

Parashat Pinchas

On the surface Parashat Pinchas covers what appear to be quite disparate themes. It begins by rounding off the narrative of the incident at Ba'al Peor, when Pinchas literally skewered Zimri a leader of the tribe of Shimon, and Kozbi, a Midyanite princess. The narrative then continues with a detailed account of a census that Moshe initiated, followed by questions of land distribution, inheritance and rituals for festivals. On the surface then there would appear to be little that links these topics. And yet, below the surface there is much that these actually have in common - particularly when they are read with a view to gender issues. The prevailing viewpoint in this regard is that of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a word that is heard very often in these days, but what actually does it mean? According to Wikipedia patriarchy "is a social system in which males hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property. Patriarchy is associated with a set of ideas, a patriarchal ideology that acts to explain and justify this dominance and attributes it to inherent natural differences between men and women." As is apparent from our portion patriarchy is very much the social construct that we encounter in the Torah. This is evident from the census material which is only concerned to record the number of males. As we read, "Adonai said to Moshe and Elazar, the son of Aharon the cohen, 'Take a census of the entire assembly of the people of Israel twenty years old and over, by their ancestral clans, all who are subject to military service in Israel.... The census results begin with Reuven, the firstborn of Israel. The descendants of Reuven were: of Hanock, the family of the Hanokhi; of Pallu, the family of the Pallui; of Hetzron, the family of the Hetzroni; and of Karmi the family of the Karmi. These were the families of the Reuveni; of them were counted 43,730." And so the census material and genealogies go on, listing tribe by tribe and family by family only males. Indeed, this is the approach adopted throughout the Tanakh where women rarely get a mention in genealogies and census material. Take, for instance, the descent of Israel to Egypt. As we read in Bresheet 46, "These are the names of Israel's children who came into Egypt, Yaakov and his sons: Reuven Yaakov's firstborn; and the sons of Reuven - Hanokh, Pallu, Hetzron and Karmi. The sons of Shimon: Y'muel, Yamin, Ohad, Yakhin, Tzochar and Shaul the son of a Kena'ani woman. The sons of Levi: Gershon, Khat and M'rari. The sons of Yhudah: Er, Onan, Shelah, Peretz and Zerach; but Er and Onan died in the land of Kenaan. The sons of Peretz were Hetzron and Hamul. The sons of Yissakhar: Tola, Puvah, Yov and Shimron. The sons of Zvulun: Sered, Elon and Ychle'el." Again, and so it goes on. The primary interest of the narrative is with the sons, who became heads of tribes and houses within tribes. When women are mentioned it is only for the purpose of clarifying the male line or tribal primacy. Moreover, although the genealogy does note that, "In sum, his sons and daughters numbered thirty three" the only daughter that is mentioned is Dinah and only for the purposes just stated. The introduction to Shemot recaps this information thus, "These are the names of Israel who came into Egypt with Yaakov, each man came with his household: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, Yhudah, Yissakar, Zvulun, Binyamin, Dan, Naftali, Gad and Asher. All told, there were seventy descendants of Yaakov; Yosef was already in Egypt." The fact is that in the patriarchal structure of ancient Israel women were effectively invisible and fairly inconsequential beyond their role as mothers of sons. This is so even in the Messianic

