Strutin, Michal. *Judging Noa: A Fight for Women's Rights in the Turmoil of the Exodus*. Fairfield, CA: Bedazzled Ink Publishing Company, 2018.

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In the Book of Numbers, a few verses are devoted to a fascinating interlude: the story of Zelophehad's daughters. This anecdote, which takes place towards the end of the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt, tells the story of five sisters who are caught up in a men's world. Their father has died, with no sons. In the world of the biblical Israelites, this effectively meant that their family would lose their rights to a portion of land when the people entered the Land of Israel, as Zelophehad's assigned lot would not be inherited by any of his offspring. In the world of the ancient Near East, where land and family were everything, this saga was capable of causing a schism amongst the Israelite people.

Zelophehad's daughters, in the biblical text, advocate for themselves before the leadership of the Israelite people, including tribal chieftains, the priests, and Moses himself. Moses, in turn, takes the case to God, who ultimately hands down the ruling: the plea of Zelophehad's daughters is just, and they should be granted an inheritance from their father. While the fleeting mentions of the five daughters in the original text are enough to summon interest and intrigue, by giving voice to their motivations, dreams, and individual stories, Michal Strutin brings to life a multifaceted cadre of women, striving to make their way in an often-harsh world. In this modern, feminist *midrash*ⁱ Strutin provides insights that allow us to envision backstories to each of Zelophehad's daughters. With second daughter Noa as the main protagonist, the reader is given access to the inner psyche of a woman caught in a man's world of tribal politics, intrigue, and survival.

While the backdrop of the story includes highlights from key moments in the biblical story of the Exodus, including the Golden Calf, the revelation at Mount Sinai, and Korach's rebellion, the insights that Strutin gives into the often-unexplored experience of the Israelite women is what is most intriguing for the reader. Noa presents her case before various tribal leaders, each time preparing and marshalling her strength to speak on behalf of herself and her sisters as worthy inheritors of their father's legacy. Noa understands the politics in play in the world that she must insert herself into. "We must build legitimacy. What are we to Moses? Before we convince Moses

and the Judges of Thousands, we must first convince the Judges of Tens. We must climb the ladder of the courts.” Throughout the book, we see Noa grow from a young girl in the early stages of the Exodus to a wife, a mother, and a strong woman who stands up for herself and her sisters.

The latter part of *Judging Noa* sees Noa coming into her own as a *nazir*, and choosing to devote herself to a strict lifestyle centered around serving God, rather than her husband and family. After a lifetime of devoting herself to meeting their needs, for a brief interlude, Noa self-actualizes and by serving a higher power, ends up serving herself. While the details and technicalities may seem arcane, reading through a modern lens, one is able to admire Noa’s choice to pursue her truth. Like many women who have followed her and who begin new chapters later in their lives, Noa leans into who she is and the pursuit of who she wants to be, despite the pain and confusion that accompanies her journey.

As with the Torah that it’s based on, *Judging Noa* ends on the banks of the Jordan River, as the Israelite people prepare to enter the land of Israel – the proverbial Promised Land. While the chapter of the Exodus and their fight for equal rights are behind Zelophehad’s daughters, it is clear that the future that lies before them will have infinite twists and turns of its own. Noa as the protagonist, like the biblical figure of Moses, will not enter the land herself. But because of her efforts, her legacy, continued on through her children, her sisters, and the women that she fought for, will live on in the new world being created by the Israelite people.

As modern readers of this text, we are able to see ourselves in the depictions of Zelophehad’s daughters – each imperfect, each struggling, and each ultimately a part of a larger system and context that makes us who we are. In *Judging Noa*, by bringing color, humor, and grit to the few lines of text we are given about Zelophehad’s daughters, Michal Strutin gives us a glimpse into the universality of the female experience through the eyes of a unique set of characters.

¹ Biblical exegesis; textual interpretation