

Dear Chavraya,

The voices of women cry out from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Pinchas*, giving challenge to patriarchy and offering a new way. At times, even they lose the way, but then it becomes for us to remind and to challenge in turn, all while celebrating the possibility of change even as it unfolds before our eyes, as if in a dream. In *Parashat Pinchas*, a challenge to power and to the way things have always been is offered by women as a way for all of us, a way that is modeled and meant then to transcend gender, meant to become a new way.

Unfolding against a backdrop of violence, a zealot more comfortable with the spear than with words, taking the law into his own hands in the way of tyrants, taking no counsel with others, only he to save. At the end of the preceding *parsha*, Pinchas slays Zimri and Cozbi, an Israelite man and a Midianite woman, running them through with his spear. As so often, the Torah sets a context of violence which is then challenged from within, a stream of nonviolence rising up, waters breaking in birthing new possibility, a new way of speaking and challenging, of leading. God makes a *b'rit shalom/a Covenant of Peace* with Pinchas, painfully ironic, meant to wean him from violence, to offer an antidote, some suggest. Subtle challenge is offered, the letter "vav" in shalom is broken in two, the only place in the Torah with a "vav," or any other letter, so written, a broken spear, an incomplete covenant. Of the many challenges to the violence that pulsates in the very name of the *parsha*, in the way of the man for whom it is named, the voices of women lead the challenge.

We don't always hear the voices of women at first, in Torah and in life. Is it about quality of voice, about trust, about likeability, all standards not applied in the same way to men? The irony is underscored in the *parsha*. Moses is told of his coming death, that he will not enter the land. In a beautifully magnanimous response, his first concern is that the people not be as a flock without a shepherd. Moses pleads, *Let God, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man/ish over the community*. In a portion filled with the voices of women, it is an irony that laughs aloud, that begs for redress. Why not a woman?

Of women who offer a different way, we encounter Serach bat Asher, a singer of epic songs, a player of the harp. From the Torah itself, we know only of her name and lineage, her character filled out through legend and lore. When Jacob's sons return from Egypt, having discovered that their brother is still alive, they wonder how they will tell their father Ya'akov, without causing shock, that his beloved Yosef still lives. They see the young Serach playing music and they ask her to sing to their father, preparing his heart with song to receive the good news ever so gently. She who is said to have been received alive into the Garden of Eden is still there to tell Moses on the eve of the Exodus where the bones of Yosef are buried. Charming his metal coffin from the Nile, she allows a promise to be fulfilled, that Yosef's bones be taken with them in order for Israel to leave.

We encounter in this portion Yocheved and Miriam, mother and sister of Moses, women who affirmed life in the face of all that would deny it, song and dance the way of this holy sister. When Pharaoh decreed death for all the sons of Israel, couples separated from each other in order not risk bringing children into such a

world. The little girl Miriam told her parents that in their separation from each other they were worse than Pharaoh, who had decreed only against sons, but they against daughters as well. In their coming back together, Moses is born, the liberator emerging. Beyond the parted waters of the sea, now on freedom's shore, the woman Miriam takes her timbrel in hand and leads the women in dance and song. Having learned her way of life and love, it is for us to remind even Miriam not to offer song upon the drowning of the Egyptians, but only for our freedom to sing. Falling back upon the ways of men, their song of might and power, Miriam's own way of love and compassion for us to hold and remind.

Central to the Torah's response to Pinchas, the teaching of another way, the daughters of Tzelophchad arise, central to the telling, teaching the dynamics of sacred struggle. They are five sisters whose father has died without a son, five who bravely stand in the face of all that has been and plead their case to inherit, Machla, Noa, and Choglah, Milkah, and Tirtza. In the opening word of the Torah's telling of their cause, *va'tik'rav'na/and they drew near*, we learn an essential dynamism of nonviolent struggle. Drawing near, approaching the other, human connection is made, not to stand at a distance, spear in hand in the way of Pinchas. And then we are told, *va'ta'amod'na/and they stood*. Even as they draw near, seeking connection, they bravely stand their ground, teaching the way of speaking truth to power. Moved by the strength of their manner and way, Moses takes their case before the Holy One, announcing then to all assembled, *ken b'not tzelophchad dovrot/surely the daughters of Tzelophchad speak justly*. In that very word *dovrot/speak*, from the word for *word* itself, *davar*, the way of the word is affirmed.

Her cry continuing to rend the heart, every mother's wail for a son lost in battle, the last of the women we encounter in *Parashat Pinchas* is the woman we know only as Sisera's mother. In the midst of the *parsha* are all of the passages that become the additional readings for every holy day. Of Rosh Hashannah we are told, *Yom T'ruah yihiyeh l'chem/It shall be to you a day of sounding the shofar*. Looking to the *Targum*, the Aramaic interpretive translation of the Torah, the rabbis bring us to a place of deeper association and human connection with what we are to hear in the voice of the shofar. So different, the Aramaic says, *Yom yabava y'hey l'chon/It shall be to you a day of sobbing*. How do we know that *yabava* means "sobbing," and whose sobbing is it? As told in the Book of Judges, it is the sobbing of the mother of Sisera who waits for her son to return from battle, knowing in her heart that he will never come, *b'ad hachalon nish'k'fa va't'yabev em Sisera/through the window peered the mother of Sisera and sobbed* (Judges 5:28). In the broken notes of the shofar, it is simply the sobbing of a mother who has lost her son. That Sisera was a brutal enemy of Israel is never mentioned. In what becomes the least known name of Rosh Hashannah, *Yom Yabavah/Day of Weeping*, from Sisera's mother, we learn the way of compassion.

The voices of women cry out from *Parashat Pinchas* and challenge his brutal way. It will take all of us to shape the path formed of words rather than weapons, all of us to remind when the way is lost. As Moses calls for a man to lead, an irony

that laughs aloud, a new day is rising with laughter and tears. The time has come.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor