

Feminism in action

Pinchas 5782/2022

As an Orthodox Feminist (and the fact that this week's Parasha was my Bar Mitzvah) the story of the Daughters of Tzelopchad, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milca, and Tirzah, has always struck a deep chord within me.

Here we have five sisters, who stand up, calling out a perceived injustice and making a legal challenge to divine law. They realise that they are about to enter the land of Israel, and unlike their wandering in the desert where they have their tent and patch of grass, suddenly they are about to find themselves homeless. They don't believe that should be the case, and God agrees with them¹.

What is it about these five women that makes them the heroes of feminism, but also deeply respected by traditionalists?

The Talmud explains that they were extremely wise and deeply righteous. They learned and were responding to the Torah learning that Moshe was giving at that moment². They were able to speak the language and create a positive change management. They weren't in-your-face activists (not that there isn't a place for that), but they knew that such activism could easily backfire (they even reference Korach and his failed activism). Rather, they came up with a point, focussed on it, and articulated it clearly – creating the desired change.

Tamara Cohen writes in support of such an idea, that the Sages of Judaism, never saw a relationship to God as being based around gender, rather about talent, inclination and strength. These five women were endowed with all three, and therefore are pedestalled as the exemplars of positive change and should be exemplified as the right methodology for much needed present-day change.

The Midrash explains that in the generation of the desert, the men were the ones who broke down the walls of Torah, while the women were the ones who built them up. This safeguarding of Torah values is central to the stance of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milca, and Tirzah, was not just feminism in action, it was Judaism in action. The men were once again complaining, threatening to leave back to Egypt, rejecting their birthright, and in that moment the women stood up and said "we want to be there, give us our inheritance"⁴.

This action was brave and heroic in the same way that Caleb and Joshua stood against the spies. It was counter cultural, determined, and a moment of legacy building – it was emphatically Jewish.

It is no wonder that Mishlei reminds us that one should not forsake their mother's teaching⁵ – because at the essence of feminism in action, is Torah in action!

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**