

Summary: Parashat Pinhas

כן בנות צלפחד דברת

Equality Without Adjuncts?

Confronting the Limits and Challenges of Gender Egalitarianism

In this week's Torah reading, we hear about the daughters of Tzelofhad, a member of the tribe of Menashe who had no sons. They approach Moshe and point out that the patriarchal system just announced for distributing land will leave their father's descendants out in the cold. This, in context, is not a feminist claim, but the dutiful objection of faithful, patriarchal daughters. They are concerned not for their own inheritance (they don't say, למה נגרע, "Why have we been left out?") but for the erasure of their father's name from the annals of Israelite inheritors (למה יגרע שם אבינו מתוך נחלתו, "Why should our father's name be left out from his inheritance?").

Nonetheless, over time, the daughters of Tzelofhad are recast as proto-feminists, understood to be challenging, from their small perch, the larger patriarchal structures that triggered their intervention. **Sifrei Bemidbar 133** recasts the whole discussion here in dramatically different terms:

ספרי במדבר קלג

"וַתִּקְרְבְּנָה בָנוֹת צִלְפָּחָד" (במדבר כז:א): כיון ששמעו בנות צלפחד שהארץ מתחלקת לשבטים, לזכרים ולא לנקבות, נתקבצו כולן זו על זו ליטול עצה. אמרו, 'לא כרחמי בשר ודם רחמי המקום: בשר ודם רחמיו על הזכרים יותר מן הנקבות אבל מי שאמר והיה העולם אינו כן אלא רחמיו על הזכרים ועל הנקבות רחמיו על הכל', שנאמר... "טוב ה' לכל ורחמיו על כל מעשיו" (שם קמח:ט).

Sifre Bemidbar #133

"And Tzelofhad's daughters drew near" (Bemidbar 27:1): When Tzelofhad's daughters heard that the land would be divided according to the tribes—to males and not to females—they all gathered with each other for advice. They said, "The goodness of God is not like the goodness of flesh and blood. Flesh and blood show greater goodness to males than to females, but the One-Who-Spoke-the-World-into-Being is not so, but is good to all, as it is said... 'The Lord is good to all and shows kindness to all creatures'" (Tehillim 145:9).

Read this way, the daughters of Tzelofhad launch a process that has continued until today: bringing the human world and its gender politics in line with a more divine ideal. That process is long, incomplete and its parameters are not entirely clear. I began this series of essays this year by exploring the notion of a legal “category shift” around gender, at least with respect to certain ritual roles and obligations. For many, that way of thinking, which expands the scope of fully obligated persons in Jewish life and eliminates gender power dynamics as a factor in ritual contexts, is the next meaningful stage in a journey begun by the daughters of Tzelofhad long ago.

But even the confident embrace of egalitarianism in the contemporary religious world creates its own challenges. One Shabbat morning in the early years of my marriage, I found myself and my wife sitting at home as the clock ticked forward and the minutes of *shul* whittled away. Neither of us was making a concerted effort to leave the house and it suddenly became clear to me that we were going to arrive well into the Torah reading. (Some of you are thinking that that sounds pretty respectable. I won’t judge you.) And it suddenly became clear to me why this was happening, and a significant cause was gender egalitarianism. Our mutual assumptions of equal obligation, responsibility, and public importance ironically created a dynamic of equal and opposite forces resulting in total static inertia. Neither of us was ritually needed in the communal space more than the other, such that one of us would be naturally pulled to take the lead in getting us out. Neither of us had a theory that one of us was more obligated than the other, such that it would make sense for one of us to be more essentially stressed out than the other. Nor could one of us plausibly be in the position of haranguing the other to get out so as not to default on that obligation. We also assumed that we would walk together, as partners and equals. And it was then that I turned to my wife and said: “Wait a minute! I can be the husband and you can be the wife. You can be the husband and I can be the wife. We can both be the husband. We can’t both be the wife!”

I was, of course, using the terms “husband” and “wife” in their traditional construction in non-egalitarian prayer spaces, where it is normal and expected that a man, who can help make the *minyan*, may well have to go earlier and more often to communal prayers than a woman, whose presence does not alter the ritual space in any way. There is also, of course, a broader social context where the husband’s career has often been supported by the wife’s. More broadly, it is certainly fair to say that, with respect to many aspects of public life, husbands have been principals while wives have been adjuncts. Beginning with who takes on whose last name and

often manifesting itself in income and professional disparities, so much of the history of humanity has featured this hierarchical dynamic between men and women. Much of modern feminism and the movement towards gender equality has been focused on reevaluating this arrangement, and on seizing the opportunities available in the contemporary world to propose different models that aim to reduce and eliminate the importance of gender when it comes to questions of power and citizenship.

