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# *Feminism in action...*

*Rabbi Alon Meltzer*

*A New Page of Talmud –  
Pinchas 5782*



The daughters of Zelophehad, of Manassite family—son of Hopher son of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh son of Joseph—came forward. The names of the daughters were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. They stood before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they said, “Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korah’s faction, which banded together against God, but died for his own sin; and he has left no sons. 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!” **Bamidbar 27:1-4<sup>1</sup>** The Sages taught: The daughters of Zelophehad are wise, they are interpreters of verses, and they are righteous. The Gemara proves these assertions. That they are wise can be seen from the fact that they spoke in accordance with the moment, i.e., they presented their case at an auspicious time. As Rabbi Shmuel bar Rav Yitzhak says: Tradition teaches that Moses our teacher was sitting and interpreting in the Torah portion about men whose married brothers had died childless, as it is stated: “If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies, and has no child, the wife of the dead shall not be married abroad to one not of his kin; her husband’s brother shall come to her, and take her for him as a wife” (Deuteronomy 25:5). The daughters of Zelophehad said to Moses: We are each considered like a son, give us each an inheritance like a son; and if not, our mother should enter into levirate marriage. Immediately upon hearing their claim, the verse records: “And Moses brought their cause before the Lord” – **Bava Basra 119b<sup>2</sup>** The rabbinic sages did not understand one’s relationship to God as connected primarily to gender, but rather, as Barry Holtz notes, to “talent, inclination and strength” ( Finding Our Way, 1990, p. 102). For example, one midrash enjoins its readers, “Come and see how the voice [of God] went forth [at Sinai]—coming to each Israelite according to his individual strength—to the old, according to their strength; to the young according to their strength; to the children according to their strength; to the infants according to

their strength; and to the women according to their strength” **Dr. Tamara Cohn, The Torah: A Women’s Commentary<sup>3</sup>** “Then came forward the daughters of Zelophehad”: In that generation the women were fencing<sup>9</sup>On raising a fence about the Law, see Avot 1:1. that which the men were breaching. Accordingly you find that Aaron said to them (i.e., the men in Exod. 32:2), “Take off the gold rings that are in the ears of your wives”; but the women were unwilling and protested against their husbands. Thus it is stated (in vs. 3), “So all the people took off the gold rings that were in their<sup>10</sup>Since “their” is masculine here, there is an implication that the men only took their own earrings. ears.” Thus the women did not take part in making the [golden] calf. So also in the case of the spies who had spread slander (according to Numb. 14:36), “when they returned, they made [the whole congregation] murmur against him.” A decree was issued against them, because they had said (in Numb. 13:31), “We are unable to go up [against this people for they are stronger than us].” The women, however, were not with them in their counsel. What is written above the matter (in Numb. 26:65)? “Because the Lord had said to them, ‘They shall surely die in the wilderness,’ not a man of them remained [...]” [Note that Scripture speaks of] “a man,” and not of “a woman.” Because they (i.e., the men) did not want to enter the land, but the women came forward to ask for an inheritance in the land. Therefore the parashah [about the death of that generation] was written next to this parashah, because what the men broke down the women fenced in. – **Bamidbar Rabbah<sup>5</sup>** My son, keep your father’s commandment; Do not forsake your mother’s teaching.– **Mishlei 6:20<sup>5</sup>**

The daughters of  
Zelophehad came  
forward...  
**וּתְקַרְבְנָה בְּגוֹת צִלְפָּחָד**  
**Bamidbar 27:1**

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