

Sermon

Matot Masei

Nancy Goldberg

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On September 6th, I will reach a milestone in my life: I will turn 50 years old. How could this be? It seems like time is going by faster and faster.

I am participating in a program called OnBoard, which involves fostering my Jewish growth and leadership skills as a member of Beth Ahm's board. This program has a Jewish study component, so I thought for my 50th birthday it would be great to go outside of my comfort zone and deliver a sermon about what I have learned about today's Parashiyot.

Matot-Masei discusses a variety of topics: Masei takes place at the end of the 40 years in the desert. Vows and oaths, the seriousness of speech, war with another people as well as Moses becoming very angry with tribes that want to settle in Jordan instead of the Promised Land. Other topics include how land is divided, how to protect someone who has committed manslaughter, and the issue of intentionality—the choices a person makes and the consequences from those choices.

But today, I would like to focus on a story that particularly spoke to me: The Daughters of Tzelophad. I was not familiar with this story until I began to study for this sermon. We first meet the five daughters in last week's Parasha of Pinchas. They came to Moses because their father had died without sons. Due to the inheritance passing through the male line, the daughters claimed that they should be entitled to the land, even though they were his only heirs. To quote from Numbers 27:4: "Why should our father's name be disadvantaged in his family merely because he did not have a son? Give us a portion of land along with our father's brothers."

Think about that for a moment: this is during Biblical times, and five females are asking the male leaders, including Moses, if they can have their inheritance. I find that pretty remarkable.

Moses did not know how to respond to this request, so he asked God directly how to resolve the matter. God found in favor of the daughters: "You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them."

Masei then takes us to the end of the book of Bamidbar, and the case of the daughters reappears. Now the leaders of Tzelophad's tribe, Menashe, son of Joseph, came and made the following complaint: If the daughters married men

from another tribe, the land would eventually pass to their husbands and thus to their husbands' tribes. Land that had been granted to the tribe of Menashe could be lost. Moses again took the case to God, who stated that the daughters were entitled to the land, but so too was the tribe. If they wish to take possession of the land, they would have to marry men from within their own tribe.

Although the daughters were faced with marrying only within their tribe, their claim of their father's land highlights that they were advocating for something they felt so strongly about, and made a significant choice to bring their case to the rulers.

This story reminds me of the clients I work with in my role as a case manager with those who have experienced a traumatic brain injury. I advocate for my clients in a variety of ways, but I have to work within a system in order to have positive results. And each individual client brings a unique case. For example, most of my clients were involved in a car accident, resulting in their brain injury. As a case manager, I have to work within a complicated system in order to advocate for my client to get all of the services that are needed. I have to work with the auto insurance adjusters, physicians, attorneys, as well as the client, family and the rehabilitation team. It's a lot of people to try to keep happy! Just as the daughters of Tzelophad had to step outside of their comfort zone and

advocate for themselves, especially as women during this time in history, so do I at times have to think outside of the box and try to get what is needed for my clients.

The Haftarah this Shabbat comes from Jeremiah. We also read another Haftarah from Jeremiah last week, which places emphasis on the importance of how each individual has his or her strengths. Before God spoke to Jeremiah, Jeremiah did not know that he was going to be a prophet. It makes us think as individuals: What is my purpose? What if I fail?

God knows that Jeremiah is worried about failing, about people not listening to him. Is it better to fail or not to try? (The question I asked myself when I decided to take a chance and volunteer to give this sermon!)

This also reminds me of the choices I made when I was at the University of Michigan. In order to receive a Bachelor of Arts Degree, you had to obtain nine credits of science. NINE CREDITS! For someone like me in which math and science were never easy subjects, this task of obtaining these science credits was a bit daunting. During my Freshman year, I decided to try to make a dent in the nine credit requirement and take Astronomy. I figured what could be bad? We'll look at stars and planets and it will be fun. Well, little did I know it was all math-based. After a couple weeks in, I knew I was not going to make it. Luckily my brother

Eddie was also at Michigan, and he suggested that I drop Astronomy and come join a class he was taking called Jewish Elderly Outreach. This was a Sociology class where you met with an older Jewish person in the community, then you attended a seminar to discuss your experiences. Every week I met with a woman whom I have fond memories of.

I was 18 years old, a freshman at a big school and adjusting to all that goes along with that. Dropping a class so early in my college career was definitely out of my comfort zone and made me feel insecure. But as I attended the seminar, I began to really enjoy the discussions, especially with my big brother there for support. I knew I was in a more comfortable place than the Astronomy class. The leader of the seminar said to me: "You should consider a career in geriatric Social Work." And that was how I knew at the ripe old age of 18 that I was going to be a Social Worker, and eventually a Case Manager.

Stepping outside of my comfort zone was also involved with how my husband Ira and I decided to join Beth Ahm. When we began to search for a new shul four years ago, we knew we wanted something smaller. Beth Ahm was very close to our home so we decided to come one Shabbat morning. We did not know anyone who belonged here. We just walked in and sat down. We had no idea that the choice we made to attend that morning would impact our lives greatly: We

decided to join after one visit (Ira was the first one to proclaim that!). Ira got involved through the Chai Mitzvah and Miles for Meals programs. I became involved in Sisterhood. It has also been a pleasure to be the Sisterhood representative to the Board of Trustees. We have made some wonderful friendships that I am truly thankful for. But for me, especially, coming to this shul has opened up doors that were never in my thoughts before. For example, Rabbi Rubenstein gave me encouragement that I could lead a service. Who me? I had never lead a service before. It took me several months to think it through and step outside of my comfort zone. But once I made up my mind I dove head first. I am very proud of my accomplishments, and I want to continue learning and growing.

Thinking outside of the box and continuing to expand my Jewish knowledge is especially important as I near my 50th birthday. By going out of my comfort zone to first walk through these doors, and then to try new challenges, I feel I have grown these past four years, and look forward to continuing to learn over the next 50 years! Shabbat Shalom!