



5 ways

to petition for a just cause

Our Torah portion tells the story of five unmarried sisters who, together with Moses and the Lord, bring about systemic change in the pursuit of justice and compassion. Drawing from the wisdom of the biblical text, discuss the process of change, naming important tips for change-makers. Five examples follow:

1. Name the injustice.

The daughters of Zelophehad sense that something is not right about an established practice, then name it accurately in relation to the justice and mercy of God.

2. Form a coherent petition. The sisters approach Moses having done their homework, knowing the law. They present their case in terms comprehensible to their leaders.

3. Act with integrity.

The sisters are women of integrity. They purge themselves of any hint of selfish or ambiguous motives.

4. Choose the right time.

The sisters do not simply 'react' spontaneously; they choose the moment in which to act as a united group, with boldness. They choose a moment in which Moses is favorably disposed to hear their case.

5. Persist.

Although the text reads as if Moses brings the sisters' case to the Lord immediately (v.5), one midrashic source (*Yalkut Shimoni*) suggests that in fact his response is not so immediate! It is the persistence of the sisters in logically arguing their case that finally convinces him to act.



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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 25:10—30:1

Pinchas

Why reflect on Torah?

"We are blessed with a Torah of timeless truths, which means that every individual can find his or her own personal story told somewhere in its sequence of words and verses... And since the stories of the Torah spiral through history, each generation is also reliving some particular step in the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Holy Land."

—Sarah Schneider, in Elper and Handleman, eds.,
Torah of the Mothers (NY: Urim, 2006)

Forged over many centuries of reflection, traditional Jewish approaches to Torah (the Hebrew Scriptures) have a particular gift for drawing us into the profundity of the stories of the sacred text. Unconcerned by issues of historical/scientific precision, they teach us to freely engage God's Word with our prayerful imagination, our questions, our personality, our life experience. In this way, we discover the bible to be not a dead letter but a lively relationship with God and God's people. Beyond all temporal/cultural differences the biblical characters beckon us to join them in seeking the Living God.

Each week *Light of Torah* takes up that invitation, exploring the Scriptures that Jesus, as a faithful Jew, knew and loved.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 25:10—30:1

Our focus for reflection this week is the story of five sisters (Zelophehad's daughters) who find themselves in a perilous economic situation. Without husbands or any living male relatives they cannot inherit their father's land. Through a successful appeal to Moses, who consults the Lord, they draw attention to the injustice and bring about a permanent change in the legal code.

Tasting Torah

"Then the daughters of Zelophehad...came forward" (27:1).

Read the story of the five sisters—Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah—in 27:1-11. Like their ancestors (v.1), each one is introduced by name. Note 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 honor (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?

Touching Torah

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."*

Depthing Torah

In Midrash Rabbah and in the Talmud we find the sages praising the five sisters for the way they approached their petition. They 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..."*²

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."*²

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.

Doing Torah

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



A further insight

"They trusted in the Merciful One, the Master of the world... and came before Moses..."

(Targum Yonatan, a 3rd c. Aramaic translation / interpretation of the Torah)

The word *trust* used in this source has the same root as the word 'to cleanse.' According to one interpretation, in approaching Moses the sisters *cleansed* themselves of anything less than the truth and completely surrendered the matter to God.

1. See Bialik & Ravnitzky, 97.

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

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