My cute story indicates a challenge we have to deal with in egalitarian models of religious life. Deprived of clear roles of principal and adjunct, how do we nonetheless share responsibilities? How can we avoid egalitarianism just being an opportunity for both genders to become more lazy, less educated, and less committed because we have no algorithm for dividing things up? How can we avoid egalitarianism being an unsustainable commitment to everyone doing everything, in a way that ultimately deprives any normal person from seeing a plausible pathway to living their life that way?

These questions inspire me this week to explore non-gendered models in our tradition for dividing up responsibilities and opportunities among religious equals. In the longer essay, I begin by engaging with the historical role of adjuncts in facilitating the principals in their lives, showing how adjuncts have been with us forever and are unlikely to entirely disappear anytime soon. I encourage you to read that analysis. But the question is: Can we imagine a world in which the principal-adjunct relationship does not revolve around gender? Is it possible to have a world without any adjuncts at all? I am hopeful this can help begin a conversation around useful strategies for maintaining a healthy ecosystem of obligation and practice in an increasingly egalitarian world. I would like to offer a range of models that can, perhaps, point the way to addressing this problem. (For relating the models to our classical sources, see the longer essay).

A. Splitting the community into two; taking turns

Sometimes, there is no leeway to apply obligations unevenly across the population. Everyone is obligated and the logistical challenges are significant. In the Talmud Yerushalmi (Megillah 2:5 / 73b), **Bar Kappara** rules that the *megillah* must be read widely, to all members of the community, irrespective of gender or age, because of the comprehensive threat posed to all

members of the Jewish people in the time of Haman. But this creates a challenge: How can you plausibly do this for all the people at the same time? The answer seems to be that one cannot.

R. Yehoshua b. Levi convenes a reading for his family.

Without a hierarchy in place, with no principals and adjuncts when it comes to obligation, people just have to take turns. This is, in some ways, the best way to express perfect equality, and can be a very practical approach. Until today, communities that are serious about gender-blind obligations in *megillah* generally have multiple readings both at night and in the morning, recognizing that it is not possible for all people—especially those with small children—to be present for the reading all at once. This is doable for a once-a-year event like Purim. It is also completely attainable for rituals that need not be done in synchronization. An egalitarian couple praying with their crying infant at home on Friday night can (and should) have one person pray the *Amidah* and then take the child while the other parent follows suit.

This model is more difficult to sustain for more regular communal obligations; we can't possibly expect every Jewish adult to be present for daily *minyan* three times a day, even if we run multiple *minyanim* at multiple times. And in many cases—*minyan* attendance being one of them—it may well be that the obligation is more communal than individual. How might we divide up responsibility when we don't want or need to assume everyone is doing the same thing?

B. Rotations

Another model offers a way for dividing up a job among equals that need not be done by all of them at the same time. In the Temple, since there were too many priests for everyone to always carry out the various obligations, twenty-four different priestly divisions bore many of these burdens equally, working in weeklong shifts to cover the various responsibilities. It was unreasonable and unfair for some subset of the priests to do them all the time, and there is no particular need to have specific people in these roles at any given moment, making the *משמרות*, these priestly divisions, the perfect solution.

This is another useful model to consider. Some synagogues I know ask their members to commit to an evenly distributed number of *minyan* days a year, in order to help the community

meet its corporate obligations. Rotations avoid the notion that anyone is any more obligated than anyone else, while effectively distributing the human capital at a community's disposal. One can imagine an egalitarian family that sends its adult members to *minyan* in some sort of fixed rotation, ensuring equally distributed representation and obligation for all.

C. Division by enthusiasm

Equal division of responsibilities is very fair and impartial, but it can also be artificial and stilted. Often, if there is an unacknowledged enthusiasm gap among equals, the commitment to equality can pull in the direction of *lesser* enthusiasm *all around*. Without the license to divide up into separate roles, but without the passion to sustain equal involvement, the sum total of performance and contribution can suffer. Therefore, another model that should be reckoned with is one that explicitly names the enthusiasm gaps that exist around various rituals and practices, and actually validates using this gap in order to distribute roles among equally situated people.

