

# THE SEVENTY ISRAELITES WHO WENT TO EGYPT

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There is a classic dispute among the traditional commentators regarding who exactly were the seventy Israelites who went to Egypt mentioned in Genesis 46:27, *the members of Jacob's family, which went to Egypt, were seventy in all.*<sup>1</sup>

We have separate counts of the children of each of Jacob's four wives: Leah's children 33, Zilpah's children 16, Rachel's children 14, Bilhah's children 7, for a total of 70. The complication arises regarding the thirty three children of Leah. While Genesis 46:15 states, *These are the sons of Leah whom she bore to Jacob in Paddan-aram, in addition to Dinah his daughter. All the people – his sons and daughters – numbered thirty three;* actually thirty four names are mentioned. The name list includes Judah's sons Er and Onan who *died in the land of Canaan* (Gen. 46:12), so the number now goes down to thirty two. Who then is the thirty third offspring of Leah who went down to Egypt?

TB *Baba Batra* 123b states, "So said Rabbi Ḥama bar Ḥanina: This missing person is Jochebed, whose conception was on the journey (to Egypt), and she was born within the walls (i.e., in Egypt), as it is stated: (*And the name of Amram's wife was Jochebed, the daughter of Levi,*) *who was born to Levi in Egypt* (Num. 26:59). Her birth was in Egypt, but her conception was not in Egypt." This is the opinion brought by Rashi, Rashbam, Ramban and Radak in their commentaries to Genesis 46:15.

Ibn Ezra to Genesis 46:27, states that Jacob himself was the seventieth person. As Genesis 46:8 states, *Now these are the names of the children of Israel who were coming to Egypt – Jacob and his children . . .* Similarly, Genesis 46:27, *All the people in Jacob's household who came to Egypt – seventy.* Jacob is certainly part of his household.

The complication is that Genesis 46:15 states, *All the people – his sons and daughters – numbered thirty three*, which seems to exclude Jacob himself. Ibn Ezra explains that the intention of that verse is to say “all the people, his sons and daughters along with him himself, numbered thirty three.”

There is another possibility. Genesis 46:15 states, *These are the sons of Leah whom she bore to Jacob in Paddan-aram, in addition to Dinah his daughter. All the people – his sons and daughters – numbered thirty three*. The wording in Hebrew regarding Dinah is *v'et Dinah*, “and Dinah.” This form is not used for anyone else on the list. Even the other female offspring in the list, Serach the daughter of Asher, is not introduced in this way. Genesis 46:17 states that the children of Asher included *v'Serach ahotam*, “and Serach their sister,” with no *v'et*. This is why the English translation of the Dinah verse has “in addition to Dinah” rather than simply “and Dinah.” This change in wording can indicate that Dinah is to be left out of the count, leaving thirty one. The number thirty three is then reached by adding Er and Onan as counted in the list of offspring even though they died previously.

Why should Dinah not be included in the count? Because only the male children and grandchildren of Jacob are counted. This obviates a major improbability in the count – that Jacob’s descendants include 67 males and two females – a seeming statistical impossibility. Rather, the convention followed here is that female offspring are not included in the counts, and most are not named at all. This is true of the descendants of Leah, Bilhah and Rachel, in 46:15,22 and 25 – only sons are named. All three counts end the list of offspring by stating “*kol nefesh*,” prior to the count, as in Genesis 46: 15, 22, and 25. In 46:15 the reading is *All the people – his sons and daughters – numbered thirty three*. The phrase *his sons and daughters* does not appear in Genesis 46:22 and 25 – but having been first stated in 46:15 – the original utterance – the implication is that these counts all suggest daughters, even though no females are counted.

Serach however is included in the count of Zilpah’s children, where a formula is used not found among the other wives of Jacob. Genesis 46:18 ends by saying *These were the descendants of Zilpah, whom Laban had given to*

his daughter Leah. These she bore to Jacob –16 persons (nafesh). *Nafesh* appears after the count. *Kol nefesh* does not appear. This indicates a subtle shift in the counting methodology, in this case the inclusion of one woman.

The question remains, why was Serach included in the count and not Dinah? Serach is mentioned three times, twice in the Torah and also in 1 Chronicles 7:30. In Genesis and Chronicles she is described as "their sister" and in Numbers 26:46, she is "named" separately (as are the outstanding daughters of Zelaphchad in their story), *And Asher's daughter was called Serach*. All of this suggests that she was an outstanding character for some reason, considered similar to her brothers in importance.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Dinah is never an outstanding character in any way, only a silent victim in the entire narrative of Shechem. She neither is associated with her brothers as "their sister" in the genealogy table nor merits inclusion as an individual.<sup>3</sup>

#### NOTES

1. In this article we will not deal with the possibility that the numbers mentioned are meant to be symbolic. For this view, see Moshe Shammah, *Recalling the Covenant* (Jersey City, New Jersey: KTAV, 2011), p. 224.
2. This is the textual starting point for the many midrashic stories about Serach. See Moshe Reiss, "Serah Bat Asher in Rabbinic Literature" *JBQ* 42:1 (January 2014), pp. 45-51.
3. R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin in his *HaEmek Davar*, Genesis 46:7 notes that it is inconceivable that Jacob had only two female offspring, Dinah and Serach. He explains that the other female descendants "were not mentioned by name because there was no reason pertaining to the Israelite nation." In his view Dinah was mentioned and counted because she was special, but he does not explain why Serach was mentioned.



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