

Milcah tells a straightforward tale about the five daughters of Zelophehad struggling to achieve their goals as they travel through the wilderness and into the Promised Land with their fellow Israelites. A modern Midrash from the perspective of a redeemed womankind, it is faithful both literally and spiritually to the Bible story. Milcah celebrates the power of faith and perseverance through the lives of Milcah, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, and Tirzah - the daughters of Zelophehad.

Milcah

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Milcah

“Zelophehad son of Hephher had no sons
but only daughters; their names were Mahlah,
Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah.”

Numbers 26:33

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Prologue

My daughter-in-law, Leah, had been screaming in labor for one day and one night. I, who had helped many women give birth, was now in no condition to do anything to help her. Hearing her agonized cry and being unable to help became unbearable. I got my walking cane and slowly felt my way to the Sacred Oak Tree where people would come to ask for my advice. I could not see the morning sun, but I felt its warmth on my flaccid arms and wrinkled face. I smelled its light mixed with the perfume of purple irises. I sat and leaned on the old oak trunk. Nobody came that day. I had time to let my mind soar upward with the birds chirping on the ancient branches. After falling asleep, I suddenly awoke to the sound of heavy running feet. The midwife yelled and came towards me.

“Milcah! Yahweh has finally blessed you with a grandson!” as she deposited a warm bundle on my lap.

I lifted it and inhaled the sweet scent of new life. I unbundled the child and explored its body with my hands. His hair was still wet. He started trembling, moving his arms in a frenzy and screaming from fear of the open space. I lay him face down on my lap, tucked my left hand under him. He grabbed my fingers and stopped crying. With my right hand I continued examining his body. He had long and strong limbs just like my husband and my son.

“What is the color of his skin?” I asked.

“Light, and his eyes and hair are black as coal. He took after his father,” said the midwife.

“My son must be happy. After fifteen daughters, finally he has a son. He did well in taking another wife after his first one died.”

I elevated my grandson on the palms of my trembling hands, “Child of my son, your name is Gideon. You’re going to become a great leader of Israel. I bless you in the name of Yahweh.”

I bundled Gideon, handed him over to the midwife and told her, “Take him back to his mother now. She must be anxious to hold the baby to her bosom. Ah, and tell Deborah to come. She has shown interest in learning our history. I’m passing on to her what I

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experienced and what I heard from others. I mustn't waste time; soon I'll be joining Our Creator."

"Don't talk like that, Milcah! You're still going to live a long time."

"No. I survived my sisters and my husband. I know my time is approaching."

As the midwife left, I leaned on the ancient trunk again and relaxed. Our history flooded my head. Didn't I just repeat a sentence I heard from my father many years ago? 'She must be anxious to hold the baby to her bosom.' I couldn't remember what I ate yesterday, but the past was crystalline in my mind. "Lord," I prayed, "You faithfully guided my first steps; help me in my last. I can't let our history and tradition die with me. Before and during the days we wandered in the desert our stories have been told to the new generations that they might not be lost. Now I, with my last breaths, must have my turn to pass it on to my granddaughter Deborah. Help me and guide my old and feeble tongue, Oh Lord."

Oh, Deborah is coming. I hear her steps.

Chapter 1

To the North, as far as I can see, lies a mountain soaring to the sky. Its many crests resemble giants; some standing and some lying. Whenever I approach it I see wadi, crevices and precipices in between its peaks. It sits on a platform, a base of layered rocks. We call it Mount Hor. A sloping area extends from the pedestal. Rocks, low vegetation and bushes cover this area. A little water trickles down from the biggest wadi.

Like ants, we camp at the foot of Mount Hor during the exodus to the Promised Land. Our innumerable tents look like miniature mounds. The men use stones and make a pond so women and children can carry water for their everyday use. Farther down, there is a sandy valley.

My father Zelophehad, my mother Jemimah holding a baby, my three sisters and I sit around a wooden tray containing manna cakes and mugs with goat's milk diluted with water.

"Finish your dinner and go play outside. Don't come back until we call you," my father tells his daughters.

