

Torah Thoughts Pinchas

5778:

Among the characteristics that define life are: growth, adaptation, metabolism (the ability to extract and transform energy) and response to outside stimuli. Things that possess these characteristics are said to be alive; things that do not, are not. Cultures, too, live and die based on the presence or absence of those same characteristics. A culture that cannot grow, adapt, metabolize or respond to stimuli will wither and die as surely as any physical organism.

And so it is that Parshat Pinchas provides us with a clear illustration of these vital processes in the Torah and Jewish history. It does so through the case of the daughters of Zelophehad, an Israelite man who fathered five daughters but no sons. The Torah clearly intended for sons to inherit their father's estate, but after Zelophehad's death his daughters plead with Moses to permit them to inherit in the absence of any brothers. Moses asks God about the case, and God concedes that their claim is just, and that they should inherit from their father. In addition to this change within the Torah itself, the early rabbinic sages added their own rulings; they supplemented the law of the Torah by decreeing that wives and daughters should be supported from the deceased's estate. And in the 1940s, the chief rabbi of what was then called Palestine ruled that daughters inherit in the same way that sons do in all matters.

The history of women inheriting, and hundreds of other cases, shows how Judaism was and is a living culture, in which law grows and adapts to the needs of the time and to new situations. Judaism even expects God to change or expand the law when shown the necessity and justice of a claim; in that way, Judaism shows that God is also a living, dynamic being. We take seriously the human authority to accept, and even to drive, change within Judaism, and make those changes only when they are needed. But we should do so not with trepidation, but with the confidence inspired by a changing tradition and a changing God.

Shabbat shalom