Parashat Pinchas

Writings. The besorot, for instance, state Yeshua's genealogy, but these genealogies follow the time worn patriarchal format of fathers begetting sons. In fact the fundamental invisibility of women in the patriarchal society of ancient Israel is plainly stated in the account of the multiplication of loaves and fishes. As we read, "As evening approached, the talmidim came to him and said, "This is a remote place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away, so that they can go and buy food for themselves in the villages." But Yeshua replied, "They don't need to go away. Give them something to eat, yourselves!" "All we have with us," they said, "is five loaves of bread and two fish." He said, "Bring them here to me." After instructing the crowds to sit down on the grass, he took the five loaves and the two fish and, looking up toward heaven, made a b'rakhah. Then he broke the loaves and gave them to the talmidim, who gave them to the crowds. They all ate as much as they wanted, and they took up twelve baskets full of the pieces left over. Those eating numbered about five thousand men, plus women and children." Actually this line that Stern translates as "plus women and children" is much more starkly put in the original language where 'choris' means 'separately' or 'without'. Thus this final line should more accurately read as 'without counting' or 'not counting' the women and children. Here Mattityahu is simply and unconsciously reflecting the patriarchal biases of his age in which women and their children were fundamentally invisible and only mattered in as much as they mattered to men, especially with regard to the critical issue of producing male heirs. Thus we seldom learn about the lives of women in the Bible beyond their struggles to bear male offspring for their husbands. In the patriarchal society of ancient Israel daughters didn't really count since until the daughters of Tzlofchad raised their voices women could not inherit land or property. Indeed, this incident, recorded in our parashah helpfully lifts a lid on the inequality of gender in the world of ancient Israel. As we read, "Then the daughters of Tzlofchad the son of Hefer, the son of Gilad, the son of Machir, the son of Mnasheh, of the families of Mnasheh, the son of Yosef, approached. These were the names of the daughters: Machlach, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah and Tirtzah. They stood in front of Moshe, Elazar the cohen, the leaders and the whole community at the entrance to the tent of meeting and said, 'Our father died in the desert. He wasn't part of the group who assembled themselves to rebel against Adonai in Korach's group, but he died in his own sin, and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be eliminated from his family just because he didn't have a son? Give us property to possess along with the brothers of our father. Moshe brought their cause before Adonai. Adonai answered Moshe, 'The daughters of Tzlofchad are right in what they say. You must give them property to be inherited along with that of their father's brothers; have what their father would have inherited pass to them. Moreover, say to the people of Israel, 'If a man dies and does not have a son, you are to have his inheritance pass to his daughter. If he doesn't have a daughter, give his inheritance to his brothers. If he has no brothers, give his inheritance to his father's brothers. If his father doesn't have brothers, give his inheritance to the closest relative in his family, and he will possess it. This will be the standard for judgement to be used by the people of Israel, as Adonai ordered Moshe."

Parashat Pinchas

On the surface this passage might appear to be an example of what we might call proto-feminism, and in some ways it is, at least to the extent that the concerns of five women are featured in the midst of a patriarchal text. On a human level we should not miss the courage of five young, unmarried women in pressing their concerns. For a start we are told that they approached Moshe and all the male leaders and heads of tribes of Israel. Try to understand the daunting nature of this for anyone outside the elite of Israel let alone young unmarried women in a culture that did not generally give them voice. These were brave young women indeed! And try to understand also that they were asking a dangerous question, for in questioning the rightness of the laws of inheritance as they stood they were effectively questioning the Word of God as it had already been understood to have been transmitted, i.e. that inheritance is an exclusively male affair. As Rabbi Dr. Noam Zohar has helpfully written, "It is not difficult to imagine how some people around them must have reacted to the request of the five sisters. After all, instructions for parceling out the land had been given: only males age twenty and up had been counted, and the command had been issued, "among these shall the land be apportioned as shares" (Num. 26:53) It was patently clear that women had no share in the land at all. Presumably some people in the camp must have argued, "These women, what right have they got to complain? Have they any right to challenge G-d's law? Whether they are petitioning on their own behalf, or on behalf of their deceased father, and even if there were some logic to their argument that 'why should our father's name be lost...,' how dare they bring charges against Heaven and demand a change in the commands of the Holy One, blessed be He?" One might also have heard the argument, "If there were real substance to what they say, from the outset the Lord's command would have been to transfer their father's inheritance to them!" The potential peril that these women placed themselves in is illustrated by the fact that in the previous case in which Moshe had to consult with God a man had been stoned to death for challenging as yet unspecified details of Shabbat observance; so now these young women were challenging *specific* rulings which had come from the mouth of Hashem! Would they be stoned to death too? And yet in contrast to the former incident when God's ruling came through to Moshe it effectively overturned the previous clear Torah commandment which had restricted land inheritance to men. In short, the daughters of Tzlofchad questioned the justice of the Torah as it stood and God actually agreed with them! The result is somewhat mind boggling! As Rabbi Zohar exclaims, "since ultimately Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah were found to have a just claim, how was it that the Almighty gave the original directive? If G-d intended a part of the land to be given to female heirs such as these, why did He not say so from the outset?" Good questions!

