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Five sisters with a just cause

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.

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

Read the story of the five sisters in the Book of Numbers 27:1-11. Then, with the help of time-honoured Jewish wisdom—with all its creative attention to detail—let's ponder the sacred text.

Perhaps you noticed that, like their ancestors (27:1), each sister is introduced by name: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah.

Notice too how they plead their cause. It is before the whole assembly (27:2). They clarify that their father was not part of the Korah rebellion (27:3). They appeal on account of kinship and their father's honour (27:4). 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 insights 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 the Holy One who spoke and the world came into being is different—divine mercies are for males as well as females.

"Their eye saw that which the eye of Moses did not see," comments Rashi, a revered 11th century Torah scholar.

In the Talmud and in Midrash Rabbah we find the sages praising the five sisters for the way they approached their petition. "They were wise and righteous women. What shows their wisdom? They spoke at the appropriate moment." In other words, the sisters are knowledgeable in the law (Num 27:5 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.

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."

According to a third century Aramaic source, *Targum Yonaton*:

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

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.

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

As the bible story unfolds, the sisters' united effort is successful. In consulting the Lord, Moses receives emphatic divine approval of their petition: "The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying" (Num 27:7). The result is a legacy of land for the sisters and an altered law for Israel.

Continue to explore this text... 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? •

Bibliography: Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah* (NY, 1992); Elper & Handelman, eds., *Torah of the Mothers* (Jerusalem/NY, 2006); *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* Vol. 2 (NY, 1983); Sapirstein Edition: *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 2001). Scripture: NRSV.