

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Pinchas, Numbers, Chapters 25-30

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A Manuscript, a Painting, and a Land

In 1965, a California librarian received a series of items as part of an inheritance from her aunt. One of these items was a trunk that belonged to the librarian's grandfather, James Frasier Gluck, who had himself been a librarian in Buffalo. The trunk sat unexamined in her attic for 25 years; only then, upon it being opened, was a treasure discovered inside: half of the original manuscript of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*. Apparently, as the *New York Times* reported, Twain had bequeathed the manuscript to the Buffalo library, and Gluck had borrowed it. The discovery, complete with parts of the novel that were excised and unpublished, was one of the great literary finds of the century. Paul Needham of Sotheby's reflected that, "This is the most amazing survival imaginable so far as American literature is concerned. . . . The only thing comparable to it I can think of would be an original Shakespeare manuscript."

Now, what is the most striking part of this tale? Is it the fact that a woman, in her attic, made the literary discovery of the century? Or is it the fact that now all sorts of new insight can be achieved from this great American novel, as we can actually see what Twain originally intended? All that is interesting, but what is most striking, most fascinating is that someone was given a trunk she knew was crammed with her grandfather's letters and manuscripts and for over 25 years made no effort to discover her past. For her, what was in the trunk that was truly a treasure was not the Twain manuscript, but everything else, because it came from her grandfather, and it embodied the story of who she was. She had never looked previously: that is what, as Jews, we should be shocked by. The inheritance of her family was of little value to her, allowing her to overlook the cultural treasure that was waiting to be found.

We bear this in mind as we approach our *parashah*, which, rightly understood, is all about inheritance. And it is only when we see how this is so that we further understand that what is seemingly the most tragic aspect of our *parashah* is, rightly understood, linked to one of the most triumphant and wondrous aspects of Jewish history.

Our reading opens with Pinchas, grandson of Aaron, whose actions when much of Israel embraced paganism led to the lifting of a plague. A reward is bestowed upon him:

Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace; and it shall be to him, and to his descendants after him, the covenant of a perpetual priesthood; because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the people of Israel. (Numbers 25:12-13)

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It is not clear what exactly is being bequeathed here, but it is certain that it is an inheritance—for Pinchas and for “his descendants after him.” For some, such as Rashi (France, 1040–1105), this means that originally Pinchas, though a descendant of Aaron, was not designated for the priesthood, and suddenly has it bestowed upon him and his descendants. According to other exegetes, such as Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain, ca. 1089–1164), Pinchas was already a *kohen*, a member of the priestly caste, but is now guaranteed that by and large the high priests would descend from him.

Once the theme of inheritance appears, another story of inheritance soon follows. As the Israelites prepare to enter and divide the Promised Land, a group of sisters whose father, Zelophehad, has died without sons—facing the prospect that their father’s designated plot in the sacred soil will go to others, rather than to them, and that their father would thus have no legacy in the Holy Land—protest to Moses:

At the heart of this [story of Zelophehad’s daughters’] inheritance is a deep sense of connection to the Land of Israel.

And they stood before Moses, and before Eleazar the priest, and before the leaders and all the congregation, at the door of the tent of meeting, saying, Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who

gathered themselves together against the Lord in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his family, because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brethren. (Numbers 27:2-4)

Moses turns to God, Who in turn assents to their request, decreeing that they will inherit their father’s estate in the Holy Land.

At the heart of this second story of inheritance is a deep sense of connection to the Land of Israel. In reflecting on this story, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes that these righteous women are to be contrasted with Israelites whom we have seen in previous readings, who did not cherish their own portions in the Promised Land:

The Sages spoke of Zelophehad’s daughters in the highest praise. They were, they said, very wise and chose the right time to present their request. They knew how to interpret Scripture, and they were perfectly virtuous. Even more consequentially, their love of the land of Israel was in striking contrast to that of the men. The spies had come back with a negative report about the land, and the people had said, “Let us appoint a [new] leader and return to Egypt” (Num. 14:4). But Zelophehad’s daughters wanted to have a share in the land, which they were duly granted.

Zelophehad’s daughters refer to their father dying “for his own sin.” There are many ways to understand this, but the simple explanation may be that he died with the previous generation that had spurned the special gift that was the Promised Land. Those Jews, Rabbi Sacks further reflects,

lost their chance to enjoy their inheritance in the land promised to their ancestors. The daughters of



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Zelophehad, by contrast, did inherit the land—because they loved it. What we love, we inherit. What we fail to love, we lose.

This, of course, is exactly the lesson of the Mark Twain manuscript: in Rabbi Sacks' words, "What we love, we inherit," and "What we fail to love, we lose." Rabbi Sacks, in turn, applies this teaching to another tale of a lost cultural treasure: not a novel, but a painting, one about which I have also written, and whose story is worth briefly revisiting. During World War II, an eccentric Englishman by the name of Ernest Onians made a fortune with his invention of Tottenham pudding, a form of pigswill produced from waste food. Having amassed his millions, Onians became an art collector, purchasing canvases at country fairs and garage sales and accumulating some 500 works in all. On his death in the early 1990s, his heirs consigned the whole lot to Sotheby's, which rushed out a catalogue on the assumption that none of the paintings was especially valuable.

One image in the catalogue, depicting the destruction of an ancient city and an army bearing loot out of a building in flames, happened to catch the eye of the art historian Denis Mahon. The painting had been identified by Sotheby's as *The Sack of Carthage*, a work by the minor artist Pietro Testa, and was listed at the suggested price of £15,000.



