

There are many times Rabbi Matt looks at the pews in our synagogue and points out a name of person who “used to sit in the third row at the end”, or another “who sat there, and who sat there.” By doing that he, and others, remember the voices of all those congregants who had been part of our community because they mattered to our congregation. They were part of our texture and now are a slice of our historical memory. Shared memory fosters a sense of togetherness, the linking of generations.

This week’s Torah portion, Pinchas, mentions Serah bat Asher, a figure who is mentioned just twice in the Torah. She is listed among those of Jacob’s family who came to Egypt (Bereshit 46:17) and is listed again (Bamidbar 26:46) as the Israelites are counted in advance of entering the Promised Land. The Torah gives no details about her.

Since Serah is mentioned these two times—spanning over 250 years—tradition has it that she lived a very long life. She was with the Israelites when they first entered Egypt; she was with them throughout the centuries of slavery; she was with them when they ultimately entered the Promised Land.

Why would the Torah mention this obscure figure in such a way as to suggest her incredible presence throughout the formative years of the People of Israel?

Perhaps the Torah lists Serah as a symbol of continuity and social context. By spanning the generations, she had a unique role to play in keeping the Israelites united. Her memories bound the people together. Presumably, people could come to her and learn about the “old days”, the earlier experiences of slavery and redemption. They could draw on the wisdom she had gained through many years of an eventful life.

Wouldn’t it be special to have a cup of coffee with Serah, to hear stories from her long life, to gain insights and to share her dreams for the future? Wouldn’t we all be stronger and happier by feeling the personal presence of someone whose life has spanned so many years, who connects personally with so many generations?

Our congregation has our own Serah figures, people who have lived long and active lives, who remember the “old days” and the personalities of earlier generations. Wouldn’t it be special for us to have a cup of coffee with them, hear their stories, learn from their experiences, share their dreams for the future?

The obscure figure of Serah continues to remind us of the mystery of the generations, the need for intergenerational continuity and communication. The Torah only mentions her twice, but in a way that underscores the importance of linking the generations with a shared historical memory, a shared social context, a shared destiny. Even today, the obscure Serah continues to lead the way for us.