

D'var Torah for July 15, 2017
Park Slope Jewish Center
Brooklyn, NY



My D'var Torah today on Parsha Pinchas is about “cherry-picking,” a subject which immediately leads us into the conceptual thicket of memory and the construction of memory – not just how we as individuals construct memories, but how we as a culture construct memories. How do some things (rather than other things) become part of “Conventional Wisdom”?

Of course, there are a lot of current events we could talk about in this context: Faux News, Fake News, et cetera, but I do not want to address any of these topics today. For me to do so in the context of a D'var Torah would be “above my pay grade.”

But as many of you already know, I am a professional film critic, so whatever the subject, I always have a movie reference ready to hand.

Who here has seen John Ford's film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* from 1962?

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance is the story of a very prominent man named “Ransom Stoddard” (played by Jimmy Stewart) who returns home after many years as a man of the world. He's been a congressman. He's been a senator. He's even been America's ambassador to Britain's Court of St. James. So, of course, the local press wants an interview with him, and they are especially eager to know all of the details about the event that first made him famous → the day he shot a really bad dude named Liberty Valance.

SPOILER ALERT: At the end of the interview, Ransom Stoddard reveals – after all these years – that he is **not**, in fact, the man who shot Liberty Valance. Liberty Valance was killed by “Tom Doniphon” (played by John Wayne). Ransom Stoddard – now at the end of his life – wants to set the record straight... but the publisher does not want to hear it. He (the publisher) grabs the pad of paper on which his reporter has been taking notes, and he tears the pages off the pad, and he rips them up!

Ransom Stoddard says: “You're not going to use the story, Mr. Scott?” And the publisher says: “No, sir. This is the west, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” These words are now part of Conventional Wisdom (at least here in the USA):

“When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

I really do not know when I first read the story of the five Daughters of Zelophehad (pronounced ZelophKHAD) – Mahlah (pronounced MakhLAH), No'ah (pronounced NoAH), Hoglah (pronounced KhogLAH), Milcah (pronounced MilCAH), and Tirzah (pronounced TirZAH) – probably my sophomore year of college, but who knows?

Top: Sculpture “The Five Daughters of Zelophehad” © Judith Klausner
Middle: Painting “Daughters of Zelophehad” © Iris Wexler (2008)
Bottom: Triptych “The Daughters of Zelophehad” © Janet Shafner (2006)

However, I can tell you the exact moment when the story of these five women became personally important to me.

Thinking about this moment now – at the age of 65 – I marvel at the fact that I was almost 60 before I embraced them. After all, I had been a “feminist” since before Feminism had a name, and a full-fledged Second Wave Warrior. So why did it take me so long to understand how important Mahlah, No’ah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah should be to me as a Jewish Feminist?

The answer is actually quite simple. The Daughters of Zelophehad had never been cherry-picked. In fact, for most of my adult life, Mahlah, No’ah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah had been disappeared. They had been disappeared, even though their story is told over two parshot (Pinchas and Mattot/Mas’ei). They had been disappeared, even though they are mentioned multiple times in the Torah by name – meaning not just as a collective noun “Daughters of Zelophehad.” They were simply not part of Conventional Wisdom, either in my Jewish world or in my secular world.

Skip to 2010, when my husband Richard began attending Torah Study every month at KAM Isaiah Israel in Chicago. I went to Services with him, of course, but I did not attend Torah Study because we do not think – as a couple – that we need to do everything together in lockstep. Me? I preferred to spend that time reading quietly by myself, as I do now on the days that Richard attends Talmud class here at PSJC.

So on that day in July 2011 when members of KAM were studying Parsha Pinchas, I was sitting in a little lounge near the room where the Torah Study class was meeting. I was reading whatever I was reading... when I suddenly became aware of the fact that people in Torah Study were talking about a man with five daughters.

By that point, I had been doing research on *Fiddler on the Roof* for over a decade and I was stunned. When Richard came out of Torah Study, I confronted him: “You were just discussing a Biblical story about a man with five daughters, and you didn’t think to tell me that was your assignment for this week?” (*You can just imagine!*)



Richard shrugged: “Nope. Never occurred to me.” So, of course, I went back and read the whole parsha later that week (plus the next one), and the following Shabbat I was ready to talk to our Rabbi – Rabbi Appel – at Kiddush.

