

Pinchas / Numbers 25:10–30:1 / Lucy Steinitz

There are lots of things going on in this Parashah. Since we're not reading all of it, let me summarize:

First, Aaron's grandson Pinchas is rewarded for his act of zealotry in killing the Simeonite prince Zimri and his lover. Not my version of heroism, but God grants him a covenant of peace and the priesthood.

Then we have a census count of 601,730 men between the ages of twenty and sixty. Moses is instructed on how the Land is to be divided by lottery among the tribes and families of Israel – male headed households only. But the five daughters of Tzelaḥchad (Zelophahad) petition Moses that they also be granted the portion belonging to their father, who died without sons. God accepts their claim and incorporates the arrangement into the Torah's laws of inheritance.

Third, Moses is not allowed to enter Israel, so he empowers Joshua to succeed him to lead the people into the promised land. And finally, the Parashah concludes with a detailed list of daily offerings and the festivals that occur throughout the year.

Most of the commentaries I found focus on the issue of leadership – for example, that it seems unfair that Moses only gets the tantalizing consolation of seeing the Land from the top of Mount Nebo before he dies. And why is Joshua so much more deserving – and even more concerning, how is the zealotry of Pinchas the kind of leader who is hailed as a harbinger of peace?

It could have been worse. At least Moses calls upon God to choose a successor for him who will understand and respect the differences between people, rather than someone like Pinchas whose instinct is to find the sinners and kill them, to separate between “us” and “them.” We might ask, where is our Joshua of today?

That said, I have decided not to focus on this aspect of the Parashah today. With all this attention on leadership, the general populace – “we the people” – is essentially left out of the process. I understand we're not talking about a democracy here; in fact, the cultural context was very tribal, male dominated, and oligarchic. But still, you have to wonder, what were the 600 thousand-plus families doing at this time to render influence and build their own future?

The good news is that there an encouraging story embedded in this week's portion. It is that the daughters of Tzelaḥchad petitioned for their own land by standing before Moses, Elazar the priest, the princes *and the entire community*, saying

“Our father died in the desert . . . without leaving any sons. Why should our father's name be disadvantaged in his family merely because he had no son? Give to us a portion of land along with our father's brothers.”

Picture this: Five women in front of the whole community and its leaders. We don't hear of any counterarguments; the community agreed or at least did not object. And then, we are told, Moses brought their case before God and God answered:

“The daughters of Tzelafchad speak rightly. Give them a hereditary portion of land alongside their father’s brothers. Let their father’s hereditary property thus pass over to them.”

Thus, this becomes the law. The Halacha now is that if a man dies and has no sons, his hereditary property shall pass over to his daughter . . . (*Numbers 27:1–9*). Clearly, this is a step in the right direction. Had anybody objected; had the community risen up in opposition, the outcome might well have been different.

So, what does this tell us about the power of the ordinary person, of “we the people?” I will argue that the populace has influence – they did back in Biblical days, and they do today. *In fact, we are obliged to get involved.* Jewish tradition speaks badly of the ordinary man or woman who does nothing in the wake of danger, tragedy or suffering. By contrast, we have the duty to help rescue our fellow human beings, both personally and with our financial resources. We do not have to give up our life nor place our survival in substantial jeopardy to do this, but *we should do something* – something meaningful – to help.

In light of the issues we face today, I wondered how far to take this teaching. I like to think that the daughters of Tzelafchad had done their homework prior to presenting their petition to Moses by identifying key allies in the community to stand by them when they approached Moses and the high Priest. These allies would likely have been men who agreed with the five daughters; men who acknowledged the unfairness of the inheritance laws at the time and were willing to silence any opposition in the community.

Identifying strategic allies to quell the voice of opposition is a highly effective advocacy approach that we still use today. In fact, no major civil rights legislation – or any similar benefit – has passed without the help of allies, of people who were not themselves discriminated against but nevertheless chose to advocate for what is morally right.

