

WRJ CENTENNIAL



*Devar Torah*

Women's Voices Deepen Our Jewish Legacy

The Five Daughters of Zelophehad:  
Advocacy for Women's Issues and a Legacy of Women's Voices  
Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 25:10 – 30:1)

During the year 2013, we celebrate the legacy of the first 100 years of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods/Women of Reform Judaism. NFTS/WRJ has stood tall on women's issues, including a woman's right to vote, a woman's right to reproductive choice and other health and wellness issues. We stand in solidarity with Women of the Wall in their efforts to have equal voices in Israel. For 100 years, NFTS/WRJ has penned and adopted resolutions that advocate for justice on behalf of women, of children, of Israel and so much more! We make certain that women's voices are heard! And in Parashat Pinchas we learn the importance of advocacy by women for women.

In this Torah portion, sisters stood together to challenge the tradition of only sons being able to inherit property in the Promised Land. In the family of Zelophehad there were no sons. Rather, Zelophehad's daughters numbered five and they were the great-great-great-great granddaughters of Joseph!

Zelophehad's daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, pleaded their case to Moses. They sought claim to their father's land, and Moses, in turn, argued this landmark case before God. "God said: '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.'" (Numbers 27:7)

Five women made a huge difference on behalf of generations of women to follow. Their unified voice for justice changed the laws of Torah. Even Adonai was not pleased that daughters had no voice up to that point. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah stood together and planned, sought and successfully claimed their property. In so doing, they stood up for the rights of all women to own family property! They made a difference in Torah just as WRJ has made a difference in understanding Torah through the historical collaborative effort of women to create and publish *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*.

Through *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, WRJ provided a resource to share women's interpretations of Torah through overviews and outlines, assorted perspectives and elucidations,



I know about the daughter longing for change  
who hopes for her daughter not  
to sit and wait  
(*The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, p 988)

This poem is about a woman who sat and waited and waited... but why do that when we know that by using our voices we can affect positive changes?

The year 2013 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Women of Reform Judaism. Throughout our one hundred year history, the women of NFTS/WRJ did not sit and wait to embrace critical issues or to advocate for social justice. We were the daughters of Zelophehad, speaking out for what would make a difference long after we were gone. Our voice was heard and served as a guide for others. Sisterhoods authored hundreds of resolutions during our first one hundred years. Today at the dawn of our next one hundred years, WRJ continues to mobilize our social, intellectual, and physical strength in diverse creative ways.

According to Judith M. Hertz, WRJ Past President (1989 – 1993), “Nothing was equivalent to the voice we gave to women in *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*. This commentary is used in so many diverse ways by so many different communities of faith. Women of many religious traditions are using WRJ's commentary. It is used as a resource that provides different perspectives than the traditional commentaries that we have known. We, like the daughters of Zelophehad, changed the paradigm for women when we helped to publish *The Torah: A Women's Commentary!*”

WRJ has always led the way for women. And like the five daughters of Zelophehad, when women unite as affiliates of WRJ, we raise our voices to strengthen our impact and make our world a better place. It is part of what we do in sacred partnership with Adonai. Adonai guides us to acts of *tikkun olam*. Let us deliberate today with the understanding that when we work together, we empower women to embrace our rich heritage, making the world a better place - especially for those who do not yet know their voices. Amen!

*This d'var Torah was written by WRJ executive committee member Cynthia Roosth Wolf for adaptation and use by sisterhoods/women's groups during the 2013 WRJ Centennial year. We are grateful to Cynthia and Michael Wolf and Family for generously sponsoring this Centennial project.*