



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Pinchas 5771

By Shira Fischer

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In many biblical stories, women are not named. While we know her salty fate, we never learn the name of Lot's wife; and despite her central role in the Joseph story, Potiphar's wife remains nameless. However, five women—Machla, Noa, Chogla, Milka and Tirtza—are named in *Parshat Pinchas* and again and again in the bible. These sisters, known as the “daughters of Tz'lofchad,” stand out by standing up for what they see as an injustice towards themselves and all women: the biblical law that lets sons inherit land but not daughters. To their credit—and to his—Moshe takes their concern seriously and raises the issue with God, who modifies the law to include daughters.¹ The revised law is still not fair or equal—as sisters and aunts are not permitted to inherit, and inheriting women are required to marry within their tribe—but it is a substantial improvement on the original.

In much of the world, there has not been significant progress in women's rights since Machla and her sisters stood up for their inheritance. But this may soon change. In fact, in *Half the Sky*, their 2009 book on the oppression of women, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn write: “In the nineteenth century, the central moral challenge was slavery. In the twentieth century, it was the battle against totalitarianism. We believe that in this century the paramount moral challenge will be the struggle for gender equality around the world.”²

One critical aspect of this struggle that is playing out today is the fight to curb physical violence against women. Abuse of women takes place worldwide, but it is more pervasive in places where women are poor and undereducated, like India. There, a crime against a woman occurs every three minutes; a woman is raped every 29 minutes; and a case of cruelty by a husband or relative occurs every nine minutes.³

Contemporary Indian “daughters of Tz'lofchad” have been hard at work to change this. Drafts of bills aimed to protect women from violence have been in the works since 1992, and some progress has been made since then. A version of an Indian anti-violence law was proposed in 2001 that, like the ruling in our *parshah*, was better than no law at all, but it still had various flaws; for example, it only criminalized violence inflicted by husbands. In 2005, the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act was passed, improving on the previous versions by including abuse by boyfriends, mothers-in-law and other actors, and by outlawing violence against women by the husband's family to extract larger dowries. The law also provides abused women with a share of the abuser's property and salary.⁴

But despite its good intentions, this legislation has not stopped widespread abuse of women in India, and women are still fighting for their safety.⁵ The persistence of this epidemic indicates that laws alone aren't sufficient to stop this

¹ Numbers 27:7.

² Kristof, Nicholas and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009. p. xvii.

³ Bryer, Hope and Kathryn Viguier. “Women Leaders Combating Violence Against Women in India.” *IMPACTblog*, United States Agency for International Development (USAID), 3 December 2010. <http://blog.usaid.gov/2010/12/women-leaders-combatting-violence-against-women-in-india/>

⁴ “World Briefing | Asia: India: Domestic Abuse Law Takes Effect.” *New York Times*, 27 October 2006. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9805E1DE153FF934A15753C1A9609C8B63>

⁵ Roy, Nilanjana S. “Fighting for Safe Passage on Indian Streets.” *New York Times*, 3 August 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/04/world/asia/04iht-letter.html>

deeply ingrained practice. A cultural shift is necessary—even among women themselves, many of whom believe that violence is part of their lot in life. Indeed, one survey showed that 56 percent of Indian women believed wife beating to be justified in certain circumstances.⁶ As women’s groups said in 2006 to the BBC: “A bill alone will not help in preventing domestic abuse; what is needed is a change in mind sets.”⁷ The persistence of violence targeted against women may also stem from a lack of education about the law or lack of effective enforcement by the government. Urvashi Butalia, a prominent Indian feminist scholar and historian, writing about the inability of laws to curb rape in India, put it thus: “Laws that relate to violence against women... are, in the eyes of the state, best forgotten or not bothered about.”⁸ Making women’s rights a priority in the eyes of the government and in the lives of both India’s men and women would go a long way in this struggle to end the culture of violence.

In the meantime, many Indian NGOs are tackling this problem on a communal level, working to end violence by helping individual girls in a wide range of ways. One Mumbai organization, Awaaz-e-Niswaan (AEN), helps young women to leave abusive relationships and provides them scholarships to return to school, knowing the important role education can play in avoiding becoming a victim of violence.

Ramlah, one young woman that AEN has worked with, was married at 14 and in search of a divorce from her abusive husband at 15. The organization helped her achieve the divorce by age 17, taught her skills through its educational and vocational programs, and helped her secure a job. Ramlah eventually saved enough money to buy her own house, and she remarried at 30, this time by choice.

Those who perpetrate violence against girls like Ramlah attempt to relegate women to the margins, taking away their freedom, security and dignity. But grassroots organizations like AEN help women speak out; help them—like Machla, Tirtza, Chogla, Milka and Noa—make a name for themselves by refusing to be silent in the face of injustice. By knowing their names and retelling their stories, we carry these women’s work forward and help pursue its just completion. Whether this means supporting local organizations that advocate for women or lobbying our own government to make human rights for women and girls a diplomatic priority, we too must stand up and demand a fair and equal share for women.



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⁶ “India tackles domestic violence.” *BBC News*, 26 October 2006. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6086334.stm

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Roy, Nilanjana S. “For Indian Rape Laws, Change Is Slow to Come.” *New York Times*, 21 September 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/22/world/asia/22iht-letter.html>

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