

THE PRICE OF CHOICE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The daughters of Tzelaphchad occupy 24 verses in the Torah. In Pinchas (27:1-11) their request, and the laws of inheritance that were taught as a result of their request, take up eleven verses. At the end of this week's Parsha, (36:1-13) their unique situation as sole heirs to their father's portion of Eretz Yisroel is the focus of 13 more verses..

In Pinchas, the discussion surrounded their "Shaylah- question" as to whether or not they would inherit their father's intended portion in Israel. Through Moshe they were informed that in the absence of sons they were the legal heirs to their father's portion. In this week's Parsha, the daughters of Tzelaphchad were the subjects of a "Shaylah" having been asked by the leaders of their Shevet, the tribe of Menashe.

The Talmud in Bava Basra explains that the resultant prohibition forbidding the daughters of Tzelaphchad, and all other women in their situation, from marrying outside of their tribe was limited to that one generation who first inherited the land.

Why did the Torah devote the last 13 Pisukim of Bamidbar to a Mitzvah that was only for one generation? Why were the daughters of Tzelaphchad specifically chosen to end the Book of Bamidbar?

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch writes, "This Fourth Book" shows the relationship of the nation of Israel, as it actually is, to the ideal of its calling'(Commentary on 1:1). Therefore, this final one generational law must be of great significance to act as the salutation and summation of "the relationship of the nation of Israel, as it actually is, to the ideal of its calling" - What is that message?

Our "calling" is to manifest subservience to G-d in every action and thought. Our calling is to start with belief in G-d (the first of the Ten Commandments) and by following His laws for both devotion and society attain the level of total acceptance and subservience, including our thoughts and feelings (the 10th Commandment).

For an individual this is a life long process demanding trial and error, mistakes, personal growth, and forgiveness. For a nation, the process is far more complex. For the generation that left Egypt and the generation that was born in the desert, the beginning process took 40 years. It would take thousands of years of trial and error, mistakes, national growth and forgiveness for the nation to accept their subservience.

The book of Bamidbar describes key moments in the nation's first 40 years of the process. As Rav Hirsch says, it describes how they struggled with the challenges of their calling. This week, we near the end of those 40 years. At the end of this week's Parsha the Bnai Yisroel will be poised in the plains of Moab, on the east side of the Yarden, waiting to enter the land. Only Moshe's final words spoken in the last month of his life divide the nation from the Promised Land. Why end the final chapter of the desert experience with the one generational restriction derived from the Daughters of Tzelaphchad?

The Daughters of Tzelaphchad represent willful subservience to the law of G-d and the process of Halacha. Not only were they prepared to put their personal destiny as heirs to their father's portion in the hands of the Rabbis - in this case Moshe Rabbeinu - they were further prepared to accept whatever attendant consequences there might be.

At first it seemed simple enough. Ask the "Shaylah" to Moshe and accept G-d's answer. The case was presented and the answer was to their liking. Yes, they do inherit their father's portion. However, the story was not over. Their "good fortune" was the cause of other concerns.

The leaders of the tribe of Menashe asked their own Shaylah to Moshe. "If the Daughters of Tzelaphchad should marry outside the tribe, their ancestral holdings would one day transfer to their sons, who would not be from Menashe but from the tribe of their father. This would reduce the size of Menashe's holdings. Was this fair? Was this G-d's will?"

Moshe answered that G-d's will for that first generation to inherit the land was to restrict the Daughters of Tzelaphchad, and any other women in their situation, to marry within their tribe. That meant that feelings, emotions, personal dreams, and family were no longer the personal decision of the individual. It meant that their personal victory in becoming heirs to their father's inheritance was at the expense of personal choice in love and family.

This week's Parsha began with personal vows and their attendant laws and restrictions. Personal vows are indicators of the desire to go "beyond the letter of the law." It indicates a personality who wishes to be even closer to G-d by associating personal behavior with His name. However, once a person commits himself to do more, more is expected of him. Being closer to G-d always means greater vigilance and concern for personal behavior and interpersonal relationships. Therefore, as one does more G-d's expectations for him rise in direct proportion. It is never without a price.

The last chapters of Bamidbar direct our attention to the importance of accepting and integrating subservience to G-d into our lives. The Daughters Of Tzelaphchad are towering examples of individuals who lived their lives subservient to G-d's will, regardless of personal cost. The fact that their marital restrictions were for one generation only, and the fact that it is the last verses of Bamidbar speaks more eloquently to this concept than anything else.

THE NINE DAYS

The Nine Days begin this Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh Av, the evening of July 20, and end Sunday evening, July 29. This interval of time imitates the period of "shiva" with some of its restrictions.

Washing and Cleaning Clothing:

It is forbidden to wash or iron clothing during the 9 Days, even if it is done by a non-Jew. You may give clothing to the cleaners before the 9 Days, even if they will be cleaned during the 9 Days. One may not, however, pick up the clothing until after the 9 Days.

Freshly laundered clothing:

It is forbidden to wear new or freshly laundered clothing during the 9 Days, except for undergarments and socks. All garments to be worn during the 9 Days should be worn for a short time before the 9 Days begin. If clothing becomes soiled and you don't have a clean change, you may wash only that which you need. Small children's clothing that constantly get dirty may be washed during the 9 Days. Bed linens should not be washed or changed, except when truly needed. Purchasing new clothing, even if they will first be worn after the 9 Days, is forbidden. Sewing and all types of alterations are not allowed during the 9 Days. If needed, minor tears and buttons may be mended.

Eating Meat and Chicken and drinking wine: Eating meat or chicken is prohibited during the 9 Days. Drinking wine or grape juice is also prohibited. These prohibitions do not extend to Shabbos or a Seudat Mitzvah such as a Brit, Pidyon Haben or a Siyum. The custom is to have a young child drink the wine from Havdalah; however, if there is no young child, the one making Havdalah may drink.

Bathing and washing:

Among the more difficult restrictions to keep during the 9 Days is the prohibition against washing and bathing. Being that we are imitating the period of "shiva", the expected mental attitude is one that "doesn't care" due to the enormity of the loss suffered. It is obvious that the Rabbis wanted us to act as if we are affected by the absence of the Beit Hamikdash in a manner that reflects a deep sense of loss in our relationship with Hashem. Our culture, much more so than other cultures, places a priority on personal hygiene. This is taken into account by the Halacha. The criteria established by the Halacha is: bathing for pleasure vs. bathing for necessity. The degree of "necessity" changes from person to person, so the Halacha's expectation is for some modification in our personal hygiene depending on the individual. Saunas, steam rooms, swimming, and other forms of pleasurable bathing activities are certainly prohibited during the 9 Days for every one. Small children are permitted to swim, bathe, etc.; however, we are especially vigilant during this period of time in supervising any activity which might contain risk. Each of us must seriously assess our level or "necessity"; however, everyone can take a quick, lukewarm shower, rather than a leisurely hot one, and still accommodate our "need to be clean". Women preparing for the Mikvah do so without any modification.

Copyright © 2001 by Rabbi Aron Tendler and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
