

Pinchas

July 15, 2017

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:

כֵּן, בָּנוֹת צִלְפַּחַד דְּבָרָת--נָתַן תְּתִין לָהֶם אֲחֵזת נַחֲלָה, בְּתוֹךְ אֶחָי אֲבִיהֶם

Numbers 27:6-7 *And G-d spoke to Moses, saying: "The daughters of Zelophehad speak right: you shall surely give them a possession of an inheritance among their father's brethren.*



Women of the Palmach, 1942 WZO Photo Archives

The Torah portion Pinchas demonstrates the tension between the improved status of women in biblical times and the divide that continued to exist between them and male figures. Today, Israeli society still experiences that tension.

At first this reading seems like a victory for biblical women. While G-d apportioned the land of Canaan to each of the tribes and their families, the female descendants of Joseph come forward. Their father, Zelophehad, died leaving no male heir. The daughters are named - an uncommon occurrence in the books of the Bible. They approach Moses, asserting their right to inherit their father's land so that the family's holdings will not be lost. Moses pleads their case to G-d, who approves, saying that their cause is just and that the daughters will inherit Zelophehad's share.

Women did not share equal status with men in biblical times. First, it is clear that prior to this episode women had no inheritance rights—if these women had brothers, they would have had no claim to any of their father's land. Women were also not “counted” in the census, as was the case in most ancient Middle Eastern societies.

Numbers 36:1-12 revisits this storyline when a complaint arises from the leaders of the Manasseh clan. They argue that if Zelophehad's daughters marry outside of their tribe, then the inherited land could pass from father to son into a different tribe. The text tells us that Moses, at G-d's bidding, amends the newly created law to mandate that daughters who inherit land must marry within their own tribe in order to maintain the tribe's land holdings. The entire episode of Zelophahad's daughters tells us that biblical women were identified through their status as daughters or wives. More proof for this case is in the fact that, though the daughters names are mentioned twice in the Torah texts, we still refer to them as: “Zelophehad's Daughters.” It seems theirs is only a partial victory for women's rights.

In efforts to reestablish a Jewish nation in the 20th century, several notable figures made certain that modern Israel would ensure equal rights for women. In *Divrei Haknesset*, vol. 9, p. 2004, we read, “*From the very beginning of the movement to return to Zion, the Jewish woman was a loyal companion to the early immigrants and settlers; and up until now the role played by the daughters of Israel (a biblical term) has never been diminished in all the activities of the Yishuv (Jewish community).*” In 1919, Rosa Welt-Strauss was among the women who founded and led the “Union of Hebrew Women for Equal Rights in Eretz Yisrael.” Welt-Strauss received medical school education and training in Vienna and Berne. After working in Europe and later the USA, she moved to Palestine at age 63. She championed rights of women to vote, hold positions of leadership, and sponsor families making aliyah.

Shortly after the establishment of the state in 1951/5711, Israel passed the Women’s Rights Law. While the Declaration of Independence promises: “equality of social and political rights irrespective of religion, race, or gender,” religious traditions and customs were bound to be a barrier to this essential right. Thus it was necessary to codify these legal protections for women.. This would at first seem a triumph for women in Israel. However, as we also noted in this week’s portion, this law, too, ultimately focused on women vis à vis men. In a 1996 article published in *Middle East Report*, Professor Nitza Berkovitch, in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at Ben-Gurion University, asserted that while legal protections exist for women, they primarily exist as protections for women based on their roles as wives, daughters, and mothers. Indeed, between 1952 and 2015 the 21 cases that came before the Supreme Court citing the Women’s Equal Rights Law all dealt with family matters.

Throughout Israel’s short history, we can see advances in the status of women. Prime Minister Golda Meir, elected in 1969, was just the world’s third female national leader. Women have served in the Knesset; 32 out of a possible 120 at present. There is room to grow as this constitutes only 25% of representatives. By comparison, in 2015, women comprised 19% of the United States Congress, 20% of the Senate, and 19.3% in House of Representatives.

Religious divides within the social and political realm in which they live influence efforts toward women’s equality in Israel. Religious leadership pressures the public to abide by their standards and norms. The ongoing censoring of women’s images, posting of signs in public places that demand modest dress, relegating women to the “back of the bus,” and preventing women full access for prayer at the Western Wall continue to be met with groups determined to ensure equality for women in the public sphere. When cases of discrimination and unfair treatment do come before the Supreme Court, by and large the legal system works in favor of the female plaintiffs.

Outside the political arena, of the TA100 companies (those listed in Tel Aviv Stock Exchange), women sit in 31% of managerial positions. Each year more women assume key positions in the political and public sectors. However, in the business sector, there still appears to be a glass ceiling. While there has been an increase each year in women who chair or sit on Boards of Trustees, there has recently been a slight decrease in the number of females running large companies. However, this does not mean that no women are at the helm of large businesses. Notably, two of Israel’s largest, Israel Discount Bank and Migdal Holdings, have female CEOs. Furthermore, women hold CEO positions at three of Israel’s five biggest banks.

The Committee on the Status of Women and Gender Equality was created in 1992 out of the desire and necessity to ensure that the 1951 Women's Rights Law would be upheld. Clearly, the work for full equality is not complete. Yet with existing laws and continued involvement by women and men to shape legislation, education, reporting, and general culture in an equitable manner, we can be cautiously confident that women in Israel will continue to advance.

Discussion Questions:

Some people believe that the [*Nashot HaKotel*](#) (Women of the Wall) inappropriately and insensitively incite conflict between Jews at a sacred place, for their own political agenda. What are your thoughts?

Additional Resources:

Israel Foreign Ministry, Primary Source [*EQUAL RIGHTS FOR WOMEN LAW 5711-1951*](#)

Nitza Berkovitch, "Women and the Women's Equal Rights Law in Israel," *Middle East Report*, Vol:26, Spring 1996

Hila Weisberg, [*31% of Israel's Top 100 Company Directors are Women*](#), *Ha'aretz*, June 24, 2015

Robert Tait, [*Religious Israeli Website Censors Women Ministers from Cabinet Portrait*](#), *The Telegraph*, May 20, 2015