

Women Count, and Not Just According to Pinhas

Shabbat Shalom.

I am very honored to be speaking with all of you today, and a bit overwhelmed by being asked.

Most of the time, I have no problem speaking in front of others – especially since it is something that I do for a living.

But today, with the idea of being the summer speaker in my community temple – it feels a bit daunting. I have been here for so many other summer speakers – people that I think are smart and clever and have something important to say. I hope that I can share something with all of you that has meaning and makes you think.

To start, let's give a brief outline of what happens in Parsha Pinhas:

- After impaling a couple in last week's parsha, Pinhas receives from God a "pact of friendship," and Moses assails the Midianites and defeats them.
- The second census occurs, and it is determined how to apportion the land according to the census.
- The laws of succession in inheritance change based on the request of the Daughters of Zelophehad – we will be talking more about this later.
- Joshua will succeed Moses.
- The religious calendar is established including the public sacrifices for each holiday.

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As you can see, there is no shortage of stuff going on in this parsha.

The piece of Pinhas that I am going to focus on is the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, which ties directly into my theme for today's talk, women count – and our fight for equality is far from over.

A quick synopsis of the story: the daughters of Zelophehad come to Moses and the whole assembly. There they say:

"Our father died in the wilderness. He died for his own sin: and he has left no sons. Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he has no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen."

Moses brings their case before the lord. And the lord says to Moses,

"The pleas of Zelophehad's daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen: transfer their father's share to them."

God goes on to outline the laws of succession.

So – right from the words of God – women are going to have some rights in the laws of succession – a really good thing – and somewhat surprising to me since most of the time in the Torah, women don't usually have a starring role – women usually don't count.

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So how does this tie into my topic for today? Well, my parsha for my *bat mitzvah* and my daughter, Rebecca's parsha for her *bat mitzvah* were – PINHAS!

I thought it would be interesting to take a walk through current history and see the status of women's rights and equality at the time of my *bat mitzvah*, Rebecca's *bat mitzvah* and today. I hope that I can shed a little light on how we have progressed in terms of women's equality and how far we still need to go.

Let's start with me, Judy the bat mitzvah girl.

It's 1975, and I am in 7th grade at Plant Junior High School in West Hartford, CT. I am the oldest of three girls – Judy, Susan and Karen – such 1960's birth names! My mom, Mindy, and my dad, Norton, and us three girls live in a brick colonial on Middlefield Drive. We belong to Beth El Temple – one of 4 conservative shuls in the greater Hartford area.

From the time I was a little girl, my parents and grandparents have always told my sisters and I that girls can do anything that boys can do. My mom and both of my grandmothers worked for a living, and helped support their families.

When it came time to plan my *bat mitzvah*, I told my parents that I wanted to have a Saturday morning *bat mitzvah* – just like all the boys. I wanted to learn to read Torah, not just my *haftarah*. Rabbi Stanley Kessler met with me and my

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parents, and he said, "Well, we can do it as long as you keep going when the men in the back start making noises."

I had to wear a white doily on my head, and I was not allowed to wear a *tallit*.

The morning of my *bat mitzvah* – June 28, 1975. I have on a pale green dress with white lace on the collar and sleeves. I approach the *bima*, ready to lead *p-sukei d'zimra* and *shaharit*.

I start the first prayer – *Ma tovu* – and I can hear the hissing and the noise making from the little old men in the back. I look over at Rabbi Kessler, and he just nods for me to keep going. By the third prayer, the hissing and noise making has stopped, and I am on a roll. I become one with the service – and I love it. I lead the Torah service, read all of the Torah readings, chant the *haftarah*, and then have a seat. I feel so proud – like I can do anything.

From then on, girls at Beth El Temple had Saturday morning *bat mitzvahs* – including my two sisters. I was a trailblazer – without even planning on it.

So what is happening in the women's movement in 1975 that allowed Rabbi Kessler and my parents to push the envelope for me to have a Saturday morning *bat mitzvah*?

- The United Nations designates 1975 International Women's Year.
- Margaret Thatcher, 49, was elected leader of Britain's Conservative Party, the first woman to serve in that capacity.

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- The first national conference on rape was held at University of Alabama.
- According to a survey conducted by the Working Women United Institute, sexual harassment was widespread; over 70% of respondents reported experiencing it at least once
- Title IX regulations barring sex discrimination in intercollegiate athletics and broadening opportunities for women were signed by HEW Secretary Caspar Weinberger and sent to President Ford.
- Congress passed legislation opening the U.S. military academies to women. NOW pushed for a September 1976 effective date.
- At year's end, only one state, North Dakota, had ratified the Equal Rights Amendment, for a total of 34.

