



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Pinchas

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July 11, 2015

Pinchas

Is the Torah Chauvinistic?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

One of the harsh critiques aimed at Torah Judaism is that it is chauvinistic – that there are no female rabbis or female cantors, that there is a partition between the genders during prayer, that women don’t read from the Torah, that women are given fewer mitzvot ... and on and on.

This is not merely an academic matter. For this reason (legitimate or not) many Jews have turned to alternative, more egalitarian forms of Jewish experience, ones in which female rabbis, cantors and scribes are embraced.

Their arguments and critiques are not to be dismissed but addressed. And in this week’s Torah reading addressed they are.

Parshat Pinchas throws these chauvinistic notions out of the window. Not only does the Torah not view the male to be superior to the female, but the Torah views the female as having, in many ways, spiritual qualities that are superior to the male, and considers the feminine as being more in touch with the divine purpose than the masculine.

It all boils down to the daughters of Tzelafchad. And a radical statement from the Midrash, coupled by a fascinating interpretation by the Sfat Emes, stating that women fix that which men break.

IS THE TORAH CHAUVINISTIC?

1. Hebrew Grammar (Joke)

A Hebrew teacher was explaining to her class that in Hebrew, unlike English, nouns are designated as either masculine or feminine.

“Moon,” for instance, is feminine: “Levanah.”

“Sun,” however, is masculine: “Shemesh.”

A student asked, “What gender is machshev (meaning ‘computer’)?”

Instead of giving the answer, the teacher split the class into two groups, male and female, and asked them to decide for themselves whether machshev should be a masculine or a feminine noun.

Each group was asked to give four reasons for its recommendation.

The men’s group decided that computers should definitely be of the feminine gender, because:

1. No one but their creator understands their internal logic.
2. The native language they use to communicate with other computers is incomprehensible to everyone else.
3. Even the smallest mistakes are stored in long term memory for possible later retrieval; and
4. As soon as you make a commitment to one, you find yourself spending half your paycheck on accessories for it.

The women’s group, however, concluded that computers should be masculine because:

1. You can talk to them until you are blue in the face and they still won’t hear a thing you said.
2. They have terabytes of data but can’t think for themselves.
3. They are supposed to help you solve problems, but half the time they are the problem; and

4. As soon as you commit to one, you realize that if you had waited a little longer, you could have gotten a better model.

2. Men, Women and Religion

Ah, men and women, everybody's favorite topic. Men are from Mars; women are from Venus, and all that jazz.

In the context of religion, the topic of men and women generates a lot of heat. Often times boiling heat, blistering with questions, passions and controversy.

One of the harsh critiques aimed at Torah Judaism is that it is chauvinistic: there are no female rabbis, there are no female cantors, there is a partition between the genders during prayer, women don't read from the Torah, women are given fewer mitzvot ... and on and on.

This is not merely an academic matter. For this reason (legitimate or not) many Jews have turned to alternative, more egalitarian forms of Jewish experience, ones in which female rabbis, cantors and scribes are embraced.

To be sure, this may not be an issue for everyone, but nevertheless the questions persist:

Why should the men control Judaism? If the Torah is chauvinistic, let us amend the Torah, redacting it into an equal-opportunity book and Judaism into an equal opportunity religion. Anyone who desires to be a rabbi may be a rabbi, and anyone who desires to wear a tallit and tefillin may wear a tallit and tefillin. This is the argument.

Such arguments and critiques are not to be dismissed but addressed. And in this week's Torah portion, addressed they are.

Parshat Pinchas throws these chauvinistic notions out of the window. As we shall momentarily discover, not only does the Torah not view the

male as superior to the female, but the Torah views the female as having, in many ways, spiritual qualities that are superior to the male, and considers the feminine as being more in touch with the divine purpose than the masculine.

3. Three Axioms

But before we get into the nitty, gritty and witty, we must understand three fundamental axioms underlying this very important topic:

Axiom Number One: The Torah, first and foremost, is a book of divine light and living, whose mission statement is to turn this mundane earth into a home for the Divine. Men and women (or women and men) are united in the common cause of entering the Promised Land and turning an arid desert into a luscious garden and home for God. Women and men aren't on two teams but on one, with one objective and destination.

Axiom Number Two: Both male and female have each their distinctive role to play in fulfilling this common mission. The feminine energy has its unique characteristics, skills and purposes; just as does the masculine energy.

Axiom Number Three: One without the other is incomplete; only together can their purpose be achieved. Man without woman is deficient; woman without man is deficient. They become proficient and efficient only when together.

And one final word on Torah and its foundation: Man and woman are created in the Divine Image. Thus, certainly neither man nor woman, neither woman nor man is superior to the other – they both comprise the Divine Image together. The Torah instructs us how to live up to that image, whether we are male or female.

With this established, let us dig in and unravel the mystery of man, woman and God via this week's Torah reading.

