

D'var Torah – 08.02.24

Matot-Masei – Nu 30:2-36:13

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The compiler of the book of Numbers clearly had women on his mind as he was putting the text together, especially toward the end. Last week we heard from Norm about women in the portion called Pinchas, and this week we have this double portion, Matot-Masei, and it's women all over the place, from the beginning to the end. Matot begins with rules for making a vow, which one scholar tells us “was a central and longstanding feature of personal religion in Israel.” I found it sadly amusing that while the instruction to a man for vow-making occupies exactly one line of text, the instruction for women's vow-making requires 13 lines of text and concerns itself not only with the woman's actions but also with those of her father and of her husband, as well as her marital status (widowed or divorced). Apparently the vows of as-yet unmarried daughters and of wives are subject to veto by the women's father or husband. Well, I guess we should be glad that women had any power at all to make vows. So it goes.

This has reminded me of an event in my own life that happened sometime in the late 1970s, nearly 50 years ago. My first spouse and I were living in Detroit, with him working and me in the wife and mother role. We lived not too far from a J.C. Penney store, and that was a familiar place for me to shop for clothing and home needs. I applied for a Penney's charge card in my name, but was told it would have to be issued in my spouse's name. I had had charge cards in my own name before I was married, but apparently the rules were different once a marriage took place. I was not pleased and wrote a stinging objection, but to no avail. The rules were the rules.

But back to the text, or rather to the very end of the Masei portion. Here, in the last chapter of Numbers, the five daughters of Zelophehad were the subject of a problem brought to Moses about their right to inherit. Earlier in Numbers, the daughters had asked to receive their portion of their deceased father's estate, since there were no sons to inherit. Moses brought the matter to God, who granted their wish. All good, until the possibility of marriage outside the tribe was seen as a problem because the daughters' property would go to their husbands, whoever they might be, thus diminishing the tribe's land holdings. Moses again brought this matter to God, who decreed that it was fine for the daughters to marry; they just needed to marry within the tribe and not outside it. The overriding issue was that the land must remain within the

predetermined tribal boundaries. The daughter obeyed the rules and were married to their first cousins. And I thought this happened only in Tennessee, where one of our esteemed state legislators proudly bragged that his parents were first cousins. That might explain something about some of his – well – weird legislative moves.

So the text for this week begins and ends being about women – but really is it? Or does it say more about the needs of the men in their lives, and the importance of tribal land retention?

However, let us not argue against the text, which is the product of a culture far different from our own (with some exceptions). We are in a very different time and place, and grateful for it. Here in the United States of America, we are contemplating the second national political campaign that is to be headed by a woman. In this respect, I got to thinking about the world history of female heads of state and government.

A helpful list in Wikipedia reveals that the first woman to be elected as prime minister of a country was Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) when she led her party to victory in 1960. The first woman to be elected president of a country was Vigdis Finnbogadottir of Iceland, who won the 1980 presidential election as well as three subsequent elections. The first democratically elected female prime minister of a Muslim majority country was Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, who led her party to victory in the 1988 general election. Bhutto was also the first of only two non-hereditary female leaders who gave birth to a child while serving in office, the other being Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand.

Currently there are 25 women around the globe who are serving as either president or prime minister of their country. Leading the pack are Iceland and Finland, each having elected four different women since 1980. Following closely are the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Malta with three each. Note that this has all happened in the lifetime of most of us. We could name other notable women leaders in the past 50 years: Golda Meir, for example. By the way, I imagine (although I could be wrong) that all of these women swore an oath when they took office, and I also imagine that they did not need parental or husbandly approval to do so. Glaringly absent from this list of female leaders is China, the Soviet Union/Russia, and of course, the United States of America.

This is not a time or a place for partisan political statements. I will just say this: We as a nation have a long way to go, and we're just getting started.

Thank you.