

Who Gets the Last Word?

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Mattot and Masei, the last two portions of the book of Numbers (30:2–36:18), are usually read one after the other on the same Sabbath. Are these portions linked by something other than the quirks of the Jewish calendar?

Mattot opens with a chapter on the subject of vows. A vow is a person's promise to God to behave in a certain way so that God, in response, will grant one's requests. When Jacob was fleeing from Esau, he took a vow that if God protected him on his journey and returned him home safely, he would give back to God a tenth of whatever God gave him (Gen. 28:22). A vow thus gives a person a sense of control over his or her own life. Surprisingly, fourteen of the seventeen verses in Numbers 30 address the topic of *women* and vows. The Torah makes the point that a father or a husband may cancel the vows of a daughter or wife. It follows that men have to keep the promises they make, while women are often prevented from doing so.

But one verse of this chapter leaps out at today's reader. Numbers 30:10 says that if a widow or divorcee makes a vow, she has to fulfill its terms. No longer subordinate to a father or husband, she must keep her promise. Her word is as binding as a man's. Quite an impressive rule for a patriarchally configured society!

Just as the double Mattot-Masei portion begins with women, it ends with women. Earlier in the book of Numbers (Chapter 27), the daughters of Zelophehad petitioned Moses to assign to them the parcel of land he would have assigned to their father, had he lived to enter the Promised Land. Moses was stumped by their request and goes off to consult with God. The famous answer from on high is—*ken b'not Tzelofehad dovrot* (the plea of the daughters of Zelophehad is just)

(Num. 27:7), i.e., these women have a valid claim. They will receive their father's parcel and his name will not be blotted out.

But in the last chapter of Mattot-Masei, we read a story that is a mirror image of the one above. The men of Menasseh, Zelophehad's tribe, approach Moses and say that his decision regarding the five women could redound to the men's detriment. If the women who inherit land in Menasseh's tract marry a man from a different tribe, they will take their land with them. It will thereby diminish Menasseh's holdings, and that would be unfair. To my mind, this is an audacious claim since the inheritance rules of the Torah so strongly favor men in every other circumstance. Land passes from father to sons, one generation to the next. Women are not part of the inheritance equation. Even so, these men did not hesitate to complain about the one inheritance advantage afforded women.

Given this background, how are we supposed to read the last chapter of Numbers? Should we take it at face value, that the men of Menasseh are right, even praiseworthy, for defending their tribal inheritance? Or should we see it as satire, by which I mean that the chapter actually mocks these men for being so small-minded, trying to deny women the one gain they were given? I favor the second option. We cannot avoid noticing that exactly the same phrase that appears in Numbers 27:7 about the women, appears again in 36:6 about the men—*ken matteh v'nei Yosef dovrin* (the plea of the Josephite tribe is just). This time these words are uttered by Moses at God's bidding, not directly by God. Moses tells all of Israel that the five daughters of Zelophehad will have to choose a husband from the tribe of Menasseh (36:5–6). That way the land will not leave the tribe. On a superficial level,

the message of the chapter is that Moses had to clip the wings of the daughters of Zelophehad. They won their case of inheriting their father's land but were then informed of the strings attached. I suspect, however, that on a deeper level, the chapter disparages the men who could not tolerate even one small favorable decision for women.

This skeptical reading is buttressed by a mishnah. Tractate Ketubot 13:7 presents one detail of the laws of inheritance. It discusses the case of a man who dies leaving both sons and daughters: if his estate is large, says the mishnah, the sons inherit all of it, but they have to maintain their sisters from it until they marry; if the estate is small, it all goes to support the daughters and the sons have no choice but to go begging at the door. Admon, an early sage, comments, "*bishvil she-ani zakhar hifsadeti*" (just because I am a male, should I lose out)? He is referring to this one set of circumstances in which a daughter's share of her father's estate would exceed that of a son. The irony, of course, is that sons are given a huge advantage over daughters in all other matters of inheritance. It is rare for daughters to benefit at the expense of their brothers. Even so, Admon begrudges women this one small victory, because, in the zero-sum game of inheritance, men are being treated, in this one instance, as less than equal.

I suspect that the mishnah is poking fun at Admon. The obvious similarity of his distress to that of the men of Menasseh leads me to conclude that the sage's comment is actually a riff on the story told in Numbers 36. Just as in that case men resented the fact that women gained the upper hand in one case of male disenfranchisement, here too a man expresses a very similar sentiment regarding one case of male disenfranchisement. In this instance it's easy to see that Admon is behaving in a petty manner. By including Admon's words, the mishnah connects him to the men of Menasseh. By implication, the mishnah thinks that they, too, are behaving in a petty manner.

What is the overall message today of the double portion of Mattot-Masei? Numbers 30, the opening chapter of the double portion, takes single women seriously and treats them as fully equal to men. Numbers 36, the closing chapter, says

that there will always be men who will try to deny women equality. But such men will not be able to roll back women's gains, even if they succeed in obtaining, on occasion, a small concession. This is the high note on which the fourth book of the Torah concludes.