"When we come back, will you tell us more stories, Father?" I ask.

"Sure, and we'll memorize some more of Moses' laws, so you'll keep them in your hearts. And after that your mother will sing for you, to put you to sleep."

"Shall we take the baby with us, Mother?" I offer, smiling and showing my two large upper teeth with a space between them.

"No. I'll breast feed him now and then he'll sleep," My mother answers, holding the baby over her protruding belly. After many pregnancies her tummy doesn't seem to shrink anymore. Forty days after Samuel's birth she is still pale, but her green almond-shaped eyes shine with happiness for having given my father a son. She has great expectancy this one will survive.

I grab my little twin sisters' hands and leave the tent. Hoglah and Mahlah have skin the color of weak tea. Their eyes are light brown. If you look close you'll notice Hoglah's iris have slight glints of yellow. But who will pay that close attention? So in order to tell

them apart, Mother tied a leather bracelet on Hoglah's left wrist when they were babies. As she grew, Mother loosened it a bit.

Noah, also younger than me has light brown hair, vivid greenish eyes and a wide mouth with an easy smile. She quickens her steps and says, "Father went a long while without asking us to go out to play. Not that we need him to ask that. I wonder why today he did it again."

"Don't you know?"

"No."

"Well, Samuel is forty days old, today. So mother is no longer considered impure. They want to be alone. They want another male baby."

"But we already have Samuel."

"Well, in case anything happens to him, they want to make sure one will survive. Mother says that every time she had a girl, Grandfather Hefer was angry at her. Father wouldn't say anything, but she could tell he was disappointed. She desperately wanted to give Father a boy."

"Why?"

"So he can inherit land in Canaan. Women have no rights of inheritance."

"That's not fair."

"Talking about fairness, when a woman has a male child it takes forty days for her to be considered clean. It takes her eighty days when she has a girl."

"Why the difference?"

"I don't know. It's in the laws."

"How do you know all these things?"

"I listen to the women talking."

Passing by Uncle Elhanan and Aunt Miriam's tent, I ask, "Where are the children?"

My Uncle stands outside scratching his back on the tent pole, like a donkey. He answers, "They are in the clearing playing."

We keep walking and reach the tent of Uncle Ephod and Aunt Abigail. The tent flap is closed, and we see no signs of our five cousins. Jeconiah and Shulamit's tent is also shut and silent. It's that

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time of the day when the children play outside, so the parents can have some privacy.

We turn to the direction the sun sets, and a cool breeze blows. “Hmm, that’s strange,” I say looking at the goose bumps caused by the sudden wave of cold. Still holding the twins’ hands, I notice them shivering. “Let’s sprint and we’ll get warm again,” I suggest and dash forward.

We reach the clearing. My heart leaps when I see cousin Jair. His wavy, coal black hair reaches his shoulders. At twelve he is already as strong as many grownup men. For this reason all the others obey him, except our friend Kemuel, who is the same age and also muscular. Jair has determined who can be part of that group; only cousins and three friends: Kemuel, Elidad and Abel from the tribes of Benjamin and Ephraim.

Beyond this area, the terrain slopes down to a valley covered with sand. The boys slide down sitting on scraps of animal’s skin, but when the girls come they play girls’ games with them.

“Now that everybody has arrived,” Jair says, “let’s play Blind Snake. Come here, Noah, you’ll be it.”

Noah approaches and he blind-folds her with a piece of woolen cloth. The children come and touch her and run back. Desperately she tries to catch one of them. The touched one will be the next Blind Snake. But before it happens, she grabs her bandana and pulls it up. “Somebody pinched me.” She cries out, “and I know it is Zared. He’s the only mean person among us.”

“You need to punish him Jair,” I say. “You need to stop him.”

“Yes!” Other girls add.

“Alright, alright,” Jair answers. He turns to a sturdy boy with eyes too close to each other and a wide forehead giving him the appearance of a square head. “Well then, Zared, you can’t play with us anymore today. Get out of here.”

