

Nine Women, Four Kinds of Courage

The Hidden Women of Parshat Pinchas

A Shabbos Teaching for Women

Opening: Count the Women

Parshat Pinchas is named for a man with a spear. But the parasha is quietly full of women. By my count, it names **nine** of them. The Torah rarely names women at all; here it names nine. Five of them it names *twice*. When the Torah repeats a name, it is asking us to look.

ASK So who are the nine?

ANSWER: In the order they appear:

- **Kozbi** the Midianite princess (ch. 25)
- **Machlah, No'ah, Choglah, Milkah, and Tirtzah** the five daughters of Tzlafchad (ch. 27, again in ch. 36)
- **Serach bat Asher** one name inside the census (ch. 26)
- **Yocheved** and **Miriam** named together in a single verse (26:59)

Why does this parsha name 9 women - and 5 women twice? What can we learn from this? That's where I would like to spend our time today. To do so, we will work through 3 questions.

1. What is the significance of Kozbi and Miriam being the first and last women named, respectively, and both being called out as "sisters"?
2. What are we meant to learn from the acts of the Tzlafchad sisters? And why are they named twice?
3. Why is Serach the only woman named in the entire census?

Question #1 What is the significance of Kozbi and Miriam being the first and last women named, respectively, and both being called out as "sisters"?

The *first* woman named in the parasha is Kozbi. The *last* is Miriam. These two are bookends — and the Torah ties them together with a single shared word - sisters. Let's start with Kozbi - So who is Kozbi? [state she was the one cavorting with Zimri in public and was slain by Pinhas alongside Zimri]

“Kozbi, the daughter of the prince of Midian, **their sister**, who was slain on the day of the plague in the matter of Peor. (1917 JPS, 25:15).

Note if asked: אֲחֹתָם (achotam) — “their sister,” from the root נִינָח

Kozbi is the only woman in the parasha named for what she *represents* - her name is built on a root meaning “to deceive.”

So what is the deceit? Our sage the Arizal says that Kozbi is associated with the image of the seductive woman, Lilith (who is connected to “the first Eve”). [speak to the implied seduction of Zimri by Kozbi, etc.]

But I would like to offer a different view - notably, when speaking of how Kozbi came to be in the Israelite camp, in last week’s parsha it says:

“...Just then a certain Israelite man came and **brought** a Midianite woman over to his companions...” (JPS 2023, 25:6)

The text does not say she acted. It says she **was brought**. Kozbi is but a pawn in a the game of two leaders - the leader of the Midianites and Zimri - a leader amongst the Israelites.

[PAUSE]

Now hold that against the parasha’s final verse, where Miriam is named — also, and unusually, as “**their sister**”:

“The name of Amram’s wife was Yocheved daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt; and she bore to Amram Aaron and Moses and their sister Miriam.” Numbers 26:59 (JPS / Sefaria translation).

Of all nine women, only these two — the first and the last — are identified as somebody’s *sister*. I found an article written by a modern day authority on Jewish Mysticism Rabbi Yitzak Ginsburg. He argues that Miriam is the **tikkun** — the rectification — of Kozbi. Same feminine power; opposite direction. Kozbi’s is associated with the drum of seduction; Miriam takes up a drum too, but hers leads a nation in song at the sea.

So the parsha opens with feminine power misused and closes with feminine power sanctified. I’d like to argue that every woman in between is part of the journey from one to the other - and is written about to teach us something about the power of femininity, the power of women. And this brings us to question #2.

Question #2

What are we meant to learn from the acts of the Tzafchad sisters?
And why are they named twice?

Machlah, No'ah, Choglah, Milkah, Tirtzah — Numbers 27:1–7

The Tzafchad sisters are the heart of the parasha. Five sisters approach Moses, Elazar the priest, the chieftains, and the entire community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and make a claim for which there is no legal precedent:

“Our father died in the wilderness... and he has left no sons. Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father’s kinsmen.” And Moses brought their case before the LORD. And the LORD said to Moses: “The plea of Tzafchad’s daughters is just; you shall give them a hereditary holding among their father’s kinsmen.” Numbers 27:1–7 (JPS / Sefaria translation), abridged.

They did not argue the law was wrong. They did not demand a revolution. They said: *we have a CLAIM, and we are bringing it forward.* They trusted that a true claim, brought honestly, would be heard — even when there was no mechanism to receive it. They had the courage to CLAIM what was rightfully theirs.

God does not only grant their request. He turns it into permanent law for all future generations. Their courage to dare to CLAIM does not just help them. It changes the Torah and the rights of women to this day.

