

Five Sisters with a Just Cause

*“Then the daughters of Zelophehad came forward”
(Numbers 27:1).*

Do you know the story of Zelophehad’s daughters? The Bible depicts them as five sisters who find themselves in a perilous economic situation. Because they do not have husbands or any living male relatives, they cannot inherit their father’s land. Through a successful appeal to Moses they draw attention to the injustice and bring about a permanent change in the Israelites’ legal code.

Read the story of the five sisters in Numbers 27:1-11. Then, with the help of traditional Jewish wisdom—with all its creativity and attention to detail— let’s ponder the sacred text.

Perhaps you noticed that, like their ancestors (v.1), each sister is introduced by name: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.

Note, too, how they plead their cause. It is before the whole assembly (v.2). They clarify that their father was not part of the Korah rebellion (v.3). They appeal on account of kinship and their father’s honour (v.4). Their choice of words is bold (‘Give to us a possession’) and not couched in self-effacing language. With prayerful and imaginative attention to God’s word, what wisdom do you uncover in this ancient text?

In Jewish storytelling traditions we find these five women held in high esteem. A famous midrashic anthology (*Yalkut Shimoni*) observes that the sisters correctly identified an injustice in its deepest sense:

“When the daughters of Zelophehad heard that the Land was being divided among the tribes—but only for males, not for females—they gathered and took counsel. They decided that...flesh and blood is apt to be more merciful to males than to females. But He who spoke and the world came into being is different—His mercies are for males as well as females...”¹

Rashi comments: “Their eye saw that which the eye of Moses did not see.”²

In Midrash Rabbah and in the Talmud we find the rabbis praising the five sisters for the way they approached their petition. The sisters are knowledgeable in the law (v.5 tells us that Moses brings to the Lord their ‘case’ or ‘judgment’, not just their query), and they are practical, timing their petition as Moses engages with the subject of inheritance.

“They were wise and righteous women. What shows their wisdom? They spoke at the appropriate moment...”³

Likewise, they are praised for their integrity. In case you were wondering why none of them were married at the time of the petition, the sages tell us: they were uncompromising in their high standards!

“They were righteous inasmuch as they married none but such as were worthy of them.”⁴

Rashi adds that they “held the land precious” just as their ancestor Joseph held the land precious (see Num. 27:1; Gen. 50:25).

“The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying” (Num. 27:7). Emphatic divine approval results in a legacy of land for the sisters and an altered law for Israel.

As you continue to explore, probe and question this passage, discuss: How might it speak to us about the respectful and transformative interchanges that are possible between community members and their leaders in the quest for fullness of truth and justice?

1. See Bialik & Ravnitzky, 97.

2. Rashi: revered 11th century Torah scholar, France.

3. Num. R. xxi, 11. Also, Bava Batra 119b.

4. Num. R. xxi, 11.

Bibliography: Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds., *Sefer Ha-Aggadah* (New York, 1992); Elper & Handelman, eds., *Torah of the Mothers* (New York, 2006); *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* (New York: Soncino, 1983); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: NRSV.

© Teresa Pirola, 2013. lightoftorah.net Reproduction for non-commercial use permitted; acknowledge website.