Zared gives the other children a chilled look, kicks the dirt and limps away.

Jair starts to blindfold another child when we first hear the noise. It is as loud as if the earth is tumbling down. We look toward the valley and what we see shocks us. Nobody moves. A mass of

sand and dust rolls like a giant sea wave climbing to catch us. Jair, after a moment of indecision, commands. "Run for your lives. Fast, fast, go!"

Noah and I pull Hoglah and Mahlah. I turn my head to see how close it is. I see billows of sand gathering dried bushes from the desert, twisting and swelling, readying to engulf us. "We won't be able to escape from it," I yell and bump something or somebody. Our friends Kemuel and Able have stopped to help us.

"I'll carry one of the twins."

"And I'll carry the other."

They throw Mahlah and Hoglah on their shoulders and run as fast as lightning. We follow panting behind them. In the camp people are scurrying back and forth, yelling, gathering their children and entering their tents. Father comes out. A mixture of ground stones and dust covers the sun.

"Go inside, girls!" He yells. "Jemimah, tie a bandana on each one of the children's head, and on yourself. Make sure it will protect your eyes, mouth, nose and ears. Bundle up Samuel. Cover yourselves and stay put."

"How about you, Papa?" I ask.

"I'm going around the tent to make sure the stakes are firm. I'm coming in soon."

I hear a constant deafening roar. Sand and dust enter in the space between the edges of the tent and the ground, through the flaps and the holes that the stitches make in the seams, holding the skins together. Mother gives me a terrified look when we see the tent sway. She makes sure we are covered but I peek. I tighten my lips, my eyes burn with particles of stone grains and my gut blazes in desperation. Our only brother is in peril. Mother does her best to save him. She lies over her baby, supports her upper body with her elbows, covers herself with a skin and holds the corners. Father enters and lies face down, stretching out his arms to protect us. I hear Mother saying, "The baby is sneezing and squirming."

"That's a good sign," Father answers with a muffled voice.

After a while she says in anguish, "Now he is still and I can't tell if he is breathing!"

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“How can you with all this howling?”

Sand accumulates on the floor and on top of us. After the time it takes for a man to walk to the foot of Mount Hor and back, the silence feels heavy like the dirt that covers us.

Father and I stand up. He shakes away the dust like a wet dog shaking off water. I open the tent flap and the sun's red, horizontal rays enter. Next my father uncovers my sisters and Mother. She sits and with trembling hands unbundles Samuel. She lets out a shriek. Father takes the baby from Mother and also sees he's dead. The child is ashen and his nostrils and mouth are full of sand. Father starts wailing and we all join him.

Chapter 2

Father takes his sadness and frustrations for having lost his second son to Mount Hor. Every morning he goes up early enough to see the sun rising. He cries, yells, argues with Yahweh, prays for acceptance and finally, exhausted, he sleeps. He has a favorite place. An acacia tree had sprouted in a crevice a few yards down. It grew parallel to the cliff and became a shady, leafy tree among the rocky world. He spends the day wandering on the peaks and rests under the acacia tree during the hottest hours.

In the afternoons my sisters and I wait for our father. We clap our hands when we see that tall, strong man coming down. A head-cloth, secured on top by a ring of braided wool, hides his dark, wavy hair. His eyes are like two deep wells full of water. You can rely on them. His thick brows resemble two curved charcoal traces. His well carved nose looks like a smooth mountain ridge seen from afar. His thick mustache ends curled up on his jaw. His beard, like a forest, has a gash on the right side due to a scar caused by a fall on one of his descents from the mountain. His woolen tunic reaches below his knees. It is tied with a cord around the waist. His leather sandals are a reminder of the Lord's promise that our shoes and clothes won't tear while we are crossing the wilderness. They look as new as when he first made them. His body bends when he walks, due to the heavy weight of not having a son to continue his name in the Promised Land and to his father's constant accusations. Hephher keeps telling him, "Your sins are the cause for God not letting you have a son."

