

**When Women Cry Out**  
***Shabbat Matot-Mas'ei 5784***

August 2, 2024

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*Content notice: Toward the end of this talk, I discuss sexual violence.*

Rabbi Mary Zamore, Executive Director of the Women's Rabbinic Network, is the leading authority on gender pay equity in Jewish organizations. She's an expert advocate for parental and family leave and a sought-after speaker about clergy sexual misconduct. Moreover, she has edited two anthologies—*The Sacred Table*, about diverse Jewish approaches to ethical eating, and *The Sacred Exchange: Creating a Jewish Money Ethic*.

Rabbi Zamore was surprised, then, to receive an invitation to speak on a panel about Israel. Yes, she's a progressive Zionist rabbi who cares deeply about Israel; but Israel is not among her many and varied areas of expertise. Still, Rabbi Zamore knew why she was invited. The Israel advocacy organization that contacted her had been criticized for repeatedly constructing expert panels only of men—"manels," we call them. They hoped to balance that with one panel made up entirely of women.

Rabbi Zamore suggested a different approach—integrating women into panels about Israel more generally, not only on all-female panels about Israeli women's issues. Rabbi Zamore's expertise includes knowing a great deal about how women's voices have often been silenced or disregarded, and she possesses expansive rosters of women with authoritative knowledge on countless Jewish topics. A plethora of women are experts on Zionism and Israel, so Rabbi Zamore was able to suggest more than a few to the organization whose invitation she felt compelled to decline. Rabbi Zamore writes, "Spoiler alert, claiming that there are no female [or nonbinary] experts available is never true, and therefore not a valid excuse for convening a manel."<sup>i</sup>

In last week's portion, women were seen and heard in ways that are unusual for the Torah. Five daughters of a man named Tzelophechad approach Moses after their father's death. Their father has left no son, and no provision existed for women to inherit. The daughters are named, which is unusual for Torah. Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirza ask that their father's property become theirs.

Moses is uncharacteristically flummoxed. He goes directly to God, asking what to do. God answers: The plea of the daughters is just! When a man dies

leaving daughters but no son, the daughters inherit.<sup>ii</sup> A small step forward in the history of women's rights.

This week, though, an objection is raised by the daughters' relatives—that is, men who would likely have inherited Tzelophechad's property if women had remained ineligible heirs. Their complaint? If the daughters marry men of different tribes, the inheritance will ultimately be lost to their clan.

This time, the daughters' voices are not heard. And this time, Moses does **not** take the question to God. Having apparently silenced the very women whose outcry God had ruled just, Moses restricts their rights, ruling that daughters who inherit “may marry anyone they like”—anyone within their own clan, that is.<sup>iii</sup>

Women are harmed when their voices are not heard. If female experts aren't considered when panels are assembled, all women's professional opportunities are attenuated. Tzelophechad's daughter's right to marry is limited. Additional examples abound.

Americans for too long did not heed women who credibly claimed sexual misconduct at the hands of men in power. Progressives looked the other way to protect a President we otherwise admired, delaying a national reckoning for two decades. Imagine how many victims could have been spared between the late 1990s and 2017, if only we had not tolerated President Clinton's sexual misconduct but had put all powerful men on notice instead. Only a few years earlier, conservatives had done the same in support of a Supreme Court nominee whose ideology they shared. Justice Thomas's misogyny and manufactured victimhood have harmed women across three decades and counting.

Sometimes, whole societies are harmed when women's voices are silenced or belittled. Sometimes, people die.

