



Zelophechad's daughters and the You-turn

Text 1 – Numbers 27:1-8

The daughters of Zelophechad came forward. The names of the daughters were Machlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. 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 Korach’s faction, which banded together against the Eternal One, 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 land among our father’s kin!”



Moses brought their case before the Eternal One. And God said to Moses, “The plea of Zelophechad’s daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father’s kin; 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.’”

Text 2 – Joshua 17:3-4

Now Zelophechad son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh had no sons, but only daughters. The names of his daughters were Machlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. They appeared before the priest Eleazer, Joshua son of Nun, and the chieftains, saying: “The Eternal One commanded Moses to grant us a portion among our male kin.” So, in accordance with God’s instructions, they were granted a portion among their father’s kin.

Text 3 – Rabbi Silvina Chemen, ‘The Torah: A Women’s Commentary’, 2008

Zelophechad’s daughters were not counted in the census and also were not to receive any land as inheritance.

We might expect that women, heirs to Egyptian slavery and then put under law that frequently favours men, might react by keeping silent, by accepting as



natural the rule decreed for them to follow. We might expect women in those days to stay close to their tents, remain out of sight, and not go far from their families.

The achievement of Zelophechad's daughters was a landmark in women's rights regarding the inheritance of land, from those days up to now. In addition, however, the story of these five women offers a compelling lesson for all those who believe that their destiny is fixed or that Divine justice has abandoned them.

Text 4 – 'The Telegraph', December 2012

We need equality too, say daughters of aristocrats

Daughters of titled aristocrats are calling for a re-examination of inheritance rules amid claims the proposed change in succession laws would leave the gentry "two steps behind" the royal family.

The anomaly was highlighted by *Downton Abbey* creator Julian Fellowes, who described it as "outrageous" that his wife Emma Kitchener's family title will die out rather than pass to a female heir. The current Earl, a descendant of Field Marshal Horatio Kitchener, is 92 and has no children. Emma Kitchener is his niece but, under the current practice, cannot inherit.

The government confirmed earlier this month that the rules governing the succession to the throne are to be changed to allow girls equality with boys. The change was confirmed as it was announced that the Duchess is pregnant. It means that the child would automatically become third in line to the throne, ahead of Prince Harry – irrespective of gender.

Text 5 – Rabbi Sylvia Rothschild, 2000

Machlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah are clearly of interest to the biblical narrator: not only are all their names recorded, but in the book of Joshua they appear again – and once again all the names are listed – to demand that what God had commanded Moses here in the wilderness was honoured once the people reached the land. They obviously made a huge impression in their determination to inherit the land of their father, and in their determination to work together – five women, siblings, jointly fighting for their principles and their rights.

Up until this point no-one has come along with their own interpretation of Torah: God has simply given out commandments, either at reaching a new geographical place or during a social crisis. At no point has anyone so much



as solicited a legal opinion from God on a matter God has not yet discussed, let alone come up with their own innovation. This is something entirely new in the narrative – for someone to come to Moses with a principled resolve based on what they understand to be the right thing to do, and a clear vision of what a Godly society should do.

The story of the daughters of Zelophechad is a story designed to remind us to stand up for rights, even if they are not yet perceived to be rights; it is a story to remind us that all things might be possible, even with a God who seems to have it all sorted out already, even in a wilderness where the right might seem to be too abstract or too unfulfillable to be relevant.

Text 6 – Rabbi Ruth Adar, 2016

Torah law is presented here as something that can change to address human needs. In fact, the text seems to be saying that God didn't think of everything; there were some issues that the original Torah failed to address. In this text, God isn't troubled by imperfection in Torah. God revises and then revises again until everyone's needs are met.

I am the first to admit that this is a radical reading of the text. An Orthodox reader would point out to me God makes the revisions; the humans don't make changes willy-nilly. But in this stage of Israel's existence, one could do as the women did and march up to the Tent of Meeting and get a meeting with God. This was a privilege unique to that generation. Later generations would deal with issues like this in other ways. Why am I a Reform Jew? Because the Torah itself tells us that not all cases are covered in the Written Torah! And the Oral Torah tells us that not all cases are decided and final, either. Sometimes we learn better. Sometimes we get new information. Sometimes a situation comes up that needs a new answer.

Text 7 – Baba Metzia 86a

Now, there was a dispute in the Heavenly Academy, thus: if the bright spot of leprosy preceded the onset of white hair, the patient is unclean; if the reverse, clean. But what if the sequence is in doubt? The Holy One, ever to be blessed, ruled, "The patient is clean"; whilst the entire Heavenly Academy maintained, "The patient is unclean."

"Who shall decide it?" said they. They nominated Rabbah ben Nahmani; for he was pre-eminent in the laws of leprosy.



Text 8 – Chagiga 15b

Rabbi ben Shila once met Elijah. He asked him, “What is the Eternal One doing right now?” Elijah answered, “God is quoting legal decisions made by the rabbis.”

Text 9 – Martin Buber, ‘Tales of the Hasidim’, 1947

The emperor in Vienna issued an edict which was bound to make thoroughly miserable the already oppressed Jews in Galicia. At that time, an earnest and studious man by the name of Feivel lived in Rabbi Elimelekh’s House of Study. One night he rose, entered the zaddik’s room, and said to him: “Master, I have a suit against God.” And even as he spoke he was horrified at his own words. But Rabbi Elimelekh answered him: “Very well, but the court is not in session tonight.”

The next day, two zaddikim came to Lizensk: Israel of Koznitz and Jacob Yitzhak of Lublin. After the midday meal, the rabbi had the man who had spoken to him called and said: “Now tell us about your lawsuit.”

And Feivel began to speak. “Why are we held in bondage in this empire? Does not the Eternal One say in the Torah: ‘For unto Me the children of Israel are servants.’ And even though God has sent us to alien lands, still, wherever we are, we must be allowed full freedom to serve.”

To this Rabbi Elimelekh replied: “We know God’s reply, for it also is written in our holy texts. But now, both the plaintiff and the defendant shall leave the court-room, as the rule prescribes, so that the judges may not be influenced by them. So go out, Rabbi Feivel. You, Sovereign of the world, we cannot send out, because Your glory fills the earth, and without Your presence, not one of us could live for even a moment. But we herewith inform You that we shall not let ourselves be influenced by You either.”

Then the three sat in judgment, silently and with closed eyes. After an hour, they called in Feivel and gave him the verdict: that he was in the right.

In the same hour, the edict in Vienna was cancelled.

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