

When deciding what aspect of Parashat Pinchas to explore for this drasha, the remarkable story of Zelophehad's five daughters and their quest to change the Jewish laws of land inheritance completely fascinated me. Perhaps this is because I am both the daughter of a father with no sons, and the wife of a father with no sons. Or perhaps it is because of my passion for equal rights for women; one of the main reasons I found myself drawn to membership at Shira Hadasha in the first place.

Whatever the reason, in this inspiring story of female empowerment, the Torah relates the courage and the integrity of five women: Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah. The story encapsulates the challenges faced by biblical women and the lengths they had to go to affirm their rights. Therefore, the story helps us to realise that we can change our own destiny and overcome obstacles that may be in our way by taking hold of life with our own hands.

Importantly the story also shows us that Jewish law is not static and has the capacity to move with the times and adapt to changes in society. This story represents the earliest revision or change of biblical law. Here, within the Torah itself, God revises an earlier piece of divine legislation because of an overriding moral imperative. Clearly, a precedent was set for later generations such as ours in our dealings with Jewish law (*halacha*).

The story goes like this: according to a law already established by God in the wanderings in the wilderness, only men could inherit property. Neither Moses nor any of the elders saw a problem with that procedure. After all, it was universal custom for men to own and inherit property, to handle finances, and to run the economy. Women lived in the generosity of powerful men. In fact, women were treated like property, transferred from their father's domain to their husband's domain.

Alone among the Jewish people, the daughters of Zelophehad pointed out that they had no brothers. If the law were rigidly followed, their father's family would be completely dispossessed. Moses responded to their complaint and promised that he would ask God what should be the law. God responds by unequivocally supporting the sisters' demand and creates a new and permanent law to secure inheritance for any daughters in such circumstances (27:6-8). As a result of the sisters' demands, the law of inheritance is changed forever.

What bravery and *chutzpah* would have been required for the women to confront the high-ranking men of the camp without being asked to do so. The Torah states: "The daughters of Zelophehad... came forward. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent Meeting" (27:1-2). As daunting as this may have been, the five sisters were determined to claim their rights. One can only imagine how confronting and surprising this would have been for the men! We also learn that not only did the women come forward with their complaint but they also spoke with great determination: "Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen!" (27:3-4).

This new law allowing women to own land was extremely radical. The daughters were trailblazers who had the courage to take bold action and create positive change. There is no doubt that their achievement was a landmark in women's rights regarding the inheritance of land. Moreover, their dazzling achievement inspires us as individuals to be assertive about what our rights should be, and reminds us that when no action is taken, we as individuals need to be bold and step up to the plate to create change. It is imperative that we continue to believe in our ability to be change makers who can turn the tide and shape our history.