

# SERAH BAT ASHER IN RABBINIC LITERATURE

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## INTRODUCTION

Serah daughter of Asher<sup>1</sup> was one of the two women listed among the seventy<sup>2</sup> who went to Egypt with Jacob (Gen. 46:17), the other being Dinah, Jacob's daughter. Hundreds of years later, Serah is mentioned in the census taken of the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Land of Israel (Num. 26:46).<sup>3</sup> While this verse simply indicates that she was a daughter of Asher, not that she was still alive at the time, a remarkable midrashic tradition developed about her as an immortal woman. Adding to her mystique is the fact (unusual in the Bible) that she reportedly had no husband or children. The only other Israelite women lacking a husband or children who figure in the Pentateuch are Dinah and Miriam. In the aggadic tradition these are supplied for them (TB *Bava Batra* 15b, *Sotah* 12a; *Exodus Rabbah* 1:17), but not for Serah.

## SERAH AND JACOB

Following the chronology of the Bible, the first tradition about Serah is that she sang to Jacob, gently informing him that Joseph was still alive. "[The brothers said] If we tell him right away, 'Joseph is alive!,' perhaps his soul will fly away (he will have a stroke). What did they do? They said to Serah, daughter of Asher, 'Tell our father Jacob that Joseph is alive, and he is in Egypt.' What did she do? She waited till he was standing in prayer, and then said in a tone of wonder, 'Joseph is in Egypt/ There have been born on his knees/ Menasseh and Ephraim.' His heart failed, but when he finished his prayer, he saw the wagons: immediately the spirit of Jacob came back to life" (*Midrash ha-Gadol* on Gen. 45:26).<sup>4</sup> Thanks to her music and poetry, he would survive this shock.<sup>5</sup> The patriarch blessed her, saying: "The mouth that told me the news that Joseph is alive will never taste death" (*Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 46:17; *Sefer ha-Yashar* 54:98). A blessing by her grandfather Jacob apparently endowed her with prophetic powers, and in

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some traditions she was taken straight to heaven before her death (*Exodus Rabbah* 5:13-14), much like Elijah (II Kgs. 2:11).<sup>6</sup>

#### SERAH AND MOSES

The Midrash explains that Joseph gave a secret sign that would prove the identity of the true redeemer from Egypt, using the term *I have taken note* [pakod pakadeti]. Joseph told this to his brothers. Asher told it to Serah, his daughter. When Moses and Aaron came to the elders of Israel and performed the signs in their sight, the elders of Israel went to Serah bat Asher, and said to her: "A certain man has come, and he has performed a set of miraculous signs before our very eyes." She said to them: "There is no significance attached to these signs." They said to her: "He said, *'I have taken note of you'* (Ex. 3:16). She said to them: "He is the man who will redeem Israel from Egypt in the future, for so I heard from my father, *'God will surely take notice of you'* (Gen. 50:24)." The people then believed in their God and in Moses, as it is said, *And the people believed when they heard that the Lord had taken note of the Israelites* (Ex. 4:31).<sup>7</sup>

Serah bat Asher, the survivor from the Patriarchal age, gives support to the authority of Moses and endorses his claim to be the redeemer of Israel. On the basis of the critical words, "God has surely taken notice of you", the time has come for the fulfillment of His divine promise.

#### SERAH AND JOSEPH'S BONES

When Joseph was about to die, he said to his brothers: *'When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here.'* Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt (Gen. 50:25-26). The Israelites honored Joseph's wish: *And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, 'God will be sure to take notice of you; then you shall carry up my bones from here with you'* (Ex. 13:19).

In several midrashic sources, the Egyptians hid Joseph's body, fearing that if it left Egypt they would be visited by darkness and plagues, or in order to prevent the Israelites from ever leaving by not giving them the opportunity to fulfill their promise to Joseph. How, then, did Moses know where Joseph's bones were buried?<sup>8</sup> The Midrash explains that Serah the daughter of Asher

showed Moses the resting place of Joseph. She said to him: "The Egyptians put him into a metal coffin which they sank in the Nile." So Moses went and stood by the Nile. He took a tablet of gold on which he engraved the Tetragrammaton, threw it into the Nile, and cried out; the coffin then rose up out of the water.<sup>9</sup> This *midrash* is based on a miracle performed by Elisha: "And you need not be surprised at this, for it says, *As one of them* [a disciple of the prophet Elisha] *was felling a trunk, the iron ax head fell into the water. And he cried aloud, 'Alas, master, it was a borrowed one!' 'Where did it fall?' asked the man of God* [Elisha]. *He showed him the spot; and he cut off a stick and threw it in, and he made the ax head float* (II Kgs. 6:5-6). Now if Elisha, the disciple of Elijah, could cause iron to float, how much more could Moses, the master of Elijah, do so!" (*Mekhilta, Beshallah* 10).