Looking carefully, however, Sir Denis, an expert in the art of the great French Baroque painter Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), suspected that Sotheby's attribution was incorrect. What might have tipped him off was that among the looted objects was a menorah—which meant that the city wasn't Carthage after all. Or perhaps he noticed the picture's striking similarity to a 1638 painting by Poussin titled *The Conquest of Jerusalem by Emperor Titus*.



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Mahon's intuition clued him in to the greatest art discovery of the 20th century. In 1626, Poussin had created an earlier rendition of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Roman general Titus. That work, commissioned by a nephew of the pope, had been given as a gift to Cardinal Richelieu but then repeatedly changed hands and became lost. Now, once Sotheby's canvas was cleaned, Mahon's hunch was confirmed; he had identified a Poussin, *The Destruction and Sack of the Temple of Jerusalem*, that, lost for 300 years, was now worth millions.

Onians' heirs were too quick to unload the painting that belonged to their predecessor and in the end, their treasure was lost. For Rabbi Sacks, this story of the long-lost painting is the mirror image of that of Zelophehad's daughters. Reflecting on the Poussin, he writes,

I know this story only because, at Lord Rothschild's request, I together with the then director of the national gallery, Neil MacGregor, gave a lecture on the painting while it was shown briefly in London before being taken to its new and permanent home. I tell the story because it is so graphic an example of the fact that we can lose a priceless legacy simply because, not loving it, we do not come to appreciate its true value. From this we can infer a corollary: we inherit what we truly love. . . .

The life-changing idea here is surely simple yet profound: if we truly wish to hand on our legacy to our children, we must teach them to love it. The most important element of any education is not learning facts or skills but learning what to love. What we love, we inherit. What we fail to love, we lose.

Only after we understand the lesson of this biblical tale of Zelophehad's daughters can we appreciate the painful poignancy of what immediately follows:



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The Lord said to Moses, Go up into this mountain of Abarim, and see the land which I have given to the people of Israel. And when you have seen it, you also shall be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was gathered. (Numbers 27:12–13)

We have, then, one of the most seemingly tragic scenes in the entire Torah: a leader who is denied his dream of entering the Promised Land, and is only allowed to see it from afar. Moses follows up this command with a request of his own: that God appoint a successor. Given the theme of inheritance thus far, the request, and the ultimate appointment of Joshua, is rendered all the more emotionally weighty given the fact that—as Rabbi Sacks himself notes in another essay—unlike Aaron, Moses does not bequeath an inheritance to his sons, in the sense that they do not inherit his leadership role. But there is, of course, another element to this tale that is poignant as well: because of the previous story, we are agonizingly aware of the fact that like Zelophehad’s daughters, Moses, too, loves the land so: but he, unlike them, will never step into it.

In a certain sense, this scene is also about inheritance—national, rather than personal. In looking longingly and lovingly at the land that he could not enter, but sustained by the knowledge of a future generation living in it, Moses became a role model for Jews centuries later who themselves were prevented from entering the land but could still visualize their descendants building their lives in the land once again. Moses was not the only one prevented from entering the land but looking lovingly toward it: countless Jews, in their own way, imitated his example, reflecting the yearning that he illustrated, as well as the yearning of the daughters of Zelophehad. Meanwhile, the Temple offerings described in the last chapter of our *parashah* became the framework of the Jewish liturgy throughout the generations, so that not only the land, but Jerusalem, and its sacred mountain of God, remained alive in Jewish hearts.

All this, of course, set the stage for a miraculous return. In its discussion of the Mark Twain manuscript, the *New York Times* quotes an official at the Buffalo library, who, grateful for the discovery of the missing half of the original novel, pondered the man who had borrowed it and said, “If Gluck forgot to return this overdue book, we are prepared to forgive him.”

It is indeed a marvelous story, but not nearly so marvelous as the story of a land lost to a people and then restored; and this occurred because it was never emotionally lost at all.

If, as Rabbi Sacks noted, inheritance is linked to love, and to imparting that love to the next generation, then the story of the Jews’ love of their inheritance in the land is the greatest illustration of this phenomenon.

We have just begun the three-week period in which the Jewish people annually mourn the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Temple—the events that Poussin’s painting depicts. And as we do so, we can also ponder the won-

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der of the Jewish people's inheritance, and the way that Moses' own message was vindicated. Today, the Poussin painting hangs in the Israel Museum; a famous depiction of the destruction of Jerusalem hangs in a Jewish Jerusalem. In the midst of all the stunning historical events that have occurred in recent months, none are as astonishing as a fact which we are apt to take for granted: that one day after these three weeks of mourning began, one day after Jews marked the breaching of ancient Jerusalem by an ancient foe, a prime minister addressed Congress as a representative of a Jewish state reborn, built by a people that never forgot a land. Much like in the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, the Jews' love of the land itself allowed for a divinely decreed inheritance that defied all destruction. And that—in our trying and turbulent time—remains a source of absolute wonder.

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May the merit of our study together bring a swift victory to the Jewish people.

Additional Resources

The Discovery of a Mark Twain Manuscript, "First Half of 'Huck Finn,' in Twain's Hand, Is Found," *New York Times*, February 14, 1991. [Click here to read.](#)

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on Love and Inheritance, "The Lost Masterpiece," July 2018. [Click here to read.](#)