4. Parshat Pinchas

Parshat Pinchas is set in the fortieth year of the Jews' wandering in the desert as they are preparing to finally enter the Promised Land. In advance of this momentous occasion, our portion discusses the divvying up of the Holy Land among the different tribes, as well as the relevant property inheritance laws involved.

Traditionally, the sons would inherit the land of the father. But what if there were no sons?

Such was the case with Tzelafchad, a descendent of Joseph's son Manasseh. But Tzelafchad sinned¹ in the desert and forfeited his life. His only heirs are his four daughters, and they are now asking what will happen with the land allotted him. The decision that is rendered sets the precedent for all future inheritance laws.

The daughters of Tzelafchad came forward...saying: "Our father died in the desert...and he had no sons. Why should our father's name be eliminated from his family because he had no son? Give us a portion along with our father's brothers." So Moses brought their ruling before the Lord. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Tzelafchad's daughters speak justly. You shall certainly give them a portion of inheritance along with their father's brothers, and you shall transfer their father's inheritance to them.²

When the daughters of Tzelafchad first came to Moses, the leader of the Jews went straight to God with their question. Why did Moses have to bring this particular inquiry to the Lord? Could Moses himself not rule on this matter?

The 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, cites two reasons:

1. Moses originally knew the ruling but then it eluded him, a punishment for crowning himself with authority, when Moses said to the judges, "And the case that is too difficult for you, bring to me."³

¹ See Numbers 27:3 and Rashi.

² Numbers 27:1-7.

³ Deuteronomy 1:17.

2. The law ought to have been written through Moses, but because Tzelafchad's daughters were meritorious, it was written through them.⁴

Looking at this more deeply, some questions arise:

Why was Moses punished with forgetting this law? Why, fundamentally, did Moses not know how to respond to this question of inheritance – especially when pertaining to the women of Israel?

Also, in what way were the daughters of Tzelafchad meritorious?

5. The Midrash: Two Case Studies

The Midrash⁵ states something profound, which shatters any misnomer or stereotype of the Torah's approach to women:

The women rebuilt all the fences that the men tore down.

And then the Midrash provides two case studies which had prompted this radical statement:

Case Study One – The Golden Calf:

While building the Golden Calf, the men tried to take their wives' jewelry for their idolatrous project. The women refused and remained true to the one true God.

The women rebuilt all the fences that the men tore down.

The men destroyed the relationship with God and the women built it back up.

Case Study Two – The Land of Israel:

Everybody knows that the generation that left slavery in Egypt died in the wilderness, never entering the Promised Land. Even Moses and Aaron did not enter the Land. Only the new generation, born after Egypt, fresh and eager, would make it inside with two notable excep-

⁴Tanchuma Pinchas 8 and Sanhedrin 8a.

⁵Bamidbar Rabba 21:11.

tions: Joshua son of Nun, who would succeed his teacher Moses as the leader of the Jews, and Caleb son of Jephunneh. (Both of whom as we recall disagreed with the negative report of the spies/scouts who ill-advised the Jews to not enter the Holy Land.)

While the new generation is poised on the border and ready to enter the Promised Land, a census is taken. In relating this event, the Torah uses an interesting phraseology:

This was the census of Moses and Eleazar the priest, who counted the children of Israel in the plains of Moab, by the Jordan at Jericho. Among these there was no man who had been in the census of Moses and Aaron when they counted the children of Israel in the Sinai desert. For the Lord had said to them, "They shall surely die in the desert," and no man was left of them but Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.⁶

Note the masculine references. The Torah states twice that no man was left for all they all perished in the desert, but makes no mention of women.

The Midrash explains why:

The women were not included in the decree of the spies, for they cherished the Land. The men said, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt!"⁷, whereas the women said, "Give us a portion."⁸ This is why the passage of Tzelafchad's daughters follows here.

The women rebuilt all the fences that the men tore down. The men destroyed the desire to go into the Land and the women rebuilt it stronger than ever.

This is how the daughters of Tzelafchad were meritorious – they desired the Land more than the men! – and this is why the laws of inheritance were written through them, not Moses.

But this still leaves us with an obvious question: Moses was the humblest man to ever live, the faithful shepherd, the consummate leader, how is it that Moses forgot the ruling of land inheritance, or did not merit to

⁶Numbers 26:63-65.

⁷Numbers 14:4.

⁸Numbers 27:4.

have it written in his honor? What specifically did Tzelafchad's daughters have that even Moses did not?

6. Sfat Emet's Explanation

Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Ger, better known as the Sfat Emet, explains this beautifully.⁹

The one thing that Tzelafchad's daughters had going for them that Moses did not was ... femininity! Tzelafchad's daughters were women and Moses simply was not.

What specifically makes the quality of femininity better than masculinity? Masculinity is the sun, while femininity is the moon.

The wilderness was a time of pure revelation – like the sun. For this reason, the people – i.e. the men – had no desire to leave the sunshine of heaven for the trials and tribulations of the Promised Land.

The women, however, knew that our purpose here on earth is not only to shine, like the sun, when it's daytime, but primarily to shine, like the moon, and illuminate the nighttime, when it is dark and foreboding.