Once again, Serah makes her appearance as a revealer of lost or hidden information,<sup>10</sup> thus in some way contributing to the redemption of the Israelites.

#### SERAH AND THE WISE WOMAN OF ABEL OF BETH MAACAH

When Joab, King David's army commander, goes to Abel of Beth-maacah where Sheba, the rebellious son of Bichri, a Benjamite, is hiding, he threatens to destroy the entire city, possibly causing a rift in the nation. A wise woman saves the day by convincing the residents to decapitate Sheba and toss his head over the wall to Joab (II Sam. 20: 14-22).

The Midrash identifies that "wise woman" as Serah, still alive after all this time! In an elaborate retelling of the story, the details of how Serah convinced both Joab and the residents are spelled out. To Joab she said, "Are you Joab?" – meaning, "You are a father (*Yo-Av*) of Israel, yet you do nothing but shorten the life of man. You don't behave according to the meaning of your name. Neither you nor David are learned". [ . . . She continued, "In earlier times they would have spoken, saying, "Let them ask Abel to surrender"] and so they would have ended the matter, by which she meant: "Have the words of Torah ended here? Is it not written, *When you approach a town to attack it, you shall offer it peaceful terms* (Deut. 20:10)?" Later she identifies herself to Joab as "I am the one who completed the number of Israel; I am the one who linked the 'faithful' to the 'faithful', Joseph to Moses." She convinced the residents to give up Sheba, using a stratagem.

"The woman immediately came to all the people with her clever plan. 'Do you not know David's reputation?' she urged them, 'Which kingdom has successfully resisted him?' 'What does he demand?' they asked her. 'A thousand men,' she replied, 'and is it not better [to sacrifice] a thousand men than to have your city destroyed?' 'Let everyone give according to his means,' they proposed. 'Perhaps he would be willing to compromise,' she suggested. She then pretended to go and appease him, and returned with the number reduced from a thousand to five hundred, then to one hundred, to ten, and finally to one, a stranger there, and who was he? – Sheba the son of Bichri. They promptly cut off his head [and threw it down to Joab]" (*Genesis Rabbah* 94:9).

*He then sounded the horn; all the men dispersed to their homes, and Joab returned to the king in Jerusalem" (II Sam. 20:22).*

Here, Serah is not necessarily revealing a secret, but she does act as a key element in bringing about salvation (a theme in her earlier midrashic roles), facilitating the Exodus. As before, she affirms life over death,<sup>11</sup> more than six hundred years after her first appearance.

#### SERAH IN TALMUDIC LORE

In *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* (10:117), Serah explains to Rabbi Johanan in the house of study that the waters at the splitting of the Reed Sea looked like a glass wall, rather than like a latticework (as he was teaching). Here again, Serah functions as a revealer of lost or hidden knowledge and also in the context of Israel's redemption from Egypt.

#### THE DEATH OF SERAH

According to the Midrash, did Serah ever die or is she still in existence? Many sources report that she entered Paradise alive, and thus transcended mortality. In medieval Jewish mysticism, Serah has a place of honor in *Gan Eden*.<sup>12</sup>

The Persian Jews of the city of Isfahan believed that Serah bat Asher actually lived among them until she died in a great fire in their synagogue in the twelfth century CE. This synagogue and its successors were subsequently known as the Synagogue of Serah Bat Asher. In the Jewish cemetery of Isfahan, there was to be found, at least until the end of the nineteenth century,

a tombstone marking the final resting place of "Serah the daughter of Asher the son of our Patriarch Jacob" who died in the year equivalent to 1133 CE. This alleged gravesite was marked by a small mausoleum known as *heder Serah* ("Serah's Room"), which remained for centuries one of the best known pilgrimage sites for the Jews of Persia. In the Iranian exile, Jews were accustomed to prostrate themselves at the gravestone of Serah, as they now customarily pray here in Israel at the Tomb of our Matriarch Rachel near Bethlehem. Like the tomb of Rachel, that of Serah is also located in a "room" (i.e., a mausoleum). This room is believed to have wondrous doorposts and only people of good character and deeds may enter; but the way in shrinks before anyone else and prevents them from entering.<sup>13</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The fact that a few short appearances in genealogical lists could generate such a multifaceted woman in midrashic literature is truly remarkable. Serah bat Asher uniquely represents the continuity from her grandfather in the Patriarchal age to Moses and Joshua, the Davidic monarchy, and the Talmudic era. She is the bearer of an oral tradition and of secret knowledge, a power of life and redemption. In this capacity she seems to function as an eternal figure, rather like a female counterpart to Elijah, who will reveal the hidden time of the final redemption when he heralds the coming of the Messiah. However, it should be noted that there is one major difference between Elijah and Serah. Although Serah is described in some midrashic sources as immortal (e.g., *Derekh Eretz Zuta*, ch. 1), we have noted above how certain traditions developed suggesting that she died at some point. No eventual death is ever suggested for Elijah. This is due to the verses at the end of Malachi which state: *Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord. And he will turn back [to God] the hearts of fathers with children and the hearts of children with their fathers...*(Mal. 3:23-24). This explicitly indicates that Elijah is still somehow alive and waiting to fulfill his role as harbinger of the Messianic age.