What does Judaism say about this? I note that the most repeated commandment in the Torah is to not oppress the stranger. And who are those strangers? Michael Strassfeld, one of my favorite modern commentators, explains that Racism is about those we think are “different” from us—those we have turned into strangers. “Black Lives Matter” is our equivalent of “don’t oppress the stranger” – it is a bedrock statement that all of us are created in God’s image. To be *anti-Racist* is to argue there is no “us and them” – that we are all, equally, God’s children. But what does that mean in terms of our own involvement – about where we would stand in the efforts to achieve equity, access and universal human dignity?

*Now I’m going to go insert a short lesson in social psychology for a couple minutes. I want to dedicate this part of my drash to Elaine Reuben whose comment in the list–serve quoted Abraham Joshua Heschel when he said, “**Few are guilty, but all are responsible.**”*

Imagine you are walking back home from a party late one night when you hear a woman screaming for help. You look across the street and notice a man kicking and screaming at the woman lying on the ground. Near the victim are four people watching the attack take place. You decide that one of the bystanders has probably already called the police and you don’t need to do anything further to help the victim. However, the truth is that no one had yet done anything to help the victim.

The reason why there were multiple bystanders but none of them intervened can be attributed to the bystander effect. This effect makes it less likely for people to intervene in emergencies if there are others around them. The more people there are, the more each bystander is discouraged from doing something about the problem. This effect is often the result of bystanders feeling uncertain about their role in the situation. They might believe someone else is responsible for seeking help or someone else already did something to help. The bystanders might also feel like they are a part of the group and need to do whatever the other bystanders do.

There are studies to show that if the bystander was alone, the chances are – actually 70% — that she or he would jump in to get involved. But not if other bystanders are nearby; then it is much rarer for someone to break out and get involved.

The bystander effect is extremely relevant since the wellbeing of others might depend on each one of us; in fact, it does. If one person intervenes, others may also follow. Knowing this can overcome that the belief that others are obligated to do something, when, in fact, you – you, me and every one of us — can do something at that moment!

Before I end, let me offer with two personal reflections: As some of you know, my father was a Holocaust survivor and sometimes I would ask him how the Holocaust changed his life. He told me that he tries not to draw lessons from the perspective of a victim or even a survivor. What would have been his role if the Nazis had targeted Bavarians instead of Jews, he asked? Or another subgroup? Would he have just been the bystander and said to himself that he that he didn't know any Bavarians and therefore someone else should intervene? We won't ever know for sure, but if the daughters of Tzelafchad didn't have allies, people in the community who supported their petition, would Moses and his cohorts have listened to them? Would God have even known to care?

Second, I want to offer a more contemporary perspective. Today I'll be saying Kaddish for two African American men, both relatives of my supervisor in Baltimore, who were killed by gun violence last month. My supervisor told me that Nygel Allen–Lee Simmons was just 20 years old, working and living with his mom. Lionel Yancy – who liked to be called Nell – was 49, a laid back and funny guy who was loved by his whole family. Like the two children murdered by gun violence last week in DC, Nygel and Nell were both caught in cross–fire – an unbearably heartbreaking and tragic situation. According to the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 36,000 Americans are killed by guns each year—an average of 100 per day. And Black Americans are 10 times more likely to die from gun violence than white Americans. I don't have any easy solutions here, but men like Nygel and Nell should not be strangers in our thinking. *Their lives matter – their Black Lives Matter.*

To conclude: today's Parashah teaches us that when there is activism from the ground up, there is hope. We must respond to the strangers in our midst, whether standing with the modern-day equivalent of the daughters of Tzelafchad or in other ways. We may not be guilty, but we are responsible.

My questions to you are –

1. Who are today's strangers – individuals? Groups? Even structures within our society?
2. And second, what else can we do to build on the initiative of the daughters of Tzelafchad – the ground–up efforts – that we read about in today's Parashah?