

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



In the Wilderness - The Place to Complain

Pinchas

The two popular names for the Book which we are presently reading are NUMBERS and BAMIDBAR. One name suggests that the major topic of the tome is counting the Jews, repeatedly. The other name implies that the central concept of the volume is the geography of the trek from bondage to statehood, namely the desert or wilderness. So, we have two legitimate candidates for the central idea in this the Torah's fourth volume. But I think that there's another issue which must be considered.

Professor Everett Fox addressed this concern over the subject matter of the book of Bamidbar: The reader who approaches the Book of Numbers under the influence of its common Hebrew name, B'MIDBAR, "In the Wilderness", will logically expect a narrative account of the wanderings of the Israelites before they reach the Promised Land. But the book in its present form is a great deal more than that... the book also features census and sacrificial donation lists; details of the setup of Israel's camp; the duties of the Levites, and mysterious ritual for

removing ritual pollution; a doubled tale about daughters inheriting land; and a host of other rules and regulations... It is this composite character and apparent lack of easily definable structure that imbue the book with its fascination for scholars and with frustration for lay readers.

Thank you Prof. Fox. This is, indeed, the most complicated narrative in the Tanach. The Wilderness is the backdrop for the drama, but not its content. The content is the most human of the Five Books of Moshe Rabbeinu, and highlights human foibles and frailty.

Almost hidden in the account are shining examples of personal greatness. We are impressed and inspired by the likes of Yehoshua, Kalev and Pinchas. However, there is a major, if not overriding issue, in the volume which introduces an unlikely quintet of heroes, and that issue is complaining.

I'm using the blanket term 'complaining' to cover an array of behaviors. Some were constructive, like the bearers of the casket of Yosef, who became ritually impure, asking if they could bring the Pesach offering at a later date. Others were less helpful, as in the questioning of Moshe's prophetic power by his brother and sister. But the array of various expressions of discontent are ubiquitous and, clearly, would undermine

the cohesiveness of society if left unchecked.

This, finally, brings me to the specific example which I want to highlight: the daughters of Tz'lofchad. His five daughters come to Moshe and say: Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korach's faction, which banded together against the Eternal, but rather 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 had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinsmen! (Bamidbar 27:3-4).

There are so many fascinating aspects to this respectful exchange of ideas between these women and Moshe. Their 'complaint' was clear. They were concerned that their father (and grandfather) would be forgotten, because there were no sons to inherit the portion allotted to the family.

Of course, this feeds into the many expressions of discontent, but this one is special, even when compared to the issue raised by those bearing the bones of Yosef. What is so special? Well, the names.

The daughters are listed by name FOUR times in our Tanach (Bamidbar 26:33, 27:1, 35:11 [the antepenultimate verse in Bamidbar]; Yehoshua 17:2), and later discussed in Divrei HaYamim (7:14-19) without listing all

the names. This is surprising because women are not named nearly as often as men in the Tanach. In one study, of the 1426 people named in the 24 books of Tanach only 111 are women. But these women are mentioned liberally, and the men who wanted an extension on bringing the Paschal Lamb aren't named.

Perhaps even cooler, is that clay tablets from the period of the Northern Kings list their names as the names of villages north of the city Shomron (Samaria). Also, the names Machla, Hogla and Tirtza appear as place names today.

Why so much honor for these wonderful women? I'm not sure, but, I believe, that the critical word appears in verse 7: The daughters of Tz'lofchad speak KEIN. What is KEIN? Translations include: right, justified, correct, true, and Onkelos translate it to YE'UT or 'appropriately'.

We know this term from Yosef's question to his brothers, IM KEINIM ATEM (B'reishit 42:19). Rashi and others assume that the reference is to the honesty of the brothers. The Ohr HaChayim explains that Yosef is asking if they are really brothers. If so they would confidently leave one behind, and know he'd be released when they bring Binyamin.

The sisters are KEINIM. It's not only that their case is sound. They are also

upright and sincere. I think God accedes to the request because it's just (just like those who carried Yosef's casket), but their names are remembered and honored throughout history because they are righteous.

Winning in court requires a just and legal argument; winning a place in history requires much more. B'not Tz'lofchad will always be remembered because they were selfless and righteous. They represented the best cause ever fought for during the difficult period in the Wilderness, protecting our heritage! We salute them, and pray that we can rise to their level of sincerity and altruism.

