

This week in Torah, five women make, and ultimately change, history. (Torah sure does have a way of speaking to the moment, doesn't it?) In this parsha, we meet the five daughters of a man named Tzelophechad. Their story begins in the wilderness, in the last year of the people's 40 years of wandering, and emerges out of a problem with one of God's given laws.

Moses has proclaimed to the people how the land will be divvied up among the tribes when they ultimately arrive in the Promised Land. Immediately, these five sisters realize they have a problem. As the plan was explained, they realize that, because they have no father and no husbands, they will be assigned no portion of land and will have nowhere to live. The law itself was flawed. It didn't include someone in their situation and so their need is quite urgent. This is the moment when we meet them in Torah.

The women come to the Ohel Mo'ed, the meeting place in the wilderness where disputes and challenges are heard. They've come to speak their case to Moses, Eliezer the Priest, and the Chieftains. *Vatikravna b'not Tzelophechad*. The daughters of Tzelophechad stepped forward. "*Avinu met bamidbar*," they begin. Our father died in the wilderness. *U'vanim lo hayu lo*. And he left no sons. Why should our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son? *T'na lanu achuzah*. Give us a holding among our father's kinsman.

Which is to say: let us inherit land and have a place to live among our own family, in our father's name.

It is an unbelievably powerful moment. A poignant moment. A radical moment in which a group of people who otherwise would not have authority, organize themselves to make their case. They speak truth to power, calling out an injustice. And they win. The story continues. Moses doesn't know what to do - this is above his pay grade. So he takes the case to God. And God says: *ken dovrot b'not Tzelophechad* - the daughters of Tzelophechad are right. And God changes God's own law to allow them to inherit land without being attached to a man. And, understanding that this is not a one-off problem, God changes the laws of inheritance from this point forward so that they will include all families, all women, throughout all time. I mean, really. That's amazing.

But the part that speaks so thoughtfully into this moment in history is how these women show up. They make a choice. They don't start from: we demand equal inheritance rights for women. Though they'd have the right to do that. They don't start from: the law you made is unjust and unfair and sexist and cruel. Though they'd have the right to say that, too. Instead, they begin: *avinu met*. Our father has died.

They start from their story. The pain that has shaped them. The reason they are there. The hurt that they carry, that is now exponentially greater because this law touches their most tender and longing hearts, and puts them in danger in a way they wouldn't have been if their dad were still alive. They begin with their heartache, their humanity.

Their words are honest, vulnerable, human, and courageous. Why courageous?

Well, they've seen an impatient and reactive Moses who gets angry when he is challenged, hitting rocks and yelling at the people. And they've seen an angry God who cannot stand it when the people complain, delivering on them devastating punishment for their faithlessness. But this time, Moses hears their words, their hearts, and responds with curiosity. And this time, God is moved to a great compassion and changes God's own mind.

The power of telling the stories that shape us is great enough to permeate the ears, and penetrate the heart of the other, powerful enough to allow a person to be seen as a human being, and not as an enemy.

And I believe that, today, this is among the greatest wisdom we can mine from this episode in Torah.

Political conversations today, split into blues and reds, conversations about what is just, what is compassionate, who is on the right side of history - it's all so very hot right now. Not only is it difficult to have conversations across political differences, but it is incredibly rare, which means we are mostly out of practice with conflict and disagreement. So often, these conversations happen in the theoretical . . . like when I argue with people I disagree with when I'm on a run. It's just me and my own head, so sure I am right. Or the "conversation" happens when we scroll through social media and see a detestable post from someone whose opinions and political stance we find abhorrent. That's not a conversation. Or when encountering someone of a different political position, we often speak right past each other, assuming we know them, rarely pausing to get curious about what the other person means, or how they came to their belief. It's terrible for our blood pressure, our sense of hope, and most of all, our sense of humanity. It breaks our ability to see people as people.

And there is a trajectory here. Somewhere down the line, we become a country broken beyond repair, states carved up into the people we are willing to see as people, and those we can only see as enemy. It is not a future that we dream of - of greater compassion or kindness or even justice and certainly not of empathy. But Tzelophechad's daughters put a map in our hand to find our way forward.

Avinu met bamidbar, they begin. See, our dad died. And we miss him so much. He used to protect us and provide for us. He taught us how to hike, how to hunt. He taught us to speak up when something wasn't right, how to get our needs met, and how to take care of each other, and our neighbors. And now, he's gone, and we feel lost, and this law about how everyone will get land, this law that seems to **you** to work because it works for **you**, it doesn't work for us and we are in pain. There's got to be another way forward that works for both of us. You have a family, Moses, right? You can imagine what this is like.

An opening. A beginning. A possibility breaks through the noise.

Ya know, a couple of weeks ago, I was with the CBE Climate team outside of Citibank Headquarters in Manhattan. We were there to remind Citibank that they need to live up to the commitments that they made to transition from fossil fuels in the 2015 Paris Accords. And we had our signs and we had blocked the doors and we had chanted our chants. And as you might imagine, the employees who wanted to get to work felt pretty frustrated by this, which is understandable.

So at one point, one of the employees started yelling some really nasty things at one of the protesters. Trying to physically push past her. Calling her degrading names. And in response, she began to speak. She said: I'm here because I have a four year old grandson who has asthma. I'm 70 years old. I have osteoporosis. I'm not well. I didn't think I'd be spending my retirement like this. I don't want to be here, but my grandson needs me to be here, so here I am. And the man fell quiet. And he stepped back. And those around him stopped pushing. And they probably didn't suddenly switch opinions, but their empathy grew. A spark of humanity emerged from the heat and it offered just a beginning. An opening. A possibility. To change the story. To see each other again as people and not as the enemy - a stance that doesn't serve any of us if we hold onto a vision of a better world for all of us.

I was also called a lot of different things that morning. One man yelled at me: "get a job!" among other less nice things. And it permeated me, I realized later, because the truth is, besides the fact that I have a job, is that I was there because I actually have a lot of love for him and for his children. And I was there for my child and her future. And I wish I had found a way to say that to him. I will try to next time. And - in some part of the multiverse - I will ask him who he cares about and is trying to protect through his actions. And I will listen and try to see him, too. That is the version of the present that leads to the version of the future most beautiful.

Avinu met bamidbar. I'm here because I have a four year old grandson. Mine starts with: "I have a seven year old daughter." How does your story begin? The one that shapes you and makes you show up for the things that matter to you, to try to take care of the people that you love?

And I don't mean to be naive here. This could be some of the hardest work we do in the next months and years. The election and what comes after is going to be rough and at times bathed in divisiveness and fear. Some days, you'll feel on top and some days, you'll feel pummeled. It is going to be hard to always be generous of spirit. There will be so many opportunities to make assumptions about the person on the other side from you. AND, if we want the world to be more kind, more compassionate, and more human, we have the chance to play a part in that. There will be times to protest, times to act, times to donate, times to postcard, times to strategize, a time to vote. But b'not Tzelophechad are not weak in their decision to tell their story and be seen as human and open space for the other to be seen as human, too. They are ever so much stronger and much more effective in building the world they want to live in.

The first word of their story is often overlooked, but is the first taste of their teaching. *Vatikravna* . . . And they stepped forward. The root *karav* means to draw near. May we learn from their wisdom to address those who occupy the spaces of power, the spaces of difference, the spaces

of profound disagreement, in a way that actually draws us nearer to one another, unearthing the humanity between us wherever we can find it.

Shabbat shalom.