

In this week's Torah portion, Matot-Masei, we meet Zelophehad's five daughters for the second time. Last week, they appealed to Moses for a change in the inheritance laws. Their father died leaving no son, and they wanted to inherit his portion of land so their family's name would not be obliterated. God agreed.

This week they are back in court not as plaintiffs but as defendants. Their tribe, Menashe, is concerned about what would happen to their land-holding if the daughters marry outside the tribe; it could be lost to Menashe forever. God is sympathetic to the tribe of Menashe's argument in [Numbers 36:5](#). But in the next verse, God seems to give conflicting instructions: They should marry within their tribe, and,

לְטוֹב בְּעֵינֵיהֶם תִּהְיֶינָה לְנָשִׁים.  
La-tov b'eineihem tihiyena le-nashim.

The translation of this verse is, "To the good in their eyes they shall be women." In context, this means they can marry whomever they want, and many commentators try to resolve the apparent contradiction between the two halves of this verse.

I recently learned a new commentary that picks up on a small grammatical detail identified by Hila Unna, a contemporary Israeli woman. Writing in *Dirshuni: Israeli Women Writing Midrash, Volume II*, Unna notices the grammatical gender of the second word quoted above. "*Eineihem*" is masculine; the feminine plural form, which the verse should have used regarding the daughters, is *eineiheren*. This, of course, could be a scribal error, and that would be an easy answer. But we read Torah believing every word, every letter has meaning. Based on the grammar of the page, and reaching for the most obvious plural masculine noun present, Unna re-reads the sentence literally, in Midrashic style:

To the good in the eyes [of the people] will be these women, for generations.

Or, switching around word order to be more in line with English syntax, "These women will be good in their [the people's] eyes." She shifts "to the good" from being an indirect object, modifying the implied noun "husbands," to become a direct object, and she interprets *nashim* not as wives but simply as women. In other words, God is saying that these women should be remembered as good. In a single neat line, Unna clears up the confusion about God's instructions and grants the daughters a new, formal status in the public eye as "pursuers of good."

It's interesting to note that Moses' whole life is framed by the idea of "good," beginning with his birth, when the very first thing we learn about him is that his mother saw that he was good. ([Exodus 2:2](#)) There is a commentary on several episodes in the book of Numbers, including [Numbers 10:29-32](#), the points out how often Moses uses the word "tov/good." This indicates a fundamental orientation in Moses: He is so focused on things that are good that he has trouble seeing anything as bad or understanding when others see things that way. However this prevents Moses from

understanding certain things, but it attunes him to seeing goodness even when it might not be obvious — a trait that for sure saves the Israelites multiple times in the desert when God is fed up and wants to blot them out.

Now we are at the end of the desert wandering. Moses' death has been ordained. Joshua has been anointed his successor. ([Numbers 27:12-23](#)) Joshua is a worthy leader, but the same air of "tov" does not surround him. Who, then, carries forward this special legacy of Moses? I believe Hila Unna is saying that Zelophehad's daughters do.

There are many challenges for us in the weeks and months ahead, and at times it is difficult to find the good. So let's remember how Hila Unna noticed one letter's change that opened a new world of meaning to her. And let us strive to learn from Zelophehad's daughters, seeking good wherever we can find it.