Nine months after Samuel died father is coming down the mountain when he meets his two twin daughters, Mahlah and Hoglah, playing pebbles by the pond and waiting for him. They run and hug his legs, "Father, we came to fetch you. Mother is having a baby."

He grabs his daughters' hands, one on each side, and quickens his steps. The girls feel secure and happy by their papa and race to keep up with his fast, large stride.

The warm odor of animals, dung, urine and hay suddenly hits Father's nostrils. He didn't realize the camp had a stench, but after

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breathing the light, clean and fresh air of the heights, it becomes noticeable. They pass by straight rows of tents and father greets their acquaintances and relatives. Now that he is used to the odor of the camp again, he smells the agreeable aroma of quail stews boiling in bronze pots outside every shelter.

He enters Hephher's place. All of his brothers gathered there waiting for him look up and raise their hands in a sign of impatience. Hours pass.

While the men talk, Mother suffers the incomparable pains of giving life. I sit beside her and hold her damp hand. She clenches her teeth and pushes as much as her feeble body can stand. Then she relaxes and dozes off. My aunts, Miriam, Abigail and Shulamit, take turns in kneeling behind Mother to support her back.

During the time Mother's belly was getting bigger, she did not look well. Her face was pale and she got tired easily. Noah and I did all the chores. At night, to tuck the twins to sleep, she'd start singing to them, but then her voice would trail off, and she would change to a soft humming.

I sense Mother's hand getting tense, and her forehead glitters in profuse sweat. She breathes in fast gasps. I hear the midwife say, "The head is out, it has dark hair." Afterward, "The shoulders are coming, one after another." And suddenly the rest of the baby's body slips out, so quickly with a gush of blood and slimy liquid that the midwife isn't able to hold the baby, and it slides on the goat skin. The midwife picks up the child by its feet and holds it upside down with her left hand. With the right she slaps its buttocks. The baby opens its mouth and lets out a cry. "She's a strong, healthy, beautiful girl," the midwife announces.

I think Mother hasn't heard and repeat with my mouth close to her ears, "It's a beautiful girl, Mother." She smiles faintly and closes her eyes.

I am worried about her; she seems too weak. I keep by her side, and I see the midwife using a flint to cut the blue cord coming from the baby's navel linked to my mother's womb. She ties the little piece that stays hanging from the baby with a piece of woolen cord. She hands the newborn to Aunt Miriam, who lays it on another goat

skin and starts cleaning it with a wet warm rag. The midwife turns her attention to my Mother again. She presses her belly with movements down until a thin, bloody bag comes out. She folds it in a piece of cloth and hands it to Aunt Abigail, who then leaves the tent.

Aunt Miriam wraps the baby in clothes that my Mother has prepared previously and asks me, “Do you want to take the baby to your father to see? I hope he’s already back from the Mount.”

“I don’t want to leave my Mother’s side. She seems so pale. Is it normal to bleed so much?”

“Don’t worry! Your mother will be fine,” Aunt Miriam says.

“I’ll take the baby,” says the midwife. “I need some fresh air.”

I also need fresh air. The smell of blood is nauseating. So I follow her.

The midwife and I enter my grandparents’ tent. My uncles and grandfather pierce the baby with their curious look. She deposits the bundle in my Father’s hands. The question comes from Grandpa, “A boy?”

The midwife answers with a negative shake of her head. Father breathes twice deeply. Then he announces, “Her name will be Tirzah. She is one more blessing the Lord has sent me.” Elevating the baby on the palms of his hands, he chants, “Tirzah, you are the daughter of Zelophehad, granddaughter of Hephher, great granddaughter of Gilead, great, great granddaughter of Machir, great, great, great granddaughter of Manasseh and great, great, great, great granddaughter of Joseph and his Egyptian wife Asenah. May Yahweh bless you.”

“My son, will you be angry if I speak?” interrupts Hephher, standing with difficulty and supporting his bent body on his shepherd’s crook. “I was young and now I am old, and I have never seen a righteous man encounter disgrace. Think back now, Zelophehad! What faults have you committed against the Lord? What sins have you been hiding from the Almighty that He punishes you by taking away your sons and giving you only daughters? For sure, you’ll die before we cross the Jordan River. All of us, the old generation, will. Your name will disappear from Israel. You don’t have a son to take possession in the Promised Land. What a shame!

