

The Teeter-Totter and the Daughters of Zelophehad – Mattot-Massey 5781

There's a wonderful book, published decades ago, by Robert Fulghum, titled, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Wash your hands before you eat. Live a balanced life—learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some. Take a nap every afternoon.

This advice takes me back. I remember the games in the play yard: hopscotch, handball, hide and seek, and the teeter-totter. I loved all of these, but as I look back, one of the games I think was especially meaningful was the teeter-totter.

There was the physics of it – I was very light, and a heavier teeter-totter partner would have to sit on the board closer to the center, and I would sit as far back as I could. And it was important to pick a teeter-totter partner who wouldn't just get off and run away when he or she was done, leaving the other to fall to the ground, but rather, make sure to hold the board for one another so each could dismount safely. There's a decision-making process for the experienced teeter-totter-er. Can I trust this person? Should I say "no" to this person? And the benefit is the brilliant, beautiful feeling of rising into the air, and coming back down for a moment, that wonderful feeling of balance and gliding, a certain harmony that is well-earned for each teeter-totter-er.

Sometimes we can catch a glimpse of a teeter-totter moment in Torah.

A few weeks ago we met the daughters of Zelophehad, who spoke to Moses and made their case – their father had died in the wilderness, and left no sons, but the five daughters, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah watched as the apportionment of the Promised land was being made to the males in each of the tribes. They said, "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!"¹ Moses brings the case before God, who says, כִּן בְּנֹת צֶלְפְּחָדֹר הַבְּרִית "the plea of Zelophehad's daughters is just: you should give them a hereditary holding among their father's

¹ Numbers 27:4

kinsmen; transfer their father's share to them."² God further instructs that this is to be a law whenever a man leaves no sons to inherit.

This is great – an impressive law in a time when women in most cultures were chattel, the laws of the Israelites acknowledged the status and inheritance rights of women.

It is also of note that the daughters approached with a reasonable question and request, with the interests of their father's name at the forefront of their reasoning.

And then we get to this week's portion.

The family heads in the tribe of Manasseh (one of the sons of Joseph), the same tribe as Zelophehad come forward with a concern and appeal to Moses: "Now, if they (the daughters of Zelophehad) marry persons from another Israelite tribe, their share will be cut off from our ancestral portion and be added to the portion of the tribe into which they marry; thus our allotted portion will be diminished."³

And here as well, we see the response:

כֵּן מֵטָה בְּנֵי-יוֹסֵף דְּבָרִים "The plea of the Josephite tribe is just."⁴

Like two children on a teeter-totter, each have a case, and they teeter back and forth. Each case is made with care, with thought to their family and their tribe, and each time one seems to go up, winning their case – it would seem that the other side loses – but not true, it is the other's turn to rise in harmony in the process.

God resolves the second argument, saying the plea of the Josephite tribe is just – and says: "Every daughter among the Israelite tribes who inherits a share must marry someone from a clan of her father's tribe, in order that every Israelite may keep his ancestral share. Thus no inheritance shall pass over from one tribe to another, but the Israelite tribes shall remain bound each to its portion."⁵

And that is exactly what the daughters of Zelophehad did.

² Numbers 27:7

³ Numbers 36:3

⁴ Numbers 36:5

⁵ Numbers 36:8-9

No one left the argument in a huff. No one got off the teeter-totter and left the other to fall. Each made a cogent argument without anger, without a win-lose attitude.

Life can be like a teeter-totter. We cannot just leave the game because we think we're done. We have to make sure those on the other side of the game are okay too.

Teeter-totter is a win-win game. Both benefit. In the case of the tribe of Manasseh and Zelophehad's daughters, both win.

Dr. Stephen R. Covey writes, win-win sees life as a cooperative arena, not a competitive one. Win-win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. Win-win means agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial and satisfying. It is a collaboration rather than competition.

Three character traits are vital in those with a win-win attitude:

1. Integrity: sticking with your true feelings, values, and commitments
2. Maturity: expressing your ideas and feelings with courage and consideration for the ideas and feelings of others
3. Abundance mentality: believing there is plenty for everyone

Each of these elements are worth examining further, but we can see elements of each of these in the cases brought by Zelophehad's daughters, and the tribe of Manasseh, to which God responded, their case is just.

When one plays on a teeter totter, the joy of soaring upwards is both given and received. We give and we receive. It is a development of character in which there is no win-lose, but rather, a win-win, in which all benefit.

May we be blessed with the abundance of Shabbat, and the blessing of one another. May we give and receive joy. מי ייתן וניתן ולקבל שמחה

Shabbat shalom,

Rabbi Lisa Bock

