

## D'var Torah - Pinchas

Shabbat Shalom. I'm Cantor Lianna Mendelson, and I am so excited to be with you here tonight. I am feeling great joy to be praying with you and hearing your voices. I am also feeling the enormity of the responsibility that you have granted me by choosing me as your first ordained cantor and entrusting me with your education. I am looking forward to building a sacred partnership with all of you, to all that we will learn and create together.

This week's Torah portion, Pinchas, finds the Israelites at the tail end of a plague. Twenty four thousand people died. The people were divided on their beliefs, the community couldn't seem to come together, and there was terrible violence. It was a deeply traumatic experience, and this parasha addresses the way the community attempts to heal afterward.

The position of the Israelites in this parasha mirrors our own, although their plague had definitively ended and ours is still ongoing. We can look to our ancestors for a model of how to keep moving forward, and what to do next.

The Israelites conduct a census in order to take stock of their community and determine how to apportion their resources, in this case doling out parcels of land to each tribe in proportion to its population. One man, Zelophehad, had five daughters and no sons before he passed away. Without an heir, the land that would have been allocated to Zelophehad was supposed to be returned to his tribe. However, Zelophehad's daughters, Machlah, Noa, Choglah, Milkah, and Tirzah, approached Moses to address the inequities in the system. They asked why they and their families should count less than others, and asked for their share of land.

The daughters of Zelophehad spearheaded a real policy change. God ordered the census to count only the males of fighting age, leaving women out of the conversation of land ownership altogether. But after these women advocated for their needs, God told Moses not only to give a portion to the daughters of Zelophehad, but that any women without brothers

could inherit her father's estate. While this is far from fully equitable, it was a massive step forward for women. The daughters of Zelophehad voiced their needs, and even more importantly, the leadership, in this case Moses and God, really heard them and made the change that was needed.

The second major organizational change that happens in this parasha is the ordination of Joshua. Moses had been the leader of the Israelites for an entire generation, but when God tells Moses that he will not be able to enter the Promised Land, Moses becomes concerned about the transfer of leadership. Moses was the only leader that the new generation of Israelites had ever known. God tells Moses that Joshua bin Nun will be the next leader. In front of the whole community, Moses lays his hands on Joshua's head and invests his authority in Joshua, just as Rabbi Dr. Andrea Weiss laid her hands on my head two months ago when she ordained me a cantor. This ritual in which Moses publicly shows his trust in Joshua helps ease the transition for the people. Moses and God are publicly vouching for Joshua and showing the people that they will be in good hands.

This parasha informs the way that I see the changes that are currently happening at TBS. There has been a re-evaluation of the leadership needs, and there is a tremendous opportunity for growth and change, as well as the responsibility to make sure that no one is left out and to be leaders who listen.

The Lewin Model of organizational change occurs in three steps - unfreezing-moving-refreezing. Firstly, the existing status quo must be dismantled and people must be ready for changes. Then, the changes occur, and lastly, a new status quo emerges. That first step, the unfreezing step, is often painful. And yet, we are already there. These last sixteen months have completely smashed all of our expectations and changed how we do everything, from gathering to grocery shopping. Just like the Israelites in Parashat Pinchas, we have experienced deep traumas. If we are going to try to spin a positive out of our pain, it is that we are primed for growth. We have been forced to be creative in ways we couldn't imagine, and

we already understand that we are braver than we previously thought. Now is the time for movement, to ask ourselves which pieces of the way-things-were truly serve us, and which pieces can be left in the past.

Change is scary. I know. Everything in my life has changed in the last year. In graduating and no longer being a student, I have given up an identity that I have held for over twenty years. I moved cross country to a state I had never even seen while my friends scattered across the country and to Canada. Before I began my job search, I took my sparkly gel pens and a piece of printer paper and wrote an adage that I learned while studying organizational dynamics: “Change always feels like loss,” next to a butterfly and the Hebrew words “Al Tira” - do not be afraid. I taped this DIY poster to my desk so that I would be reminded of it every day. My teacher Merri Arian says that when congregants react poorly to a new tune, it is often because they are feeling a sense of loss that they might not ever hear the one they are familiar with and love again. And so I am here, and that is both a gain and a loss, because I am not Aaron or Meredith or Rabbi Jenny, and I will do things differently and the system has changed.

But I promise to consult with those of you with institutional memory and I will listen and be attentive to your needs, and I will also bring my authentic self and work to leave an impact on Temple Beth Shalom. And I have deep faith that while change is hard, this will be a positive one. This is such an exciting era for TBS. It is so exciting for me to be here. I could not feel more blessed that you have welcomed me in, and I look forward to getting to know you better and growing together.