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You'll die unknown! Turn to God and repent! He'll give you another son."

"Father, if the Lord is punishing me, I am blessed. Happy is the person whom God corrects! I was born poor and with nothing I will depart. The Lord gave me two sons and He took them away. May Yahweh be praised! I am content with my five daughters. Milcah counsels me when I am distressed. Noah is a motion in the stillness of the wilderness. Mahlah is a song for my soul. Hoglah sings as sweetly as a partridge and Tirzah is a friendly doe."

"Nonsense, Zelophehad! You have given strength to many people when they became weak, stumbled and fell. Your words encouraged them. Now it's you who are in trouble and are too stunned to recognize it. Think back, name your sin..."

Turning to the midwife, Father says with a shaking voice. "Take the child to Jemimah. She must be anxious to hold the baby in her bosom."

The midwife takes Tirzah and leaves the tent as quietly as she had entered followed by me, a thin, tall, dark-haired girl with green eyes, Zelophehad's oldest daughter.

While we walk back to the birthing tent, I ask, "May I carry my baby sister?"

"Here," the midwife hands me Tirzah. "Be careful!" She admonishes.

I cradle her with both arms and look at the baby's swollen red face. Her eyelids are closed tightly due to the bright sunlight. She has a pointy nose like our mother's. I tighten her close to my heart, raise her to my lips and say softly in her ears, "Don't worry, Tirzah! Only grandfather is disappointed because you are a girl. Your parents and your sisters are not. We love you very much."

Then I recall, some years ago, my mother's words clearly telling me, "Milcah, when I had my first son, Zaphenath, your grandfather and father were so happy that they had a feast fit for kings. Your father named him after your ancestor Joseph, his Egyptian name. Unfortunately, their happiness didn't last."

"What happened to Zaphenath, Mother?"

"It hurts so much every time I remember this," Mother sighed. "It makes me mad at your father and especially mad at Hephher. They said it was God's law. I don't believe it. What God is this that demands suffering for a newborn child? I didn't want them to hurt my baby, so when the time came for your father to take the baby to the priest, in my despair, I bundled up the baby tightly, grabbed him and ran away. I kept running and zigzagging in between the tents. It was very early in the morning; most of the people were still asleep. I ran for my son's life. I felt a surge of vitality. I thought I'd have breath to run until I reached the land of the Moabites, and they would give me protection because they were also descendents of Abraham. I was already out of the camp, near the King's Road, when Zelophehad caught me by my long hair which had come loose. I had lost my head cover during the run."

"Are you crazy?" Your father rebuked me. "You know Zaphenath has to be circumcised according to the law God gave us through Abraham. Hand me the child."

"No, no, I don't want the priests to hurt him."

"I understand you, Jemimah. My heart aches too, but we have to do this. It's God's law."

"No! No! I'm sure that God would not order suffering to innocent baby boys. Also I have this fear that something wrong is going to happen while the priest is murmuring his prayers and formulas and cutting the foreskin of our baby. He can commit a mistake and cut a portion of the gland. You know that sometimes it happens and the baby dies bleeding. I don't want this to happen to our son. Your grandfather had reached us by then and breathlessly said, 'You're a troubled woman. No, you're completely crazy! Take the baby from her, Zelophehad. Don't just keep standing there.'

"Don't! Don't take my son away from me. Don't hurt him! You're going to kill him. I want my baby to live!"

"They turned back taking the child with them. Despair took over my whole being. I pulled my hair, tore my clothes, scratched my face until blood started to drip and finally threw myself face down on the ground and stayed there waiting for death to come and rescue me. I don't know how much time passed. I felt no hunger, no thirst. I was

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conscious only of the heat of the sun baking my back. Once I heard donkey's hooves and people talking in a strange language. It must have been a caravan of traders traveling from Bashan to Egypt.

