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THE  
FIVE BOOKS  
OF  
MIRIAM

*A Woman's Commentary on the Torah*



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## 41. PINKHAS:

*Women at the Margins*

(NUMBERS 25:10-30:1)

**T**ORAH TEACHES: As a reward for Pinkhas' zeal in slaying the two idolaters—Zimri and his Midianite lover, Cozbi—God appoints Aaron's grandson heir to the high priesthood.

In preparation for the Israelites' battle with Midian and their imminent settlement in Canaan, God orders that a second national census be taken, so that tribal lands can be allocated after the conquest. As part of this census, all the tribes and clans are named, according to their ancestry: the twelve sons of Jacob, their sons, and those among their male descendants who have established their own clans. In this list of almost one hundred names, only six women are mentioned: the five daughters of Zelophekhad, and Serakh, daughter of Asher, the only granddaughter of Jacob who is named in the Torah.

When the census is over, Moses finds himself confronted with an anomalous case: Zelophekhad, one of the Manassites, has died without leaving male heirs. His five daughters petition Moses to inherit his land, urging him: "LET NOT OUR FATHER'S NAME BE LOST TO HIS CLAN JUST BECAUSE HE HAD NO SON!" When Moses brings this case before God, the daughters' claim is upheld as "just," and they are given a hereditary holding in their family's land.

At God's bidding, Moses climbs a mountain to view the land that he will not be allowed to enter, and brings Joshua to Eleazar to be appointed Moses' successor. The parasha ends with a detailed description of the daily, Sabbath, new moon, and holiday sacrifices.

## COZBI DAUGHTER OF ZUR

**OUR DAUGHTERS ASK:** Why does the Torah choose to identify the *pagan* woman killed by Pinkhas together with an Israelite man? As it is written: "THE NAME OF THE MIDIANITE WOMAN WHO WAS KILLED WAS COZBI DAUGHTER OF ZUR; HE WAS THE TRIBAL HEAD OF AN ANCESTRAL HOUSE IN MIDIAN" (25:15). Who is Cozbi and why are we given her lineage?

**BERURIAH THE SCHOLAR ANSWERS:** The three people involved in this incident are not just ordinary folk. Cozbi is a princess, daughter of one of

Midian's tribal leaders. Her lover, Zimri, is the son of a clan chieftain. And Pinkhas is Aaron's grandson, heir to the high priesthood.

**THE RABBIS POINT OUT:** In killing Zimri, Pinkhas is obeying God's command to impale the ringleaders of the Baal-peor affair.

**HAGAR THE STRANGER INTERJECTS:** But in killing Cozbi, Pinkhas is in effect declaring war on Midian. In the ensuing war between the Israelites and the Midianites, Cozbi's father, Zur, is one of the chieftains killed.

**OUR DAUGHTERS ASK:** Why is Cozbi named when so many other biblical women—the wives of Noah, Lot, and Job; the daughters of Pharaoh and Jephthah; the mothers of Abraham and Samson—remain nameless in the Bible?

**THE RABBIS ANSWER:** Until we name them in the Midrash! As for Cozbi, her name, like so many others in the Bible, is freighted with meaning. The Hebrew root *kozav* means "to deceive" or "to lie." That is because Cozbi *makes a lie* out of her father's teachings—that is, to give herself only to the greatest man in Israel. Others teach: She commands her father: "Kas be—"Devour for me' this people." Cozbi's name was originally *Shevilanai*, related to the Arabic word meaning "womb opening"—that is, whore. As a popular proverb puts it: "What business does Shevilanai have by the reeds of the lake? What is she doing among the peeling rushes? Her sins stain even her own mother's name."

**LILITH THE REBEL COUNTERS:** Vulgar misogynist fantasies!

**LEAH THE NAMER SUGGESTS:** Maybe not, for the Hebrew name Cozbi may derive from the Akkadian word *kuzabatum*, meaning "voluptuous" or "well developed."

**OUR MOTHERS CONCLUDE:** Sometimes it's better to remain nameless in the Bible.

## THE DAUGHTERS OF ZELOPEKHAD

**THE RABBIS TEACH:** Zelophekhad's daughters pursue their claim to their father's inheritance because they believe that "God's love is not like the love of a mortal father; the latter prefers his sons to his daughters, but the One who created the world extends divine love to women as well as to men. 'GOD'S TENDER MERCIES ARE OVER ALL GOD'S WORKS'" (Psalm 145:9). In fact, so wise, pious, and learned are these five daughters that they choose to remain unmarried for forty years because they cannot find suitable partners. As a result of their piety, when they later marry, they all miraculously give birth at 130, like Moses' mother, Yokheved.

