seen what the men do not or cannot.

Not only did these women have courage, they were empowered by educating themselves in legal matters, according to Rashi and others,⁵ allowing them to challenge the status quo. Perhaps fearing the kind of assertiveness demonstrated by the daughters of Zelophechad, groups today like Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan perpetuate the appalling, patriarchal premise that girls should not be educated. We have seen the extremes to which they will go in this mission.

Remarkably, women around the world today continue to set their sights forward, despite facing not only the kind of discrimination the daughters of Zelophchad faced, but also unspeakable oppression and violence.

On the last evening of a retreat for alumni of AJWS's delegations for rabbis and rabbinical students, I and my colleagues watched one of the most disturbing films I have ever seen. *The Greatest Silence* tells the story of tens of thousands of women and girls who have been systematically kidnapped, raped, mutilated and tortured during the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), by soldiers from both foreign militias and the Congolese army.

¹ Numbers 27:1-11.

² Babylonian Talmud, Bava Batra 119b.

³ Rashi on Numbers 27:7.

⁴ Yalkut Shimoni, Pinchas 27.

⁵ Rashi's comment on Numbers 27:2 quotes the Midrash from Sifrei 12 and Talmud Baba Batra 119b that portrays the daughters sitting in the Beit Midrash (Study Hall), and that they then rose before Moses, Elazar and the heads of the tribes.

The great silence that night in the room full of rabbis, educators and activists was broken only by tears and sighs of disbelief. How can it be that in 2014, gender-based violence is such an enormous and painful reality?

Brutal and shocking as this film is, there are so many stories of hope and courage; women who, like the daughters of Zelophechad, are standing up against discrimination or stopping violence, educating themselves to know their rights and help others achieve theirs. Women like Grace in the DRC, who is Pygmy and a mother of seven. Her ethnicity and her gender make her a double target for discrimination and violence. Grace is facilitating conversations between the Bantu majority and the Pygmies to promote peaceful coexistence, in partnership with an organization called Hope for Indigenous People, supported by AJWS.⁶

The International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA), which was recently introduced in the Senate, strives to ensure the safety and dignity of women everywhere and would support the work of courageous women like Grace by allocating U.S. aid dollars to groups like AJWS grantee Hope for Indigenous People. It would also place special emphasis on under-reported forms of violence against ethnic minorities like the Pygmies and other marginalized groups, which are most vulnerable to abuse. By urging our members of Congress to support IVAWA, we can help women like Grace overcome oppression and stop cycles of violence, entering into a hopeful future. The stories of Grace and other courageous women join the story of the five daughters of Zelophechad: Machlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milchah and Tirzah.⁷ The daughters needed the support of Moses and God to change the law. Women across the world need the support of Congress and of all of us to pass IVAWA.

My teacher, Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, the iconic founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, teaches that the biblical text of Zelophechad's five valiant daughters hints at a future of justice and redemption. The word in the Torah text for "their case" is "*mishpatan*"⁸—with a feminine plural ending, which is traditionally scribed with a large *nun* as the final letter. According to Reb Zalman, this large *nun*, which has the numerical value of 50, alludes to the mystical "50th gate of understanding," or perfect knowledge of God. Reb Zalman teaches that in the future, because of these women's deep understanding and insight, we will experience a transformed awareness which will lead to a healing of our world and of our societies in which gender will no longer be a basis for discrimination.

Reb Zalman ends this teaching with a prayer that "empowered, committed women, latter-day daughters of Zelophechad, will help us all and lead us to an effective way of *tikkun olam*"—repairing the world. May this vision extend across the reaches of the planet, empowering women everywhere to be change makers through the political process as well as through spiritual yearning—bringing hope, healing and understanding.



Rabbi **Marc Soloway** has been the spiritual leader of Congregation Bonai Shalom in Boulder, Colorado since 2004. He traveled to Ghana with an AJWS Young Rabbis Delegation in 2011 and was the narrator of a documentary film about the Baal Shem Tov, made in the same year. Marc has been twice co-chair of Limmud in the UK and was a founding board member of Limmud Colorado. He was a fellow of CLAL's Rabbis without Borders in 2012 and is the chair of the Rabbinical Advisory Board for Hazon, as well as a proud member of Jewish goat and chicken farming co-ops. Marc was listed in *The Forward* as one of America's most inspiring rabbis for 2014. Marc can be reached at rabbi@bonaishalom.org.

⁶ "Meet Grace," *American Jewish World Service*. Available at <http://webelieve.ajws.org/activist-toolkit/stories/meet-grace/>.

⁷ Numbers 27:1.

⁸ Numbers 27:5.

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