"My sisters-in-law would have come to rescue me, but they didn't know where I was. My husband would have come, but his father wouldn't let him. What is the life of a woman worth? Hephher would be happy if I had died. In fact, he wanted your father to take another woman to give him many sons. I must have slept or lost consciousness. I woke up once it was completely dark. I still didn't move. I woke up again with women's laments and crying around me. With difficulty, I turned on my back. It was day again. I saw their faces against the blue clear sky. They weren't crying for me. They saw I was alive. Suddenly it dawned on me why they were crying. They were crying because what I feared the most had happened. My son had died bleeding. I woke up a week later lying on my fur pallet with your Aunt Miriam trying to feed me. A year later you were born, Milcah."

The midwife and I arrive at the birthing tent's entrance. My Aunts Miriam, Abigail and Shulamit are coming out. Death is stamped all over their faces.

"No!" I scream and hand Tirzah to Aunt Abigail. Mother's body is soaked in blood. She has a serene expression though. I get down on my knees and shake my mother's shoulders. "Don't leave us! Please don't leave us!"

Aunt Miriam comes and gently puts her hand on my head, "There is nothing you can do, Milcah. Your mother is dead."

I ignore her words, and express my despair in anguished cries. "It is my fault. If I hadn't gone with the midwife to show the baby to my father, I'd have saved you, Mother. I'd have given you some more of that potion to help staunch the blood. I'd have convinced you not to give up. You still could have more children and one of them would be a boy to rescue our family from shame. I'd have talked to you until you forgot your disappointment for having had another girl. You bore a healthy baby girl, Mother. She needs you. Why did you give up fighting for life? Was it because you didn't

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want to face Grandfather's disapproving look? That's what happened every time you had a girl. I shouldn't have left your side. It's my fault."

"No, Milcah, it is not your fault. One day you are alive, the next you're dead. That's how life is," explains Aunt Miriam. "Death is part of life." Then she pulls me up and guides me outside the tent of blood and death. My heart sinks with despair. I will never see my mother again. I'll never hear her sweet voice singing for us. My mother will never tell us stories anymore. I am missing her already. I feel alone and abandoned.

Chapter 3

“No!”

Aunt Abigail’s screams echo in the desert a few seconds before the thump of a stone hammer hits a copper wedge securely positioned on her wrist atop a wooden trestle. Blood gushes from the stump and splatters her executioners.

Hepher’s sons have set up their tents in a straight line. The first belongs to Jeconiah and his wife Shulamit. Grandpa Hepher and Grandma Deborah occupy the second. My father and his five daughters dwell on the third. Elhanan, his wife Miriam and their six children own the fourth. The fifth belongs to Ephod, his wife Abigail and their six children.

The women have arranged the cooking tripods, benches, mortars and other work utensils in front of their tents. It is a recreational and working area. Behind the tents we keep the animals tied to pickets.

That morning, the women and children came back from collecting that day’s manna. Grandpa Hepher and Uncle Elhanan stayed behind collecting more manna for the next day, a Sabbath.

Father is wandering somewhere in Mount Hor, his mania since Samuel died. His state of mind worsened with the death of Mother. My sisters and I spend most of our time with Aunt Miriam and her children.

The older cousins pound the manna into flour. After that, Aunt Miriam and I boil it and make flat cakes.

“I’m tired of eating the same thing over and over,” says Aunt Miriam sourly.

“You better not complain,” comments Aunt Abigail, who is passing by. “It is the bread which the Lord has given us. For me it tastes like bread made with olive oil.”

“I love these cakes,” I say.

“Me too,” agrees Jair,” winking at me. “They taste like honey.”

I blush. I have a warm sensation every time Jair speaks to me.

When we finish eating, Jair and his brothers leave to fetch water.

Mordecai, a big fellow from the tribe of Benjamin, arrives in front of Uncle Ephod's tent and yells, "Ephod, I need to talk to you."

