



Assertiveness Training • Parshat Pinchas

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirza, the five daughters of Zelophehad serve in *Parshat Pinchas* as powerful role models for assertiveness. They came forward (“*va-tikravna*”) in front of Moses, Elazar, the princes, and the entire community, stood strong (“*va-ta’amodna*”), and explained their case: Their father died before the land was allocated, and, without sons, the daughters were in danger of not inheriting any property. “Why should our father’s name be lost to his family only because he had no sons?” they asked respectfully yet frankly. They conclude with a direct request: “Give us a portion of land along with our father’s brothers” (Num. 27:1-4).

In psychotherapeutic literature, assertiveness is viewed as an essential skill. On the one hand, being passive when you believe that you are not receiving something you deserve can contribute to increased depression and anxiety. On the other hand, being overly angry or aggressive often backfires with negative repercussions for personal relationships. Being assertive entails communicating desires and expectations clearly and confidently. It is not about dominance or power but advocating for your own or others’ interests. This is a skill that many of us struggle with and can be learned through assertiveness training.

The daughters of Zelophehad deliver a clinic in effective assertiveness. God acknowledges the correctness of the five women’s approach: “Zelophehad’s daughters speak correctly.” The Hebrew word for “correctly” is “*kein*,” which is translated by Onkelos as “*ya-ut*.” This word

does not just have a logical connotation, but an aesthetic one as well. Both their argument and their approach for making that argument were admirable. Their body posture exuded assertiveness. “*Va-tikravna*” - They approached. They were not reserved or passively resentful. “*Va-ta’amodna*” - They stood proudly. They did not slouch. They were not timid. “*Ya-ut*” - They were respectful and reverential. They were not aggressive. They did not rebel, complain, or threaten.

Dr. Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg contrasts their approach with destructive failures of speech throughout *Sefer Bemidbar*. God praises their speech: “Zelophehad’s daughters *speak* correctly.” “This unprecedented divine compliment,” Dr. Zornberg writes, “resonates powerfully toward the end of a book in which so many unhappy acts of speech have been recorded.” She summarizes the aggressive use of words throughout the narratives: “after all the complaints of the people, the verbal fury and distrust, after Moses’ complex failure to speak to the rock, after the Balaam narrative, with its murky projections of the problem of language as benediction and malediction,” and concludes, “after forty years of misspeaking – five sisters achieve an act of *dibbur* that gains a gratified response from God, all the more intense for the misfires of the past. (*Ken*, God says – Yes! At last!)” “Happy is the person whose words the Lord acknowledges,” one midrash reflects on the sisters’ successful approach. Reinforcing their assertive style, several other midrashim elaborate on the

daughters' righteousness and wisdom. Their argument was logical, followed sound exegetical principles, and was fair and moral. They also had a proper sense of timing. They waited to approach Moses specifically when he was expounding these particular laws. Their motivation and values were pure and inspired. In contrast to the spies and the Israelites who wanted to return to Egypt, they desired to dwell in the Promised Land.

In a meta-analysis of data from 63 research studies, Melissa J. Williams and Larissa Z. Tiedens reported that men's aggressive speech and behavior tends to be positively reinforced

and valued in the workplace. Women, however, tend to be socially and financially penalized for even assertive behavior in the workplace ("The Subtle Suspension of Backlash: A Meta-Analysis of Penalties for Women's Implicit and Explicit Dominance Behavior").

Sefer Bemidbar serves as a scathing critique of this culture from both ends. Aggression and dominance should not be promoted as a model to emulate. The proper approach for both men and women, applauded by God, and exemplified by five courageous daughters, is to communicate assertively.

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman is an assistant professor at the Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration, associate faculty at the Sacks-Herenstein Center, the associate rabbi at Kingsway Jewish Center, and the author of Psyched for Torah: Cultivating Character and Well-Being through the Weekly Parsha.

Character Challenge: Identify a situation in which communicating assertively would be beneficial for you or someone you care about.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "...Zelophehad's daughters wanted to have a share in the land, which they were duly granted. This led to the famous comment of Rabbi Ephraim Luntschitz of Prague (1550-1619) on the episode of the spies. Focusing on God's words, 'Send *for yourself* men to spy out the land of Canaan' (Num. 14:2), Luntschitz argued that God was not *commanding* Moses but *permitting* him to send men. God was saying, '*From My perspective, seeing the future, it would have been better to send women, because they love and cherish the land and would never come to speak negatively about it.* However, since you are convinced that these men are worthy and do indeed value the land, I give you permission to go ahead and send them'" ("The Lost Masterpiece," *Covenant & Conversation*).