



A Father's Daughter

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In memory of my father, David Adler.

Daughters of fathers are different from sons.

Daughters, as they grow, do not take on their father's image. A daughter's voice will not deepen into her father's baritone. Her jaw will not sharpen to resemble his, and, in all likelihood, she will not reach his height. Rarely will anyone ever be startled when they encounter her on the street after her father's death, thinking for a moment, because of their resemblance, that they are seeing a ghost.

Inasmuch as inheritance is supposed to provide the illusion of unbroken continuity, of semi-immortality, daughters cannot inherit their fathers. They will almost always be different in ways that sons might be similar.

And yet, it is only after he sees the surprising inheritance of Tzelofhad's daughters that Moshe asks God to appoint his successor:



במדבר כז:טו-יז

¹⁵וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל ה' לֵאמֹר: ¹⁶יִפְקֹד ה' אֱלֹקֵי הָרוּחַת לְכָל בָּשָׂר אִישׁ עַל הָעֵדָה: ¹⁷אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא לִפְנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֹא לִפְנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם וְאֲשֶׁר יְבִיאֵם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה עֵדֶת ה' כְּצֹאן אֲשֶׁר אֵין לָהֶם רֹעֶה:

Bemidbar 27:15-17

¹⁵Moshe spoke to God, saying, ¹⁶“Let God, Source of the breath of all flesh, appoint someone over the community ¹⁷who shall go out before them and come in before them, and who shall take them out and bring them in, so that God’s community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd.”

Moshe is remarkably similar to Tzelofhad. Like Tzelofhad, he is fated to die in the desert. Like Tzelofhad, there is no obvious inheritor for his position.

Bemidbar Rabbah suggests that upon seeing Tzelofhad’s daughters granted an inheritance in their father’s name, Moshe begins to hope that God will decide that Moshe too deserves to have his own children carry on his legacy:

במדבר רבה כא:יד

מה ראה לבקש הדבר הזה אחר סדר נחלות? אלא כיון שירשו בנות צלפחד אביהן, אמר משה: הרי השעה שאתבע בה צרכי. אם הבנות יורשות, בדין הוא שירשו בני את כבודי.

Bemidbar Rabbah 21:15

What did he see that led him to request this matter after the order of inheritance? It was, rather, since Tzelofhad’s daughters inherited from their father, Moses said, “This is the moment for me to demand my needs. If the daughters inherit, it is only right that my sons inherit my prominence.”

Moshe's reasoning seems sound: if Tzelofhad's daughters could inherit his land in order to carry on his memory despite the fact that the Torah had previously only mentioned inheritance by males, surely God will allow Moshe's sons to inherit his position. God's answer, however, is no.

אמר לו הקב"ה: "נוצר תאנה יאכל פריה ושומר אדוניו יכובד" (משלי כז יח) – בניך ישבו להם ולא עסקו בתורה. יהושע הרבה שרתך והרבה חלק לך כבוד והוא היה משכים ומעריב בבית הועד שלך. הוא היה מסדר את הספסלים והוא פורס את המחצלאות. הואיל והוא שרתך בכל כוחו, כדאי הוא שישמש את ישראל.

The Holy One blessed be He said to him: “‘The guardian of a fig tree will eat its fruit’ (Proverbs 27:18)—your sons sat idly and did not engage in Torah study. Yehoshua served you very much and accorded you great honor, and he would come early and stay late at your house of assembly. He would arrange the benches and spread the mats. Because he served you with all his might, he is worthy of serving Israel, as he will not be deprived of his reward.”

This reading of Moshe's story is tragic. What Moshe wants is what any other Jewish patriarch might have: the knowledge that his children will inherit him and carry on his memory by tending the same plot—or in this case: flock—that he did.

But, God explains to Moshe, what Moshe has to pass on is different from every other Jew. Torah is not land, an external legacy. It is not something that can be passed on by virtue of a genetic link. Moshe's sons have not immersed themselves in Torah, and so they cannot inherit Moshe's portion. In this reading, what applies to a father of daughters cannot apply to Moshe, the father of unlearned sons.

Avot de-R. Natan, however, offers a different reading of Moshe's story, one in which Moshe himself recognizes that his sons will not inherit him:

אבות דרבי נתן נוסח א פרק יז

בשעה שראה משה רבינו את בניו שאין בהן תורה שיעמדו בנשיאות אחריו, נתעטף ועמד בתפילה. אמר לפניו: רבש"ע, הודיעני את מי יכנס את מי יצא בראש כל העם הזה ... אמר לו הקב"ה למשה: משה, קח לך את יהושע.

Avot de-R. Natan A chapter 17

When Moshe Rabbeinu saw his sons, who did not have Torah that they should stand in the role after him, he wrapped himself and stood in prayer. He said before God, "Master of the World! Inform me who should enter, who should leave at the head of all this people?" ... The Holy Blessed One said to Moshe, "Moshe, take Yehoshua."

In this reading, Moshe knows that his sons cannot inherit his position. Rather than trying to change that fact, Moshe takes steps to ensure that the Jewish people will be cared for, asking God to give them an appropriate shepherd to lead them once he is gone.

While Avot de-R. Natan offers a more redemptive reading than Bemidbar Rabbah, avoiding the tragedy of Moshe's prayer for his sons being rejected, it leaves Bemidbar Rabbah's question unanswered: why does Moshe's prayer for a successor immediately follow the story of Tzelofhad's daughters? What about his encounter with Tzelofhad's daughters moved Moshe to ask for someone to inherit him?

Perhaps for Avot de-R. Natan what Moshe learns from Tzelofhad's daughters is not, as Bemidbar Rabbah suggests, that children always inherit, but that inheritance can take surprising forms.



Tzelofhad's daughters show Moshe that physical resemblance is not the only thing that matters in inheritance. When they talk about ensuring that their father's name is not forgotten, they make a deeper claim about legacy: it is a person's name that must be remembered and passed on, with all that that implies—values, ideas, teachings. Although a daughter may be different from her father physically, she carries those within her soul as much as a son might.

When Moshe sees Tzelofhad's daughters inherit, perhaps his ability to imagine what his inheritor might look like expands. His sons cannot be his inheritors, but as with Tzelofhad who had no sons, someone else can be.

The jump between being inherited by daughters and being inherited by a non-relative is, of course, massive. Daughters are (usually) biologically related to their fathers, and are (usually) raised by them from birth.

But what Moshe does in asking for an inheritor who will carry on his legacy is an expansion of the principle that Tzelofhad's daughters introduce: inheritance can take many forms, and its animating concern is that the deceased's name—their life, their concerns, their legacy—is not forgotten.

May we all merit inheritors who carry on our names.

May we be worthy inheritors of those whose names we carry.

