

The Chain of Life

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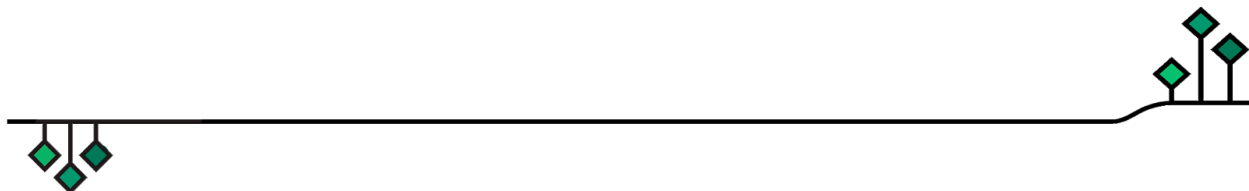
Parashat Pinhas 5781

The story of Zelofhad's daughters in Parashat Pinhas is often referred to as a proto-feminist event. Zelofhad had five daughters, but no sons, before he died. In biblical society and culture, dying without a son was equivalent to dying intestate. Thus, Zelofhad's share of land (to be dispensed when the Israelites settled in Canaan)¹ would disappear. His daughters petitioned Moses to inherit the lands so that Zelofhad's estate—land bearing his name—would not pass from the scene. A divine oracle upheld that the daughters were correct in making their request and should be given their father's land inheritance. This ruling was then generalized: In all cases where a man died with no son to inherit him, the land would pass to his daughter.² If there was no daughter either, the man's brother would inherit. The land would be passed on in reverse order to relatives or marriage connected by degrees of separation, always staying within the family (Numbers 27:5-11).

This narrative may speak to the Torah's ultimate ideal of gender equality, but the incident appears to be more about family continuity. The overriding concern of the Torah here is that

¹ See Numbers 26:52-56.

² See Numbers 27:4 and the conclusion of this story in Numbers 36:1-12.



Zelofhad's inheritance stay in the family, that **his name not be wiped out**, and that the equal portion given to each family within each tribe not be lost.³ This is a recurring theme of the Torah, that no line of life be wiped out forever. For example, if a man dies with no children, his widow was to be taken in levirate marriage by his brother. The first child of this levirate marriage would be considered as carrying on the name of the brother—so that his line of life would not end with his death (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). This concept of not cutting off a chain of life is a deeper Torah value. It highlights one of the most important aspects of covenantal living: the unending chain of covenant-keepers.

Jewish tradition says that God has recruited human beings—because they have the consciousness and capacities required to repair the world—to fill Creation with life, to upgrade the planet so it will sustain the highest levels of quality of life and its fulfillment. This is the covenant partnership commitment to fill the world with life that God entered into with humanity, the Noahide covenant.⁴ This was followed up with a particular covenant partnership commitment with Abraham,⁵ and then the people of Israel at Sinai, to serve as teachers, pace-setters, and role-models for all humanity.⁶

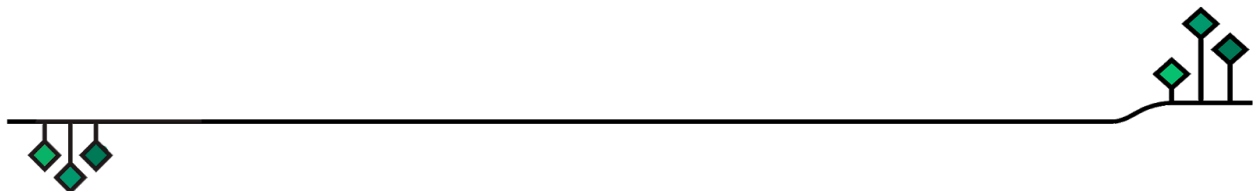
Out of respect for human nature and community consensus—neither of which change overnight—the covenant itself operates by upgrading the world one step at a time. Thus, the world will not be repaired in one lifetime; we have been working at this covenant for about 4,000 years and have still not achieved the goals. Each person committed to the covenant must be concerned to achieve as much as possible in their lifetime, then **create** (or educate)

³ See my discussion on Parashat BeHar-BeHukkotai, "Judaism's Utopian Vision of Universal Equality," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/judaism's-utopian-vision-universal-equality>.

⁴ See Genesis 8:21-22, 9:1-7, 9:8-17.

⁵ See Genesis 12:1-3; chapters 15, 17.

⁶ See Exodus 19:7.

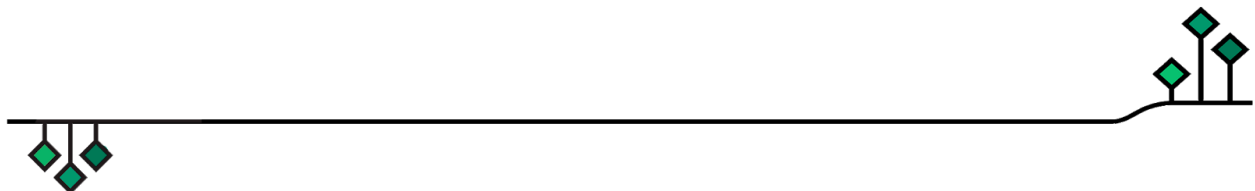


the next generation to carry forward the mission.⁷ Otherwise, the activity of one's lifetime will be futile, the task unfinished, the goals unfulfilled. Therefore, a central part of individual covenantal consciousness is that: "I am determined that the chain of life **not end** with me or with other agents and partners in this generation, and I feel responsible to create the next generation that will carry on after me. If I cannot have children, I can adopt or educate others' children to take up the task."