By that point, I had been doing research on *Fiddler on the Roof* for over a decade, and I had already read both Sholem Aleichem’s autobiography *From the Fair* (published in Yiddish in 1916, but not released in a full English translation until 1985), as well as *My Father, Sholem Aleichem* (the biography Marie Waife-Goldberg published about her famous father in 1968).

On page 231 of *From the Fair*, Sholem Aleichem talks about the day he met Elimelech Loyev – his future father-in-law – for the first time.

Listen here, young fellow, let me ask you something,” old Loyev sang out. “My son [Joshua] tells me that you’re just as knowledgeable in our holy Jewish books as in their secular ones. Do you remember what Rashi says about the daughters of Zelophehad?”

Then commenced a long-winded discussion on Rashi. And Rashi led to the Talmud. At which followed a learned disquisition about scholarship and Haskala, as is usual among Jews who are at home in all the commentaries.

I had read these words – in Curt Leviant’s translation from 1985 – but they had not registered. Since I had no appreciation yet for the Daughters of Zelophehad, the significance of this reference to them in Sholem Aleichem’s autobiography had gone right over my head... Until the day Richard was in a Torah Study discussion of Parsha Pinchas!

So my question to you is this: How could a story that is so **present** in our Biblical literature have been disappeared for centuries? After all, this is critical part of the narrative, at the end of the Book of Numbers, when the Israelites – after all their years of wandering in the desert – are finally going to enter the Land? This is not one of those weeks where the poor Bar/Bat Mitzvah student has to struggle through the rules of Kashrut or whatever. Parsha Pinchas is in a really critical part of the Torah, right before we begin the Book of Deuteronomy in which Moses gives his final exhortation before the people cross over the Jordan.

And there, at this point of maximum promise and peril, we learn the story of the five daughters of a man named Zelophehad, and three times, we hear their names: Mahlah, No’ah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah. The drama begins when the five sisters go to the Tent of Meeting:

They stood before Moses, Eleazar the Priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and they

said, 'Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korah's faction, which banded together against the Lord, but 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!'

Moses brought their case before the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, 'The plea 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.'

**'Further, speak to the Israelite people as follows:
'If a man dies without leaving a son,
you shall transfer his property to his daughter.'"**

The five daughters of Zelophehad are in the Torah and they are in Sholem Aleichem's autobiography, and therein lies **our** challenge with respect to selective memory: Our culture, like all cultures, prizes some pieces of our story above others, cherry-picks what it wants to remember, and disappears the rest. And yet – at least in our Jewish Tradition – the original texts are still there, waiting for us to find them, and pull disappeared stories back into significance.

**Honor the text!
Defy Conventional Wisdom!
Never allow the legend to occlude the facts!**

What is happening in Sholem Aleichem's life – in his telling – when he reaches this part of his autobiography? Well, he's been wandering around as an itinerant scholar, and he is at an inn one night, and he meets a young man named Joshua Loyev who is the son of a prominent local landowner (something very rare for Jews in the Russian Pale of Settlement in those days). After speaking with this 18 year old teenager (really, Sholem Aleichem was a very young man at that time), Joshua Loyev says: You know, I think my father would really like you, so I'm going to tell him about you.

And Joshua goes home and he brings his father Elimelech Loyev back to the inn to meet Solomon Rabinowitz (aka Sholem Aleichem), and the first thing that Elimelech Loyev wants to know – according to Sholem Aleichem – is: Have you read Rashi's commentary on the Daughters of Zelophehad? And young Solomon Rabinowitz says: Yes, in fact, I have, sir. And they proceed to have a discussion, and Sholem Aleichem describes how a crowd gathered around them, riveted by his erudition. What are we to make of this?

I used to say to myself: Well... maybe? Is this a true memory? Did Sholem Aleichem actually have this conversation with Elimelech Loyev the first time they met, or is this just the memory of a man knowing he is close to death – a man who has been ill for a long time – is this just the memory of a man who at the time of his death is still plagued

by the fact that he had four daughters and one ward, and had been personally responsible for five dowries? Did the story of the Daughters of Zelophehad resonate with Sholem Aleichem at the end of his life such that he put them into his story in thinking he “remembered” them?