#### NOTES

1. Serah's name in the biblical text is spelled with *sin* (שׁ) as the first letter, but often with a *samekh* (ס) in non-biblical texts, where it can mean "overhanging, overlapping" (Ex. 26:12). Serah thus overlaps the Patriarchal age and that of entry into the Promised Land. See F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951) p. 710; and M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York: Pardes Publishing ed., 1950) pp. 1024-1025.
2. As Nahum Sarna observed, Serah is the only granddaughter listed along with Jacob's fifty-three grandsons: *Torah Commentary on Genesis* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989) p. 315. Although the text states that Jacob took all of *his sons, and his sons' sons with him, his daughters, and his sons' daughters* (Gen. 46:7), implying that there were a few granddaughters, none are listed apart from Serah. Rashi notes that Jochebed, the mother of Moses and another granddaughter, is included in the number of people who went down to Egypt, yet she is not listed by name. Jochebed was reputedly born on the border between Canaan and Egypt, hence another "overlapping" individual (*Genesis Rabbah* 94:1; *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 10). Louis Ginzberg, in his *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1938), vol. 5, p. 39, notes sources claiming that Asher was Serah's adopted father and that he married her mother (Hadorah), a widow, when Serah was three years old. Marc Bregman expansively translates the text about Serah in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana (Beshallah)* as follows: "I completed the number of seventy Children of Israel who accompanied Jacob to Egypt. I linked one faithful leader of Israel, Joseph (who is called *ne'eman*, 'faithful,' in Genesis 39:4), with the next faithful leader of Israel, Moses (who is called *ne'eman*, 'faithful,' in Numbers 12:7)." See Bregman, *Serah bat Asher: Biblical Origins, Ancient Aggadah and Contemporary Folklore*, The Bilgray Lectureship, booklet published and distributed by the University of Arizona, 1997 [reprinted in *New Harvest* (St. Louis: The Brodsky Library Press, 2005)].
3. Serah is also noted in I Chronicles 7:30 as a daughter of Asher.
4. Translated by Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg in *Genesis, the Beginning of Desire* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1995) p. 281.
5. In a slightly different version, her brothers told her: "Believe it or not, just sing it and then we will come and prove it. But it would be better if you believed it, for you would sing the better": Thomas Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: Knopf, 1969) p. 1128.
6. Quoted by Rachel Alderman, "Serah bat Asher: Songstress, Poet, and Woman of Wisdom", in O. W. Elper and S. Handelman, eds., *Torah of the Mothers* (New York: Urim, 2000) p. 225.
7. *Exodus Rabbah* 5:13, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, 48.
8. See *Mekhilta, Beshallah – Petihta*; Howard C. Kee, "The Testament of Simeon", in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1983) pp. 787-788. In some versions the brothers sank Joseph's coffin in the Nile in order to prevent the Egyptians from worshipping his body; *Zohar* II, 46a, note 345.
9. In another version, found in *Tanhuma – Bereshit* 2, Moses writes on a small stone, "Rise, Ox": Alderman, op. cit., p. 236. See also TB *Sotah* 13a and *Tosefta Sotah* 4:7, where Serah shows Moses where Joseph is buried, but the part about throwing a tablet into the Nile to make the coffin rise is omitted.

10. See also *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, trans. J. Z. Lauterbach, vol. 1, Schiff Library of Jewish Classics (Philadelphia: JPS, 1949) pp. 176-177. In a Samaritan *midrash*, when the Israelites are leaving Succoth (as noted in the biblical text), they are stopped by a pillar of fire. While efforts are being made to discover who had committed a sin, Serah, speaking for the tribe of Asher, tells the elders that they had forgotten Joseph's bones. Moses went back and Serah found the bones. See Z. Ben-Hayim, ed., *Tebat Marqua: A Collection of Samaritan Midrashim* (Jerusalem: Academy of Sciences, 1988) p. 98.

11. Alderman, op. cit., p. 243.

12. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 38:103; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 2, p. 116; vol. 5, p. 356 n. 294, p. 359 n. 321. See also *Zohar* III, 167b, where Serah is granted an honored place in Paradise.

13. Marc Bregman, op. cit.



**עשה תורתך קבע**

**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

|          |                               |                  |
|----------|-------------------------------|------------------|
| January  | I Chronicles<br>II Chronicles | 10 – 29<br>1 – 8 |
| February | II Chronicles                 | 9 – 36           |
| March    | Genesis                       | 1 – 28           |
| April    | Genesis<br>Exodus             | 29 – 50<br>1 – 6 |
| May      | Exodus                        | 7 – 34           |