The purpose of existence is not to be comfortable and bask in glory; but to reach out into darkest places and fill them with light. We weren't born to sunbathe in the desert; we were born to conquer the Promised Land and make even the most challenging situation divine.

This, all the women in wilderness knew, and specifically the daughters of Tzelafchad. And though Moses surely knew this as well, Moses was on the level of masculinity and appreciating the sun and, therefore, could not enter the Promised Land, which requires a feminine moon-like sensitivity.

This is why Tzelafchad's daughters merited to have the inheritance laws written in their honor, and not Moses.

⁹Pinchas 5663.

7. Trajectory of the Parsha (Optional)

If we look at the various events related in our portion, we find a clear trajectory to the narrative. First comes the declaration that no man would enter the Land ... followed by the episode of Tzelafchad's daughters ... followed by Moses ascending the mountain to see the Land that he will not enter ... followed by the appointment of Joshua as Moses successor ... followed by the recitation of the daily offerings.

What, asks the Sfat Emet, is the connection between all of these events?

Moses, the Talmud¹⁰ tells us, is akin to the sun, while Joshua is akin to the moon. The trajectory of our portion conveys the passing of the torch from Moses, sun, masculine energy, to Joshua, moon, feminine energy. As follows:

- 1) God states that no man would enter the land
- 2) Tzelafchad's daughters desire the land and initiate inheritance revolution
- 3) Moses ascends to a lofty place and passes the torch onto Joshua¹¹
- 4) This will ultimately lead to the building a home for God here on earth, that is the Temple in Jerusalem, where the daily sacrifices will be offered

8. Personal Lesson

There is systematic Judaism and innate Judaism. The masculine energy is indicative of systems and structures; the feminine is innate.

The masculine dimension in Judaism is the sun, shining in daytime, offering us direction and guidance in conventional and predictable situations. The feminine dimension in Judaism is the moon, shining in unexpected places, illuminating the darkness of night.

¹⁰ Bava Batra 75a.

¹¹ Which, as the Sfat Emet explains, is akin to the Torah She'bichtav (written Torah) shining on and influencing Torah She'bal'peh - the moon has nothing of its own, but can refract the sunlight into the night, i.e. the darkest places: The Oral Torah refracts the Written Word throughout the world.

The desert was systematic and structured Judaism, where divine revelation reigned; the Land of Israel requires a deeper innate sense of the divine will to illuminate and transform even dark materialism (night).

Masculine energy is necessary, for it provides the seed; but feminine energy is equally necessary to shape the offspring and bring light into the dark world.

The lesson for women: Don't try to be men, but open the Torah and discover what it truly means to be a woman. Women, do what you do and don't change a thing!

The lesson for men: If you are not going to assist the women in entering the Land, the least you can do is get out of the way!

The daughters of Tzelafchad teach us an invaluable – and highly contemporary message about the role of women and men in Judaism today: Both man and woman reflect equal but different indispensable roles in fulfilling the divine mission for which all human were sent to this earth.

A woman need not be a Rabbi, cantor or scribe to realize her divine calling. She need not emulate or aspire to masculine duties to live up to her tremendous potential. Quite the contrary: Had the daughters of Tzelafchad not used their feminine sensitivity to appreciate the qualities of the Promised Land, we would all have lost out on a fundamental element in our collective mission.

Women have an innate deeper yearning – and teach us all to yearn – for fulfilling the divine mandate to transform our material world into the Promised Land.

Through their added sense women can achieve as much – if not more – than Rabbis, cantors and scribes.

9. Who's In Control? (Joke)

At the pearly gates, God comes and says, "I want the men to form two lines. One line for the men that dominated in their homes, and the other

line for the men who were subjugated to their wives.”

The men complied and they divided into two lines. But there was one strange thing: The line of the subjugated men stretched for as far as you can see. But in the line of dominant men stood only one frail man.

God declares, “You men should be ashamed of yourselves. I created you in my image and you were all emasculated by your mates. Look at the only one of my sons that stood up and made me proud. Learn from him! Tell them my son, how did you manage to be the only one in this line?”

And the small man replies, trembling, “I don’t know, but my wife told me to stand here.”

10. Women’s Lib (Conclusion)

The Torah has always, does always, and will always put the woman on the loftiest pinnacle of perfection and divine holiness. In so many ways she controls the world and tells the man where to stand.

The Torah does not believe in women’s lib – simply because, from the Torah’s point of view, the woman was never enslaved. Prisoners have to be liberated. Free people don’t. From the Torah’s perspective, the Jewish woman (or any woman for that matter) has never been confined, limited or repressed. As a matter of fact, the opposite is true: the Torah, with its divine mitzvot, its divine connections, has facilitated the woman to be the best feminine human being possible.

As history bears it out, if anything, it was the men who were imprisoned, confined and repressed. Come to think of it, it is time for men’s liberation, where we follow the women into the Promised Land.

May it be immediately!

Shabbat Shalom!

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