Ephod is an exception among the old generation. He doesn't care that he is going to die before entering the Promised Land. His name is going to continue through his children. He married very young and has been blessed by the Almighty with eight sons. Three of them died in infancy, but he still has five healthy male children remaining: Hanniel, Abiezer, Hoseah, Heber and Hiran. They will continue his name. What else can he desire? His happiness increases when at last a lily of the fields sprouts in their family, just before the mother-fountain dried. He calls his only daughter Lilah. "She came to brighten even more the days of my old age," he says.

His occupation, when we are camped, is to make tents of leather or animal's hair to exchange with caravans we meet on our wandering. He has purchased Egyptian linen clothes. Ephod dresses better than the other men with their dull and stained woolen tunics. He wears his cloak thrown over his shoulder on top of his tunic secured around the waist with a striped sash. On his head he uses a long and wide turban tied firmly with a blue cord. His fine clothes soon become a cause of envy.

Ephod greets Mordecai with a broad smile. Mordecai looks at Ephod's combed salt-and-pepper hair, his bushy mustache and beard, wealthy clothes and mumbles, "You won't look so fancy when I'm done with you today, Ephod!"

Mordecai then starts accusing Ephod of not having paid for a goat he bought from Mordecai. As the discussion intensifies, our grandmother sends one of the younger kids out to bring Grandfather to put an end to the argument.

Well, he doesn't arrive in time. Soon the yard is littered with neighbors who come to see what all the shouting is about. The commotion becomes like a spark in some wood shavings for Mordecai. He jumps on Uncle Ephod unexpectedly and throws him to the ground. Mordecai holds Ephod's hands under his strong knees and starts to squeeze Ephod's neck.

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I grab baby Tirzah, huddle close to my sisters and the little cousins, and watch from the tent flap.

“Pay me or I’ll kill you.” Mordecai says and loosens his grip on Ephod’s neck for a few moments.

Ephod answers, “I’ve already paid you.” Mordecai squeezes again until Ephod’s face starts to turn purple.

Grandmother and her daughter-in-law run back and forth. They don’t know what to do.

“Do something! Do something or he’ll kill Ephod!” yells Abigail to the men watching.

Abigail is plump and taller than her husband. She only loses weight when we travel for weeks without a break. She wears striped, loose tunics with long sleeves. She has inherited two of them from her mother. They belong to the time they lived in Egypt. The square head cover tied under her chin hides her cheeks and shadows her eyes, leaving uncovered only her curved nose and tight lips.

She knows she and her husband won’t enter Canaan, but she has worked it out in her mind and finally feels consoled that her children will. Her boys haven’t been marked with the shame of servility. They will be stronger, have more determination and be fit to possess Canaan than their grandparents and parents. Besides the harsh life in the wilderness, she lives in fear one of her children or her husband will complain and be punished with death. She also has expanded her vigilance to the extended members of her family. She makes sure to stop anyone from grumbling against the Lord. She feels responsible to keep the whole family faithful and safe. A furrow on her forehead and the tightness of her mouth are the only signs of the battles fought within her soul.

Seeing that the men won’t do anything to save her husband, Abigail becomes a lioness. Her eyes burn red with rage, and she advances towards Mordecai’s back. He is kneeling over Ephod. She reaches beneath Mordecai’s tunic and furiously grabs his genitals. Mordecai yelps, releases Ephod’s neck and falls coiled to the side. Abigail gets hold of her husband’s arms and drags him into their tent.

The crowd laughs at the bully Mordecai, rolling on the ground and groaning. He looks at them with fury and runs crouched low towards the Patio of the Tent of the Covenant.

Uncle Elhanan and Grandfather arrive with their baskets full of manna. Deborah and her daughters-in-law tell Hephher and Elhanan what has happened. Grandfather gives a hard look at the people gathered there. They bow their heads and start to leave one by one. "That is not good," Old Hephher says, shaking his head. "That is not good! Don't leave the tents. Stay right here." At that moment they hear the single trumpet blast summoning the leaders.

When Hephher gets hold of his shepherd's crook to leave, he waves to his family with it. That is his way to say that everything is going to be fine, but we can read in his ashen expression that it isn't.

