

D'VAR TORAH: PINCHAS. NUMBERS 25.10-30.1

Michael Steven Marx, 22 July 2016

A Chasidic tale—maybe from Elie Wiesel's *Souls on Fire* or one of the collection of Chasidic tales compiled by Martin Buber—tells of a renowned rebbe who visits a small community. Walking by the rebbe's room, a congregant hears him reciting speeches of praise about himself. This happens two or three times before the rebbe comes downstairs to join the service. Looking out at the congregation, he addresses them, "Perhaps some of you heard me speaking inside my room, reciting the very words of praise that you yourselves are hoping to deliver tonight. Nu? I do that not to pre-empt you, but to remind myself how ridiculous such praises are and how unworthy I am." This tale tells us something of how challenging it is to give a *D'var Torah* to mark 30 years that Rabbi Linda and Rabbi Jonathan have been here at Temple Sinai without ourselves sounding extravagantly ridiculous. Rabbi Linda and Rabbi Jonathan appreciate the exercise in humility that the rebbe in the story practices. So what can I say?

The task was not made any easier—as Art Ruben and I discovered—by this week's Torah portion, *Pinchas* (Numbers 25.10-30.1). The *parshah* contains stories of the second census of children of Israel, of Moses's successor being chosen (Joshua)—and I don't even want to have to think about choosing a next rabbi for many years to come—and of ritual sacrifices for all the Festivals. But early within the *parshah* is a small story of great importance that many commentaries focus on, the story of The Daughters of Zelophehad. In fact, Rabbi Linda spoke to the Board of Trustees about this passage at our meeting this past week.

Zelophehad died and left no sons to inherit his land. But he did leave five daughters: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. If any of you are looking for names for a soon to arrive daughter or granddaughter, keep these five obscure names of women of valor in mind.

The problem is, can the daughters inherit Zelophehad's land? What will happen to it without a male to inherit it? What will happen to his daughters?

Poor Moses—he's just had to deal with the rebellious and complaining children of Israel, and now he has to confront "the Gender Question." But like the wise and gentle leader he is, Moses consults with The Man Upstairs. G-d accepts the daughters' request as "just." The story thus tells us something important about change and agents for change within Judaism.

Many of the values inherent in the story are values we have learned from Rabbi Linda and Rabbi Jonathan and have come to cherish about them over the past 30 years.

The first is the value of being connected. The daughters of Zelophehad wanted to remain connected to their father's name, to their father's tribe, and to their land. That idea of *connection* is something we celebrate with our rabbis each of these 30 years. On one level, we want to be connected to the land: *Artzenu*—our land, Israel. Rabbi Linda and Rabbi Jonathan have helped us as a congregation stay connected to Israel with their congregational trips and their own involvement with the politics and policies of Israel. But they also have given us a

sense of place on the earth—also our land—with the environmental values they preach in their sermons and the “green” practices we have adopted in the Temple. The annual Adirondack *Shabbatot* are a way of renewing ourselves and our connection to the earth. These connections to the land foster connections to G-d and our Jewish and Biblical roots.

But more than this surface connection to the land is the value of a sense of belonging that the daughters of Zelophehad represent. Rabbi Jonathan and Rabbi Linda have created a sense of place for each of us here at Temple Sinai, a way for us to demonstrate our sense of belonging to a community, especially our Jewish community. The daughters’ petition Moses, “Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan...” From G-d’s answer we learn that there is more than one way to prevent a relationship from being lost. And the rabbis have embraced a similarly diverse attitude in providing each of us with distinct and meaningful ways to keep our relationship to Judaism alive in a variety of ways through our membership in Temple Sinai. For some, it may be nurturing a Jewish identity in our children through their attendance at the religious school. For others, it may be attending Shabbat services. For some others, it may be an adult education class in Yiddish or weekly Bible study. And still for others, it may be donning a costume for a Purim celebration or enjoying a freshly baked challah each week from the Slice of Heaven bakery. And how beautiful is it that through Rabbi Linda’s work as a *soferet*, we all are invited to show our connection as we participate in her making of the community Torah? All of these are ways the rabbis assure that we keep our connections strong. That these connections not get lost. That we not get lost.

Another dimension of the story of Zelophehad suggests a further characteristic of our community that Rabbi Jonathan and Rabbi Linda have cultivated here at Temple Sinai as our leaders these past 30 years. The story isn’t called “The Story of Zelophehad” but rather “The story of the Daughters of Zelophehad.” The emphasis is on “the daughters.” There’s a subtle attention to *inclusion* in this story, perhaps even an early nod to feminism. The daughters—who up until this point traditionally have not counted (remember the parshah begins with a second census) suddenly are included and *count*. That sense of inclusion has been an important part of the kind of Jewish community the rabbis have created over these past 30 years at Temple Sinai. They have made Temple Sinai a place where all Jews are welcomed and included—whether you come from a conservative or orthodox background, have wandered from your Jewish identity, or even if you actually grew up with Reform Judaism.

But such *inclusiveness* can dangerously become *exclusiveness*. As Hillel famously teaches in *Pirket Avot*, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I?” It’s that second question that captures the sense of inclusiveness that the rabbis have made in our community: “If I am only for myself, who am I?” Rabbi Linda and Rabbi Jonathan have extended the community of Temple Sinai and made us focus not just—in the words of *Oseh Shalom*--“*v’al kol Yisrael*” but equally important “*v’al Kol Yashvey TaVail*”—on all who dwell on the earth.

Temple Sinai is a community that supports the EOC soup kitchen for the homeless in our community and regularly organizes the EOC Christmas dinner. We have celebrated the

passage of landmark legislation for LGBTQ rights, including, most recently, Gay Marriage. As many of you know who have attended Friday night services in mid-January or if you are a student in our Religious School, through his father Rabbi Jonathan had a personal connection to Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movements in the United States. Our rabbis have been our leaders and representatives in the Martin Luther King Day observances and Day of Volunteering here in Saratoga Springs. Sensitive to the discrimination and pain endured by the Muslim Community in the greater Capital Region, the rabbis have participated in programs at the Mosque and welcomed guests from the Muslim community here to our Temple to teach us about Islam and being Muslim in the United States.

When Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah approached Moses about inheriting the land of their father, they didn't realize that their request was laying a foundation for change in Judaism. And when Rabbi Linda and Rabbi Jonathan arrived in Saratoga Springs 30 years ago, perhaps they didn't imagine that they would be here in our community in 30 years, let alone have such a positive impact on our Temple Sinai community and our community of Saratoga Springs. But they did, and they have. We have changed for the better, so as we celebrate these 30 years together, let us say a heartfelt *Todah Rabah*.