



SERMON PINCHAS: MACHO TWITS

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 16 July 2022
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue – *bat mitzvah of Jenny Levy*

- 1 Woodmen of the World is a fraternal, Masonic-style organisation in the United States. At its height, it had more than 2,500 lodges across the country.¹ In 1922, the Texas branch got into a legal dispute about the sale of a piece of land in El Paso, and the case eventually made its way to the Texas Supreme Court.

Unfortunately, all three judges of the Texas Supreme Court happened to be members of the Woodmen, so had to recuse themselves from hearing the matter on the grounds of bias.²
- 2 In those circumstances, the procedure was to empanel three more junior judges to step in and fill the gap. But this proved rather difficult: every judge approached – in the entire State of Texas – turned out to be a Woodman. So the Governor resorted to asking regular attorneys if they would like to become temporary judges...



but every lawyer he asked, likewise, turned out to be a Woodman.

By this point, the case had been on hold for eight months.³

3 Eventually,⁴ the Governor worked out how to find three legal minds who definitely could not be members of Woodmen of the World.

And so, on 30 January 1925, an all-female panel of the Texas Supreme Court sat. It was a historic occasion. Texan law at the time did not even allow women to serve on juries, but there turned out to be no bar to their temporary appointment as judges. (Ironically, after all that fuss, Special Chief Justice Hortense Sparks Ward and Special Justices Ruth Brazzil and Hattie Henenberg ruled in favour of the Woodmen anyway.)⁵

4 Moving from Special Justices to special women in general, this morning Jenny beautifully read us the story of five of them, the B'not Tz'lof'chad, who respectfully but courageously ambushed Moses and the elders of the Israelites and demanded an egalitarian system of inheritance.⁶



- 5 There were many confrontations in the wilderness – demands for food, meat, water, an idol, even a return to Egypt – but the confrontation in today’s parashah is unique for two reasons. Firstly, it was about a weighty and serious matter; it was eminently justified.
- 6 Secondly, all of the other skirmishes were orchestrated by men. This is not just me engaging in a typical Liberal-rabbi-modern-feminist-gloss. Since at least the time of the Talmud, it has been recognised that the Israelite women were, generally, opposed to all of their husbands’ petty demands.⁷
- 7 In fact, the 17th-century Torah commentary Kli Yakar goes further, by a quite astonishing margin:⁸ “The men hated the land of Israel, because they were **אבירי לבב** [which, roughly translated, means ‘macho twits’]⁹ and far from righteousness. They had no desire to go from the wilderness, a place with no rules, to a land of obligation. But the women of that generation were honourable, and loved righteousness. And because they had no control over their



husbands, they yearned to travel to a place where their husbands would have strict duties.”

- 8 In many ways, all of these women – Israelite and Texan – were similar. While the menfolk, **אבירי לבב**, macho twits, were messing about with silly masonic ceremonies and whinging about how much better their lives were before being liberated from Egyptian slavery, Hortense Sparks Ward was taking serious and sober judicial decisions, and the daughters of Tz’lof’chad were reformulating probate law.
- 9 And now, having moved from Special Justices to special women in general, we move to a special woman in particular: Jenny. Jenny, you truly exemplify the strong and virtuous women about whom Kli Yakar teaches us.
- 10 This isn’t a second bat mitzvah, as is often the case when those with a few decades under their belt come up to Torah. Rather, this is your first bat mitzvah: you’ve spent so many of your eighty years



selflessly transmitting Torah to this community's young people.

You've quietly but determinedly taught them Hebrew, prepared them for their own b'nei and b'not mitzvah, and all without going through the ceremonialism of having your own.

- 11 There is a tradition to find a verse from the Tanach that begins with the first letter of one's Hebrew name, and ends with the last letter.

In Jenny's case, that means two ר-s, from רחל אסתר. There can only be one choice of verse here, and it comes from the Book of Proverbs:¹⁰ רָאשׁ עֲשֵׂה כַּפְי־רַמְיָה וַיֵּד חָרוּצִים תַּעֲשִׂיר – “An idle hand impoverishes, but a diligent hand enriches.”

- 12 Jenny, you've blessed this community with your diligent hands, and done everybody proud today with your wonderful Torah reading on such a special occasion. We wish you much strength and every blessing, and let us say: amen.

¹ Dale Foresythe. “Woodmen of the World”, USGenNet (2000): <<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/ar/county/greene/historywood.htm>>



² Alice G McAfee. “The All-women Texas Supreme Court: the history behind a brief moment on the bench”, 39 St Mary’s LJ 467 (2008).

³ Jeffrey D Dunn. “The legacy of *Johnson v Darr*: the 1925 decision of the All-woman Texas Supreme Court”, Texas State Historical Association (6 March 2004).

⁴ Dunn, *ibid*, suspects that this popular narrative may have been embellished. But I don’t care.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ Numbers 27:1-11

⁷ See eg Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer 45, in which the women refused to participate in the construction of the golden calf.

⁸ Kli Yakar to Numbers 26:64

⁹ With thanks to Sharona Margolin Halickman for suggesting the word ‘macho’: “Women were the pioneers in loving Israel and acts of kindness”, *Times of Israel* (16 July 2019): <<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/women-were-the-pioneers-in-loving-israel-and-acts-of-kindness/>>

¹⁰ Proverbs 10:4