The sun is already projecting long tent shadows when Hephher returns, followed by the leaders of the community. No matter what he pleaded in his daughter-in-law's favor it didn't make any difference. Abigail is going to be punished. She has committed an abomination. She has to suffer the punishment as an example for all the other women.

Hephher enters his tent. The family gathered outside. One of the leaders yells, "Hephher, bring the woman forward." He doesn't answer. He simply collapses on his fur pallet. The others surround Abigail to protect her.

"Hephher, bring the woman forth." There is no answer. So two of them grab Aunt Abigail's arm and drag her out of the circle of crying people.

"No, no, don't do this to me. Hephher, help me! Ephod, do something. Don't let them cripple me! You know I became madly blind when I saw that wicked man choking you. Help me God. Have mercy on me. Have mercy on me!"

Ephod with his wrinkled and soiled linen clothes and bare head advances towards the men holding his wife and struggles to free her from their hands. Two others get hold of him and pull him away.

"Let me go. Let me go!" He screams.

Hanniel and Abiezer start kicking the men holding their mother. They also have to be restrained and taken away.

Milcah

The other leaders keep making the preparation quietly and quickly, as if they have done it many times before. The children and adults gather around with stupefied looks. It seems we are watching preparations for our own executions.

They blindfold her and strap her left arm to her back. One places her right hand on top of a work bench, brought for this purpose, and ties it there. This last man's hair is the color of flames which contrasts with his ashen expression. I leave baby Tirzah with Noah and approach the scene. I can't take my eyes away from the red-haired man. His frowning eyes and tight lips show his disapproval for what they are doing to Abigail. Why is he taking part in this act then, I ask myself? I, of course, know the answer. He has to do it. He must be one of the leaders. He holds the wedge firmly against her wrist. All the while the whole desert hears her desperate screams.

"Don't cripple me! I prefer to die. Kill me instead! Have mercy on me, Lord!"

Finally the man with the stone hammer says, "Ready?"

"Ready!"

He elevates his hammer high above his head and strikes a firm blow precisely on top of the wedge. The men then let Abigail loose, and she collapses on the ground bleeding. The man with hair the color of fire staggers and falls with a thump beside Abigail. One of his companions grabs his arms and drags him away saying, "Toughen up, Achan, if you want to be a leader."

"She's dead," cries Aunt Miriam.

"No, not yet!" says Grandmother, after bending down and listening to her heart. "Let's save her!" While she unties the strap around her waist and applies a tourniquet on Aunt Abigail's arm, she prays, "Please, Lord, help us! We already have five children without a mother. We don't need six more orphans." Grandma, whose memory is lapsing and can't tell one grandchild from the other, becomes as sharp as a desert serpent, "Hanniel, get me some coals and a copper tong. Abiezer, go into my tent. In a corner you'll find a leather pouch. You'll see three small clay bottles inside it. Bring the smallest one. It contains frankincense. After I cauterize the cut, I'll

Alcita Ferreira Brown

apply the frankincense. Once the bleeding has stopped completely, we'll apply a mixture of henna and turmeric. It will help close the wound. Zelophehad and Elhanan," she orders her sons, "Get everybody out of here." My father has arrived from his wandering just in time to witness Aunt Abigail's punishment.

"And me, what should I do," asks Aunt Miriam crying.

"Gather the children and take them for a long walk out of the encampment. Take with you the left over manna cakes and a jug of water. Feed them, quench their thirst, tell them stories and let them play until this horrible event fades away from their minds.

We heard many glorious stories of our ancestors. It made no difference. That scene became engraved in my mind forever.

Milcah tells a straightforward tale about the five daughters of Zelophehad struggling to achieve their goals as they travel through the wilderness and into the Promised Land with their fellow Israelites. A modern Midrash from the perspective of a redeemed womankind, it is faithful both literally and spiritually to the Bible story. Milcah celebrates the power of faith and perseverance through the lives of Milcah, Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, and Tirzah - the daughters of Zelophehad.

Milcah

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