

Parashat Pinchas—Do you Stick Up for Me?

Rabbi Angela Buchdahl, July 14, 2017

Last year a young 17 year old girl came to me, fresh off a summer Israel trip with a group of 26 teenagers. She shared her experience of being in the mystical city of Sfad for Shabbat and attending services at the Ari Synagogue, where the famous Isaac Luria, founder of Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism, prayed. She recounted a scene in which a room full of men were in ecstatic prayer, jumping, dancing, singing at the top of their lungs. The boys from her trip emerged from worship saying it was the most spiritual experience of their lives.

“And how was it for you?” I asked.

“I had to sit in a small balcony, unable to participate, but only to be watch through holes in the wall to the action below. It made me angry that Judaism would relegate me to being a mere spectator to my religion. But I think I was even more angry at the boys on my trip, my *friends*, that they could feel comfortable participating in a Judaism that was so exclusive and sexist. How can they be ok with that?” she asked.

I shared this story around our dinner table with my teenage sons and daughter. It precipitated some vigorous conversation.

We debated:

“Should the boys have refused to participate?”

“Yes, it was unfair, but should they all miss out on this learning opportunity?”

“This was not their community and they didn’t have power to change it, so were they culpable?”

I wondered, “Even if we are not the primary actors, what is our responsibility when we see injustices?”

This week, with the story of the 5 daughters of Zelophehad, we have one of the first recorded instances in Judaism, of women overcoming gender discrimination and breaking down barriers. These five revolutionary women, who significantly, *are named*—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah—were the first females in the Bible to inherit land from their father, Zelophehad. Zelophehad had no sons, so when he died, in the traditional system, his property would transfer to a more distant male relative. His daughters came before Moses and Eleazar the priest, before their community and its leaders and argued that they should be allowed to inherit their father's land so that their father's name would not be lost. Moses is persuaded by this argument, his consciousness is raised, and he argues their case before God. Remarkably, God agrees; that in the case where a man has no sons, his daughters inherit the land.

Well, it's not perfect, but it's progress.

2000 years later, and Judaism, especially more progressive strains of Judaism, have come a long way towards gender equality from the days of Zelophehad's daughters. But even in Reform Judaism, we are not immune to the sexism still inherent in society today, including unequal pay between male and female rabbis, the lack of women in visible leadership positions and the comments and expectations that women face that their male colleagues never do.

So what can we do about it? Like Zelophehad's daughters, we can speak up. But I wish it wasn't just the daughters speaking up. Why does the burden to fix these failings fall to those who do not have the luxury of staying quiet, who are in desperate situations, who have the most to lose? When Zelophehad's daughters finally spoke, Moses and Eleazar, well they *got woke*. They realized something had to change. But what if these men could have been allies from the start?

There was a wonderful first article by a new NY times columnist, Lindy West who described being on a radio show with two comedian friends with the topic of "How to build a better white guy." As she thought of all the ways this

feminist allies conversation has been loaded with jargon like intersectionality, white privilege and systemic oppression, she said that only one question sprang to mind, and it was personal, not pedantic. She asked them: “Do you ever stick up for me?”

These were good guys, these friends. They are very similar to most of the men that I know in my life who support women, want them to succeed, love their daughters and wives and sisters and want equal opportunities for them.

But it’s a simple question, in public and private: “Do you stick up for me?”

When you overhear a group of guys talk about a woman in objectifying or demeaning ways, do you speak up, or, like Billy Bush, just laugh and go along?

Do you agree to speak on a panel of only men, or do you say, “Where are the women on this panel?”

What about that business meeting over a round of golf when you know the women on your organization don’t golf?

Do you throw up your hands with dismay that there are so few women in leadership roles in your organization, law firm, or businesses but do nothing, or are you willing to rethink a system that was set up by men for men and whether or not there might be other possibilities?

I know it’s not always popular to be the man who speaks up on these issues. It can feel self-righteous, moralizing, *Super PC*. “Look who’s the feminist?”

If you think that’s bad, try being the woman in this situation: We’re shrill. Demanding. Whiny. Aggressive and overly ambitious.

It’s hard work. Changing a gender hierarchy that is as old as the Bible. That’s why, since this first episode of Zelophehad’s daughters, 2000 years later,

we're a lot better off but we're still far from done. But male allies, if you stick up for me, and for your daughters, and your sisters and your friends, TOGETHER, we may be able to affect the change that Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah were able to do, with the help of *their* male allies, Moses and Eleazar.