My parents, our community, and the greater world were all influenced by what was happening with women's rights, and I am incredibly grateful for all that was occurring at that time so that I would be able to have more opportunities.

Let's now flash forward to July 7, 2007. Parsha Pinhas, and the *bat mitzvah* of Rebecca Felice Zola, Geoff and my first-born daughter. Rebecca and her siblings have been brought up with two parents – me – the mom who loved them and worked – because I loved that too and it made me a better mom – and Geoff, the dad who was an amazing nurturer, teacher, and organizer. Our children learned to value what

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each person can do – and not focus on what society says are roles that men and women should play. We are fortunate to be members of Temple Emunah – Rebecca has only known what it is like to be in an egalitarian temple – and she took full advantage of leading services, reading Torah and *haftarah*, and speaking from the *bima*. Rebecca wore a *kippa* that her dad got her in Israel, and a *tallit* that her grandmother made. It was an amazing day for our family and for Rebecca.

Here is a part of Rebecca's *d'var*, where she also spoke about the daughters of Zelophehad:

"I will be talking about a different part of the parsha – the story of the daughters of Zelophehad. In the story, the daughters, who are named Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, find themselves in a situation where all of the men in their family have died. In those days, men had all of the rights of ownership. Since there were no men in their family, the five daughters were, shall we say, homeless.

The daughters of Zelophehad were, fortunately, knowledgeable people, so they went to Moses to ask him to talk to God and to change the property law. Women needed more rights in order to survive.

God changed the law, and Moses told the people. Now, women had property rights. The theme of this story is that everyone should have a chance to change the world, or to

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change their life so that it is better. The daughters of Zelophehad took that chance, and they succeeded."

Thanks, Rebecca!

But what was happening in women's history at this point?

Interestingly, it was much harder to find top news stories that involved women.

Here is what I found:

- Cristina Fernandez de Kirshner was elected Argentina's first woman president
- Nancy Pelosi becomes first woman speaker of the House of Representatives
- The minimum wage increases to \$5.85
- The Dixie Chicks are at the top of the music charts

In my research, I could not find any news stories about women's rights or issues like what was happening in 1975. I know that we have certainly evolved in laws, practices and culture in terms of women's equality, but I know that there was still plenty of inequality under the surface. Being a working mom, I certainly remember many instances of women being treated differently than men in terms of recruitment, interviewing, promotions, and other more subtle ways.

Let's flash forward one more time to July 11, 2015 – today, Parsha Pinhas.

Where are we in terms of women's rights, equality, and our culture accepting women as strong and capable humans?

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Since I knew I was going to be speaking about women's rights, I have been paying closer attention to what is happening in the news and in pop culture.

Here are a few of examples

- OK Magazine shared a link saying, "Taylor Swift has made a "pregnancy announcement!" In reality, Taylor was helping a couple announce their pregnancy. In the article, Taylor was referred to as "Harry Styles ex-girlfriend" and "Calvin Harris' rumored girlfriend"
- Ariana Grande, a teenage pop star, recently said, "I am tired of living in a world where women are mostly referred to as a man's past, present or future property/possession. I can't wait to live in a world where people are not valued by who they're dating/married/attached to/having sex with (or not)/seen with, but by their values as an individual."
- Forbes annual highest paid celebrity list – Two things were apparent from this year's list: women make up only 16% of the top-paid celebrities in the world, and the ones who do make the list are significantly younger than the men. The average age for men on the list was 42 – for women, it was 36.
- And women still make only 78 cents for every dollar earned by men, a gender wage gap of 22%.

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- There are two women that have already put their hat in the ring to run for president in 2016 – Hilary Clinton and Carly Florin.
- Meryl Streep, my Vassar alum idol, recently sent a letter to each member of Congress, urging them to pass the Equal Rights Amendment – yes, the same amendment that we were trying to pass in 1975.

So back to Pinhas – what should we take away from this talk?

Women and men count – and women and men can do anything they set their hearts on.

Laws are better today than they were at the time of Pinhas – but we still have a ways to go.

My dream, some day – hopefully for my granddaughters and grandsons-is that equality will not even be a discussion – it will be the norm.

Thank you, and Shabbat Shalom.