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Blog Edition

Perspectives on Parashat Pinchas (Numbers, 25:10-30:1)



Rabbi Jane Kanarek and Rabbi Gray Myrseth offer divrei torah on Parashat Pinchas. Both authors discover within this week's Torah portion a powerful paradigm for the transformation of injustice, and a much needed call for compassion.

Posts from this [Hebrew College-hosted blog](#) are published weekly in [Patheos](#).

Asking for Change

By Rabbi Jane Kanarek
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About ten years ago, I was introduced to two books that have become part of my must-read list: *Women Don't Ask* and *Ask For It*. Written by Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, these books describe the cultural reasons women do not often ask for what they want, the costs of not doing so, and strategies for negotiation. In contexts both personal and professional, these books teach women how to ask and, in the process of asking, to engage in structural and societal change.

And so I am particularly struck in this week's *parshah* by the question, "*Lamah?*" ("why) that Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah ask after their father's death. "Why," these five women say, "should our father's name be lost simply because he did not have a son? Give us land amongst our father's kinsmen" (Numbers 27:4). In asking for land after their father Zelophehad's death, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah challenge a patriarchal system where only sons inherit. Coming before not only Israel's leaders—Moses, Eleazar, and the chieftains—but also the entire community, these women have the audacity to negotiate for change. Indeed, the Torah describes the daughters of Zelophehad as crafting a clever message to ask for their inheritance. They argue that since their father did not join Korah's rebellion against God, his death without male heirs should not be viewed as punishment. Rather, Zelophehad's name should be passed on through their inheritance of his land.

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Justice in the Wilderness

By Rabbi Gray Myrseth, Rab'17
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As a person who grew up in a relatively non-observant Jewish home, with little to no Hebrew, I used to only know the fourth book of the Torah as Numbers. This title calls to mind an orderly census-taking, a linear and rational accounting. And to be sure, there is plenty of counting in the Book of Numbers, but that tidiness is a thin veneer over the turmoil, wandering, crying out, and transformation that this chapter of sacred story presents. It was when, as an adult, I re-encountered that same tome as Sefer Bemidbar, the Book of the Wilderness, that it clicked into place for me.

The wilderness, our tradition teaches, belongs to no one (Mechilta d'Rashbi on Parshat Bemidbar). This is why the Torah was originally given in the wilderness, lest any group of people claim it belonged to

them and no one else. The wilderness can be treacherous and powerful. It strips away our illusions. It cuts through our human ideas of ownership, of hierarchy, of nation and state.

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