THE SAGES IN OUR OWN TIME SUGGEST: No, this story justifies why women were later permitted to inherit land within a patriarchal system.

BERURIAH THE SCHOLAR COUNTERS: Or we can understand this story as a valuable lesson for us all, teaching us that Jewish law has the flexibility to expand and embrace women, giving us increasingly more rights and a fairer share of our common legacy.

### SOURCE OF THE BREATH OF ALL FLESH

OUR DAUGHTERS ASK: What is God's real name? How do we name that which is infinite? Can one name contain such vastness? But if we begin to call God by many names, can we ever exhaust the list?

THE RABBIS ANSWER: Judaism has many names for God, foremost among them *YHVH*, the Tetragrammaton, the Four-Letter Name, once pronounced only by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, then silenced altogether after the destruction of the Temple. Other names include status terms such as *Adonai*, "Lord"; *Melekh*, "King"; *Ribono shel Olam*, "Master of the Universe"; and attributes like *Tzur*, "Rock"; *Go'el*, "Redeemer," and *Ha-Makom*, "the Place."

HAGAR THE STRANGER BREAKS IN: Don't forget variations on the name of the ancient Mesopotamian god El, such as *Elohim* and *El Shaddai*.

LILITH THE REBEL PROTESTS: I object to the Rabbis' preference for divine names emphasizing hierarchy and male power, such as King, Master, and Lord. I prefer feminine images of generativity and nurture, such as the ancient name *Ha-Rahaman* (derived from the Hebrew root *rehem*, meaning "womb") and its feminine form, *Rahamema*, as well as new names based on the feminine symbols of water—*Ein*, "Fountain"; *Ma'ayan*, "Spring"; *Be'er*, "Well"; *Mekor*, "Source."

ESTHER THE HIDDEN ONE ADDS: And *Shekhinah*, the indwelling feminine Presence especially beloved to the mystics. The mystics also describe God as *Ein Sof*, the One-Without-End.

MIRIAM THE PROPHET POINTS OUT: Here when Moses appeals to God to appoint a successor, he addresses God as *Elohai ha-rukhot l'khol basar*, "SOURCE OF THE BREATH OF ALL FLESH" (27:16). This too is a nurturing image, for is there anything more intimate and sustaining than our breath?

## 42. MATTOT:

*Vows and Commitments*

(NUMBERS 30:2-32:42)

**T**ORAH TEACHES: The first chapter of this parasha details the biblical rules governing vows and oaths. The opening verse addresses Israelite men, charging them to honor the verbal commitments they make. The next fourteen verses apply specifically to women, elaborating in considerable detail the limits of their freedom to commit themselves with their own words. Dependent women—those still living under their father's roof—can fulfill their own vows only if their father does not object; similarly, married women have to have the *tacit* approval of their husbands. If, however, their father or husband objects to their vow *immediately upon learning of it*, the vow is thereby annulled, and the woman bears no responsibility for the commitment she has made. The only women who are permitted to make independent vows are widows and divorcées. The text makes no mention of women who do not marry, presumably because such cases are so rare.

In revenge for Midian's sexual and idolatrous seduction at Baal-peor, the Israelites wage a savage war, killing all male Midianites, among them five kings (including Cozbi's father, Zur) and the pagan prophet Balaam; burning down all their cities and encampments; and taking all the women, children, cattle, and property as spoils of war. Moses is enraged that the Israelite fighters have spared "every female"—women are the ones responsible for the earlier plague—and orders the men to kill "every woman who has known a man carnally," as well as all the male children (presumably because they might one day form a fifth column in Israel's midst). But the Israelite soldiers are instructed to spare all the virgins—that is, the men are free to appropriate them as wives or slaves.

### THE LIMITS OF A WOMAN'S WORD

THE RABBIS TEACH: We Jews have always regarded taking a vow quite seriously. The third commandment warns us not to take God's name in vain. We have always urged people to avoid taking vows whenever possible, since the