NOW , what can we learn from the 2nd time the sisters are mentioned?

The Daughters Again: The Courage to Accept

Numbers 36 (the bookend to their story)

The sisters return at the very end of the book of Numbers. The tribal leaders worry that if the daughters marry outside the tribe, their inherited land will transfer away. A condition is set: they must marry within their father’s tribe. And they comply.

“Tzafchad’s daughters — Machlah, Tirtzah, Choglah, Milkah, and No’ah — were married to sons of their uncles... and their share remained in the tribe of their father’s clan.” Numbers 36:10–12 (JPS / Sefaria translation), abridged

Some read this as a limitation. Look again. They are *still inheriting*. They have permanently altered the law. They accept one condition — and keep everything essential.

The courage here: Knowing when to press fully, and when to accept a framework that preserves what matters most. The first time, courage looked like pushing. The second time, it looked like wisdom.

Discussion prompt: Two times the sisters are mentioned - once they demonstrate the courage to claim, and the next the courage to accept. What can we take from this? What are the sisters teaching us?

My answer: it's all about choice - the courage, the power is in the choice. In each case, the daughters acted - either to claim or to accept. Unlike Korzbi who had not agency, who was brought to her ultimate end, the sisters show us what's possible when women CHOOSE TO ACT.

Question #3 Why is Serach the only woman named in the entire census?

Serach bat Asher: The Courage to Endure

Numbers 26:46

In the middle of a census that counts fighting men, there is one anomaly — a single daughter, listed for no stated reason:

“And the name of Asher’s daughter was Serach.” Numbers 26:46 (JPS / Sefaria translation).

That’s the whole verse. One woman, in a sea of male names, simply because she is *still there*. The midrash tells us Serach was already ancient — alive since the descent to Egypt, the one who gently broke the news to Jacob that Joseph was alive, finding the words that wouldn’t kill him with shock. She reappears across Jewish history as the keeper of memory. (*Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 13a; Exodus Rabbah 5:13; Genesis Rabbah 94:9. Serach is named among those who went down to Egypt (Gen. 46:17) and again here*)

What made her brave: Not a single dramatic act. Endurance. Staying. Remembering. Being present across generations so the chain of memory wouldn’t break. She continued to step forward - to be counted, despite the odds. She chose to ENDURE.

Discussion prompt: *Who in your family’s history is the Serach — the one who endured, who kept the memory, who was simply still there? What did their staying make possible for you?*

BONUS *if time* Courage #4 — Yocheved and Miriam: The Courage to Raise and to Lead

Numbers 26:59

We end where the parasha's list of women ends — the single verse that names both Yocheved and Miriam (26:59, quoted above). Two women, mother and daughter, in one line.

Yocheved is named here as the one who *bore* the three leaders of the generation. Her courage is the quiet, foundational kind: she brought a redeemer into a world that had ordered his death, and she raised him. Without the woman who raises, there is no one to lead.

Miriam closes the circle the parasha opened with Kozbi. Where Kozbi's power pulled a nation toward ruin, Miriam's pulls it toward redemption:

"Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took a drum in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with drums. And Miriam chanted for them: Sing to the LORD..."[10]

The courage here: To raise the future (Yocheved) and to lead it in song (Miriam).

Discussion prompt: *Whose future are you raising? And where are you being called to pick up the drum and lead others where you cannot go alone?*

Closing:

Nine women. One movement from misused power to holy power, and five forms of courage along the way:

- **Kozbi → Miriam** — the frame: feminine strength turned from harm to holiness
- **The daughters of Tzafachad** — the courage to CLAIM what is yours when no mechanism exists and the courage to ACCEPT accept wisely
- **Serach** — the courage to ENDURE, to stay, to keep the memory
- **Yocheved and Miriam** — the courage to RAISE THE FUTURE and LEAD it in song

The parasha is named for Pinchas, who acted in a single burning moment. But its nine women teach something he could not: **courage has many shapes**. Some are loud. Some are five sisters standing before the whole community. Some are one name in a census.

Closing bracha:

My bracha for each of you is this: whether you choose to claim, accept, endure, or lead - to raise the next generation, or to build something entirely your own - may you always remember to CHOOSE.

That power was denied to Kozbi. It was seized, deliberately and courageously, by the Tzlofed sisters, by Serach, by Yocheved and by Miriam. Our matriarchs did not wait to be given a voice. They CHOSE it.

May we merit to carry their legacy forward - to trust that Hashem has placed the power of choice in our hands for a reason, and that through every choice we make, we fulfill a piece of the purpose He set before us.