This covenantal consciousness is what drives the Torah to see termination of anyone's chain of life as a serious setback for the cause of *tikkun olam*. Thus, the Torah created practices such as levirate marriage and the inheritance of daughters to allow the chain of life to go on as if unbroken. In this same spirit, the members of the covenant are asked to think not only of living their own lives properly. Rather, they are tasked to think of their lives as an important link in the **chain of life**. Only if the chain continues unbroken—with vision transmitted and generations carrying on—will the final *tikkun olam* be possibly achieved.

This extra effort is not just fulfillment of an ideal, and an act of taking responsibility for the future of the covenant. There are—at least!—three rewards in this task. First, I am the beneficiary of the efforts and achievements of the generations that preceded mine. I start at my level, inherited from past generations, which is higher than if I started from scratch. Our task, then, is to turn that higher starting point into a commitment to widening access and opportunity for other groups that lack this advantage.

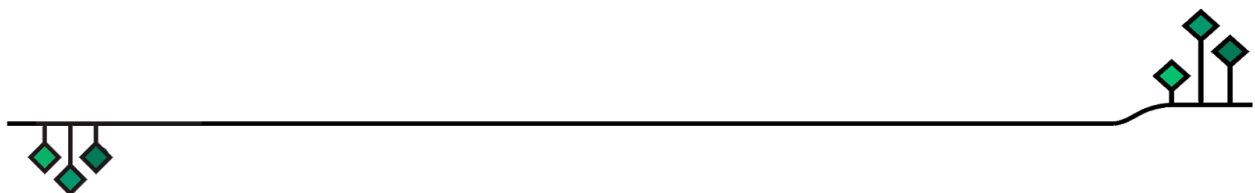
⁷ See also my thoughts on Parashat VaYehi, "The Covenant Between the Generations," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/covenant-between-generations>.



Secondly, I am playing my part in the promulgation of the covenantal chain. I begin with the insights and experience of the past covenantal generation as part of my patrimony. I inherit the wisdom, the hard-earned experiences of life, the cumulative learning of those who have gone before. This way I start with major enrichment of my life, and of my capacity to live the good life and to focus my behaviors on maximizing life.

Finally, the third reward: My life does not really end with my death. Tasks and goals unfinished in my lifetime may well be completed by those who come after me in the chain of life, especially if I have communicated the vision of *tikkun olam* and the importance of living for ourselves, but also **beyond ourselves**, for the realization of this covenant. Assuring the chain of life goes on—and with it the vision and promise of the covenant—is the validation of starting programs and living for goals that transcend me. “It is not incumbent on you to complete the task” (Mishnah Avot 2:16). But if you grasp the larger purpose and ultimate goal of *tikkun olam*, then you will not feel free to desist from beginning the upgrade, the process of repair.

Each one of us can choose the areas to which we will contribute, be it enriching the world and overcoming poverty through business (such as conducting with fairness to workers and respect for the environment); be it in medicine, overcoming pandemics or sickness, and drilling down to biological and genetic building blocks that can heal hitherto untreatable illnesses; be it law or politics where one can work for justice and fairness, and overcoming systemic deprivations or discrimination; be it in education, expanding people’s capacities and/or communicating the covenantal vision; be it in having and raising families and developing the value and dignity of each child. I can do all of the above, and I can be assured



that it all is not in vain by forging the next link in the chain of life, to carry on after me in the next generation.

I would like to add that ever since dealing with modernity became the dominant challenge in Jewish life, the covenant-keepers' chain has been weakened at both ends. On the one hand, many Jews interpreted the emancipation and access to full citizenship for all Jews as permission to live only for themselves—after all, the group's fate no longer determined their individual lives. Many Jews interpreted the surging individualism as license to look out for self only. In the face of individual autonomy, some “childless-by-choice” adults feel no connection to the value of ensuring there be a next generation and covenantal continuity.

At the other end, many Jews concluded that the chain of *tikkun olam* is best continued by joining the general society and its projects, rather than working through the Jewish covenant. Many people—having been exposed strongly to the general culture—turn secular, deciding to live exactly like the general culture. Secular culture **is** an attractive and rich one, and it promises to deliver much of Judaism's vision of *tikkun olam*. This means that even if Jews believe in *tikkun olam*, they may turn to secular culture to pursue that goal and to find meaning in life. In America, this is true of all Jewish movements that expose their children to modern life. The phenomenon is threatening the continuity of the Reform and Conservative denominations, and nearly 40% of Modern Orthodox youth become secular as well. In effect, a less developed Jewish culture loses in the competition for primary loyalty. I believe that the best way to recapture the centrality of the Jewish covenant is to roll out the full breadth of Judaism as the religion able and willing to be a major vehicle of world repair. Such a broadly understood version of Judaism is able to hold its own, and even to contribute spiritually, to the richest, most life-enhancing culture of all time.

