

On Belonging - Parashat Pinchas - 10 July 2020
Nehar Shalom Community Synagogue
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As many of you know, I also work as a hospice chaplain. One of the core tools in a chaplain's toolkit is a spiritual assessment - a rubric that guides us in getting to know a person's spiritual strengths, and places of spiritual pain. My workplace uses a written assessment, and one of the questions asks what role a person's spiritual belief system or identity plays in their life. Is it a source of comfort? Confusion? Does it give a sense of purpose or meaning? Is it a source of alienation? Again and again, I find myself checking the "other" box and adding a category: belonging. The person's religious or spiritual identity is a source of belonging.

I could just click the "comfort" box, but feeling a sense of belonging isn't always comfortable. Sometimes belonging feels like baggage or burden. And I could click "meaning" because belonging makes us feel connected, cared for, and accountable. But it can also be a site of alienation, as we belong to communities or families that disappoint or even hurt us; as we question our place, question whether we belong to groups we were born into and groups we have joined. A sense of belonging is an internal feeling, but it is, of course, tremendously shaped by external conditions and power dynamics.

Each of us has our own journey of belonging with any number of families, groups, or communities. And as a society, we are constantly wrestling with what it means to belong - to actually constitute ourselves as groups of people with some relationship to one another - and sometimes we include land or animals in our circles of belonging. What it means to belong is a huge question - both material and spiritual.

The importance of belonging, and the tension over how it gets defined and experienced, are a major theme of this week's parsha, which opens with God praising Pinchas, grandson of Aaron, for violently killing an interfaith couple - a really painful scene where the Torah's xenophobia is on full display. Next, God commands that a census be taken, and the names of the clans of each tribe are listed. The paradigm of belonging implied here is clear: everyone belongs to a family, families belong to clans, clans belong to tribes. These structures of belonging determine identity, and the distribution of resources. God explains that when the Israelites arrive in Eretz Yisrael, the land shall be divided according to family, clan, and tribe - passed from father to son. And then *Bnot Tzelofechad*, the daughters of a man called Tzelofechad who are descendants of Joseph, object. Their father is dead; he had no sons. If land can only be inherited by sons, their land (which of course is just imaginary at this point) will no longer belong to their family; and because family names are preserved within

clans by their land holdings, their family will, in a sense, no longer belong to their clan. Unable to fit in to the structure of belonging, their family will cease to exist.

Moses brings their case before God, and God responds, they are right, their case is just. Allow them to inherit the land, and change the practice: from now on, if a man dies without leaving a son, transfer his property to his daughter.

It's pretty cool. *Bnot Tzelophehad* have been praised by ancient rabbis and contemporary feminists alike, for their wisdom, for their bravery, and for their capacity to interpret the law of inheritance better than Moses - to both hold a more expansive vision of justice, and to fine-tune the application of the law.

The essence of the patriarchal system doesn't change, but the way *bnot tzelofechad* advocate for their own belonging in the system is powerful. They claim their belonging in the system by asserting their right and ability to critique it - even as their critique itself says, "we belong enough to want to help preserve this system."

As themes of belonging come alive in the parsha, so too they are alive and fraught in public life right now. So many of the injustices stemming from white supremacy are about power, exploitation, and greed, but are also about belonging - about keeping people out, preserving belonging - and that means resources, safety, and well-being - for the few. And so many incredibly powerful responses to injustice are also about belonging. This week, a major piece of liberatory civil rights legislation was presented by the Movement for Black Lives and Representatives Pressley and Talib, called the Breathe Act. It's about building communities where people truly belong - we are cared for; we are held accountable and can ask for accountability; we can be our full selves and know we will be safe, not targeted. Safety comes from investing deeply in communities, and building equitable structures that, in turn, invite everyone affected by them to invest deeply - to contribute, to participate, to have a say.

Also this week, the Supreme Court ruled that much of Eastern Oklahoma, nearly half the state, is indigenous land, recognizing a 19th century treaty that the United States made with the Muscogee Nation. As I understand it, the decision recognizes the land as within the bounds of the reservation, and subject to tribal rather than state law. It's a really significant ruling because it affirms the federal government's obligation to uphold and honor treaties, and thereby affirms the Muscogee Nation's sovereignty. It doesn't actually change any land ownership, but it recognizes that what it means to "belong" to this country and any particular state is still contested; it affirms that the relationship between governance and land and belonging is still contested.

Both the Supreme Court decision and the Breathe Act are small steps towards the healing around land and belonging that we desperately need. Both, in different ways, make room for or reach towards acts of reparation.

Both were, and continue to be, fought for by people who have experienced terrible state and state-condoned violence, people who have been targeted and exploited by our system of government, and who are still demanding their place. Like *bnot tzelofechad*, they claim belonging in the system by critiquing it - by demanding that it change.

Jews have always negotiated what belonging looks like in our small communities in the context of negotiating belonging on a larger societal scale. As we have figured out what it means to belong, as Jews, in the wider world, in different moments in history, so too we have struggled to figure out what it means to build our own communities of belonging. At their best, our shuls and congregations, our neighborhood communities, are places where we get to practice. Where we get to speak honestly about our own experiences of belonging and not-belonging, the ways belonging is a source of strength for us, and the ways it is a source of pain and sorrow. Where we get to make mistakes and learn from them. Where, as the world around us struggles against racism and ableism and transphobia, we learn how to build a community where no one is presumed to be a non-Jewish guest, rather than a member, because they are Black, or Asian Pacific Islander. Where no one can't get in the door because they don't have physical access, or because it is guarded by a police officer, or because they couldn't afford a ticket. Where no one has to leave early because they can't hear what's going on, or because there isn't a bathroom they can use safely. Where all members hear their languages spoken, see their traditions honored. Where everyone feels invited, feels seen, knows how important they are.

We get to practice, we get to envision together, so that we can bring our learning out into the world.

A midrash about the daughters of Tzelofechad פִּיִּסְקָא קֵלָג (ספרי במדבר פרשת פינחס) says this about them: When Bnot Tzelophechad heard that the tribal lands were being distributed to men and not women, they gathered to advise one another. They said, "God's mercy is not like human mercy. רַחֲמֵי הַמְּקוֹם Human mercy is more merciful towards men than women. But the one who speaks and the world came into being - רַחֲמֵי עוֹלָם it's different with that one. God's mercy is for everyone. רַחֲמֵי עוֹלָם הַכֹּל.

Without any examples, they had the vision to know that there is a larger justice, a more merciful love; and they had the boldness to demand that it be made manifest in their community.

What I am so excited to do as the rabbi of this community is discover and create our vision of a larger justice, a more merciful love, and to be courageous to manifest it in our community, and in all our communities.

And at the end of this first dvar Torah, I want to say unequivocally and from day one, to each of you: you belong here. There will be times when you feel like you don't. For all kinds of reasons. As your rabbi, I want to know all about it - when you do and when you don't. I want belonging to this community to be a source of powerful spiritual connection and nourishment for you, and I want to be partners with you in manifesting that. May we learn together, and may our learning flow out into the world, making the whole world a true community of belonging.