And then I read Rashi. Rashi was also a man blessed with daughters but no sons. Rashi had three daughters, and Rashi taught them Torah, and Rashi’s daughters became the mothers of sons who became famous scholars in their own right, and helped to secure their grandfather’s legacy. And Rashi’s commentary about the Daughters of Zelophehad is quite long and very positive in tone.

So now, as I think about all of this again, I think maybe this **is** a true fact about the day Sholem Aleichem first met Elimelech Loyev. Maybe Elimelech Loyev asked young Solomon Rabinowitz (aka Sholem Aleichem) about the Daughters of Zelophehad because he wanted to know if this young man would be a good tutor for the children who currently resided at his estate in Sofievka? After all, Elimelech Loyev knew something that Solomon Rabinowitz did not know yet: Elimelech Loyev knew there were three girls in Sofievka awaiting his return to the estate.

Let us assume that this **is** a true fact. Let us that assume Elimelech Loyev **did** ask Solomon Rabinowitz if he knew Rashi’s commentary on the Daughters of Zelophehad. Why might he have asked that? Maybe what he was thinking was: Would this young man be an appropriate teacher for these three girls of mine – my daughter Olga (age 15) and my granddaughters Manya (age 9) and Natasha (age 5) – who are back in Sofievka?

If I bring Solomon Rabinowitz back to Sofievka, will he be a good teacher? Or is he the kind of young man who will say: “Girls?!? No Way!!! I am **not** going waste **my** time teaching **girls!!!**”

So maybe the fact that Solomon Rabinowitz did know about Rashi’s commentary on the Daughters of Zelophehad, which is, in fact, a very positive commentary about these five woman and their role in the Torah, maybe this was the reassurance that Elimelech Loyev was looking for?

Of course, we are not ever going to know. We do not have Elimelech Loyev here. We do not have Solomon Rabinowitz here. We do not have Ransom Stoddard here to interview about what really happened on the day that Liberty Valance died. But we do know that Parsha Pinchas and Parsha Mattot/Mas’ei roll around every summer, and maybe now, we will pay more attention to this text.

Before I close, I want to bring us back to last Saturday when Rabbi Carter gave her wonderful D’var Torah on Parsha Balak before heading off on vacation. Her subject was the talking donkey, or, as this creature is best known, “Balaam’s Ass.” Maybe I knew before last Shabbat that Balaam’s Ass was, in fact, a **female** donkey, but if so,

then that is another fact that I had also forgotten. So when I was listening to Rabbi Carter's D'var Torah, I was extremely moved because, of course, Rabbi Carter made clear that this voice – the voice of Balaam's Ass – was a **female** voice.

A man named Balaam is beating "his" animal, and finally she turns to him and says: Why are you beating me? And Rabbi Carter asked us to imagine what Balaam's Ass was thinking at that moment. Then Rabbi Carter talked in her D'var Torah about domestic violence and that whole thread that was part of her D'var Torah last Shabbat. But what I was sitting here thinking was: Is this story of Balaam's Ass an introduction to the story of the Daughters of Zelophehad? Is this where the authors of our most revered text warn us about men who refuse to listen to females voices?

This female being – one of God's creatures – is being beaten without mercy! When Rabbi Carter asked us what we thought Balaam's Ass was thinking, we called out: Why don't you trust me? I have been your faithful companion all these years, and I have never done anything like this before, and suddenly I am calling your attention to something, so why are you beating me instead of asking yourself, "What is my faithful companion trying to tell me?" Is there something I see that you – Balaam – do not see? And that is, of course, when the angel reveals itself to Balaam.

My life's work has been about recovering the voices of women, always in dismay over how the voices of women are systematically disappeared from our culture. I am not going say anything about the political year – 2016 – that just ended. I am going to leave that to you, to think about on your own.

But I do want to say this: "Let **us** not allow the legend to become fact. Let **us** not cherry-pick from our most revered text, leaving out things that may be "unconventional" in our own time. Let **us** strive to see what is actually there in the text, and in this case, one of the things that is clearly there in the final three parshot of the Book of Numbers is the celebration of the female voice, and the affirmation by God to Moses and the People of Israel that yes, indeed, these five Daughters of Zelophehad – Mahlah, No'ah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah – are essential members of the Jewish People and they each deserve a portion in the Land. Shabbat Shalom!