There is no doubt in my mind that the daughters of Tzlofchad should be celebrated for their great bravery and provide a very welcome portrait of female faith. And yet as we do so we must note that as far as the rights of women were concerned their 'victory' was exceedingly small. Indeed, the fact that this incident is recorded in Scripture at all is, as Katherine Doob Sakenfeld has astutely commented, because the story was of interest to the patriarchal concerns of the redactor. "Why was this story preserved in the canon? The drama of the story

Parashat Pinchas

and the courage of the sisters are not sufficient explanation. It seems probable that the story survived because the basic point at issue was the preservation of the *father's name*. The storyteller presumes an intricate connection between possession of land and preservation of family name. The women themselves are pictured as taking action for the sake of their father's name not for the sake of their own opportunity to possess land. This story could be heard even in ancient Israel as a story of comfort for women who would not be left destitute, but it was preserved primarily as a story of comfort for men who had the misfortune not to bear any male heirs - their names would not be cut off from their clans." Thus in this case even when the Torah appears to be concerned with the interests of women, its interest is rather in that of men! Such is the patriarchal outlook of the Tanakh and even of the Messianic Writings. In the Torah women are often presented as possessions of men, first of their father and then of their husband. As we read in next week's parashah, "When a woman makes a vow to Adonai, formally obligating herself, while she is a minor living in her father's house; then, if her father has heard what she vowed or obligated herself to do and holds his peace, then all her vows remain binding - every obligation she has bound herself to will stand. But if on the day her father hears it, he expresses his disapproval, then none of her vows or obligations she has bound herself to will stand." Similarly if and when a woman married her husband could equally make her vows null and void. The patriarchal view of women as possessions of men is also reflected in the Ten Commandments themselves which are not only grammatically communicated in the masculine singular but which actually also list wives among the property that an Israelite male is forbidden to desire for himself. Shemot 20:14 therefore says, "Do not covet your neighbor's house; do not covet your neighbor's wife, his male or female slave, his ox, his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Here then a wife is listed with slaves, oxen, donkeys and 'anything' else that 'belongs' to another man. As the commentator Tikvah Frymer Kensky points out, the last commandment, "Neither shall you covet your neighbour's wife..." addresses the men and treats the wife as an object to be desired, like the neighbour's house, field, slave, ox or ass, all of which one may not covet."

Alas the patriarchal perspective of ancient Israel effectively objectified women and thus diminished their full humanity. 'Not counting women' sums up so much of the perspective of the writers and editors of Scripture. Seldom do we find fully rounded accounts of women's lives. Women mostly appear in the texts when it bears on the patriarch concerns of ancient Israelite society. They are mainly either evil seducers, like the Midyanite women or Shlomo's wives, dragging men away from fidelity to their God, or they are valorised for their behind the scenes role in propping up the structure of patriarchy: they are valued as mothers and wives, but rarely as beings who are interesting or worthy in their own right to be written about. And yet in Yeshua we encounter a different perspective. In contradiction to this patriarchal structure he surrounded himself with female talmidim, who followed him, along with the men, around the country and supported his ministry in every way, not least financially. As Luke tells us, "After this, Yeshua traveled about from town to town and village to village, proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God. With him were the Twelve, and a number of women who had been healed from evil spirits and illnesses — Miryam (called Magdalit), from whom

Parashat Pinchas

seven demons had gone out; Yochanah the wife of Herod's finance minister Kuza; Shoshanah; and many other women who drew on their own wealth to help him." Just as Yeshua nicknamed many of his key disciples renaming, for example, Shimon as Kefa (meaning rock), and the brothers as B'nei Regesh (Sons of Thunder), so too he may have honoured Miryam with the title 'Migdal' - which means 'tower.' Such was her faith that she towered even among the disciples. Little wonder then that this same Miryam was the first to encounter the risen Messiah and convey the good news of his resurrection to the male disciples! In contrast to the narrative of the Midyanite women, and much to the consternation of his male disciples, we find that Yeshua even dared to talk and spend time with a Samaritan woman! Time and time again we find that Yeshua acted contrary to the expectations of a patriarchal culture, affirming the full humanity and rights of women alongside those of men. Thus also we find Yeshua disabusing the Prushim of patriarchal assumptions as to the male ownership of women. As we read, "Some P'rushim came and tried to trap him by asking, "Is it permitted for a man to divorce his wife on any ground whatever?" He replied, "Haven't you read that at the beginning the Creator made them male and female."

Alas this was not the end of patriarchy, not even the beginning of its end. But his words do give us hope that one day, when the Spirit of God has fully opened our minds, each human being, regardless of gender, will be freed from artificial social constraints, so that they can be fully themselves - fully human and fully alive. Much work yet remains to be done so that both women *and* men can be liberated from the harmful effects of patriarchy. Until then the promise remains and urges us on, striving to achieve fullness and shalom that is encapsulated in the prophetic vision that "one day the lion will lie down with the lamb."