This is often a powerful way of distributing tasks among equals. You want to read Torah? Sign up in the spreadsheet to do it. Those who take the initiative are rewarded. Does a given task give you enormous satisfaction and does it motivate you? It may make sense to give it to you. In many families, some people—not always correlated with gender—like to go to *minyan* more than others. One way of breaking the equality logjam is to acknowledge that this is an important factor, and perhaps should be the basis for affirming who gets there on time and who comes a bit later, if that is necessary.

D. Considering who has the most to gain and lose

Sometimes, people who are equally situated before the law are not equally situated in terms of their vulnerabilities. Even those who are equally obligated and commanded are not always equally needy in the same ways. If enthusiasm measures how excited and motivated someone is to bear a burden or have an opportunity, thinking about what each person has to lose by *not* participating in something can be another important way of delegating responsibilities.

This is the sort of system we see at work when airlines overbook flights and start offering compensation for those who voluntarily give up their seats. But it may also be a more generally useful strategy for delegating responsibilities among equals. Who is religiously at greater risk if not contributing publicly? Whose spiritual profile is more fragile and in need of greater peer reinforcement? Often, in a family, there is one person who is generally more rattled about being late. There may be one person who grew up with weightier expectations around communal prayer and will feel more like a failure if they are lackluster in their attendance. In other cases, someone who has taken on observance might more pressingly need presence at *minyan* as part of reinforcing an electively chosen practice of prayer.

E. Validating different roles

Finally, even in a world where gender is not the basis for dividing people into principals and adjuncts, it should not be inadmissible to consider that different roles might be appropriate for different people. Yes, the basic democratic expectations of the world of *mitzvot* must be done by all. But so much of what takes time and care in religious life are the more amorphous fulfillments of and investments in communal needs, in harder-to-quantify *mitzvot* like *talmud Torah* and the education of children. Even if gender need not play a normative role in those tasks, it might be that healthy marriages and families sometimes settle on different roles for different partners.

Not all jobs need to be done by everyone, even in a healthy community. Gender egalitarian communities of Torah may also find direction and efficiency in embracing certain roles for different people, albeit not broken down by gender. Different from the enthusiasm model above, which might shift day to day, this model imagines people settling in to different roles over time, based on talent, proclivity, and perhaps even convenience. A person whose work is closer to a *minyan* may be the one who bears that burden, as might someone who grew up doing it and is familiar with integrating it into their routine. Whatever the criteria, this model is pursued with a sense of humility and appreciation—humility that there is much holy work to be done, and appreciation for the part of it that others do with greater intensity than we do.

My mother has a favorite saying: “The advance of civilization has always depended on the subordination of women,” she would tell me. “And it is not clear we have yet come up with a better strategy.” I would put it in softer terms: Social adjuncts always have, and likely will, continue to play a role in shaping society. Can we actually eliminate this category altogether? And if not, what is our best way forward for eliminating gender as the boundary between principals and adjuncts?

This essay is intended more as a stage-setter and conversation starter than a set of final thoughts. One of the clear consequences of a more gender egalitarian world is rethinking obligation in a world without adjuncts. I firmly believe that, with respect to most religious obligations, we can simply assert that a larger set of people are now included under the umbrella of expectation and our community will simply be richer and fuller for it. But there are indeed areas, particularly time-intensive, decorum-heavy, and communal ones, where it is not realistic for everyone to be doing the same thing at the same time. It is there that we must mine our tradition for ways of thinking about axes other than gender that help us distribute obligation among equals. Sometimes we will have to invest time and resources to facilitate multiple manifestations of the *mitzvah* in question, allowing people to take turns to accomplish the same goal. Sometimes a rotation gets the job done for the community without overburdening the individual. And sometimes some people should be prioritized over others, whether due to an enthusiasm gap, divergent needs, or simply the efficiency and richer religious civilization that can sometimes come from assigning roles. In fact, all these strategies will need to work in concert as we face the blessed challenge of running a community that embodies obligation and responsibility in fuller measure than ever before. As with many contemporary issues, we will only fully understand ourselves in retrospect, many years from now. In the meantime, I hope some of the models we have explored in this essay can help us leave a legacy of shared practice that is broadly and sustainably shared.