In January, I told you about a report in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, that the soldiers who repeatedly warned that “something unusual was happening” on the Gaza border were women. These women are “spotters,” a role that *Haaretz* explains, “involves staring at a screen for hours on end, studying surveillance cameras for untoward activities.” The Hebrew term for a spotter is *tatzpanit*, a feminine word, indicating that “Nowadays, only women perform the task.” After October 7, these *tatzpaniot* were enraged. “During their years of military service, they say they've grown accustomed to the fact that they ‘don't count.’” No “notice was given to the repeated warnings they raised before Hamas' infiltration on Black Saturday. Warnings that, it seems to them, were going in one IDF earpiece and out the other. These included reports about Hamas' preparations near the border fence,

its drone activity in recent months, its efforts to knock out cameras, the extensive use of vans and motorcycles, and even rehearsals for the shelling of tanks.”<sup>iv</sup>

Once again, women were badly harmed when women were ignored—yes, among the murdered and abducted—and uniquely, as women, victimized by sexual assault committed against them by Hamas terrorists.

The United Nations was not talking about Israeli victims when it reported, “According to UN Action Against Sexual Violence in Conflict... Women...can face devastating forms of sexual violence, which are sometimes deployed systematically to achieve military or political objectives. Rape committed during war is often intended to terrorize the population, break up families, and, in some instances, change the ethnic make-up of the next generation.”<sup>v</sup>

Sexual violence is also a method of exhibiting power. The terrorist effectively proclaims, “I can dominate you completely.” Sheryl Sandberg’s devastatingly effective film, *Screams before Silence*, which can be viewed at no charge on YouTube, demonstrates that victims of sexual violence are often murdered after they are violated. Their screams were heard by terrified Israelis nearby, but then these women were silenced forever.

That silence was compounded when much of the world denied or downplayed the sexual violence of October 7. Letty Cottin Pogrebin laments, “Some people are in denial; rapes didn’t happen, they say; Israel faked the numbers. Others accept the facts but are chillingly dismissive of victims, calling them the unavoidable byproduct of a noble rebellion. These apologists sugarcoat Hamas’ heinous acts with the honeyed balm of ‘national liberation’ or the slippery rhetoric of ‘popular resistance.’”<sup>vi</sup>

When women cry out, but are ignored, the consequences can be horrific—and, in this case, turn a conflict upside down. Pogrebin explains, “[A]s a Jew and as a woman, I refuse to let Hamas’ brutal assault on Israeli women and girls be forgotten in the fog of war. I feel obligated to describe every violent act committed by Hamas on Jewish female bodies, lest the erasure of the unpleasant ‘details’ facilitate the terrorists’ campaign to rebrand themselves as ‘freedom fighters.’”<sup>vii</sup>

As our journey through the Book of Numbers draws to its close this Shabbat, let us commit ourselves to hearing the voices of women, just as God does, proclaiming: “The plea of Tzelophechad’s daughters is just.”<sup>viii</sup> We won’t always get it exactly right. Even Moses doesn’t. And yet, if we will listen, we will hear. We will learn. We will be better prepared to act and to build a just future.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> My telling of this vignette is based on phone conversations and emails between Rabbi Zamore and me and on her article, “‘Manels’—Why Are We Still Discussing This,” Rabbi Zamore’s Women’s Rabbinic Network Report in the *CCAR Newsletter*, July-August 2024, p. 7, [https://www.ccarnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/OL\\_July-August-2024-newsletter-8-one-up.pdf](https://www.ccarnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/OL_July-August-2024-newsletter-8-one-up.pdf).

<sup>ii</sup> Numbers 27:1-8.

<sup>iii</sup> Numbers 36:1-12.

<sup>iv</sup> Yaniv Kubovich, “The Women Soldiers Who Warned of a Pending Hamas Attack—and Were Ignored,” *Haaretz*, November 20, 2023, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-20/ty-article-magazine/.premium/the-women-soldiers-who-warned-of-a-pending-hamas-attack-and-were-ignored/0000018b-ed76-d4f0-affb-eff740150000>.

<sup>v</sup> Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations, “Sexual Violence: a Tool of War,”

<https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/pdf/bgsexualviolence.pdf>.

<sup>vi</sup> Letty Cottin Pogrebin, “Don’t Look Away from the Sexual Brutality of October 7,” *Lilith*, February 15, 2024, <https://lilith.org/articles/dont-look-away-from-the-sexual-brutality-of-october-7/>.

<sup>vii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>viii</sup> Numbers 27:7.