

Sat 15 July 2006
Shabbat Pinchas
Congregation Adat Reyim
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Parsha Pinchas, Serah bat Asher, and Midrash

Gut Shabbos. This week's Torah portion is Pinchas. Last week at the end of parshat Balak, Pinchas stopped a plague that killed 24,000 people. At the start of today's reading, Pinchas receives his reward and Moses and Aaron's son Elazar take a census. The Torah likes genealogies, and this is one of the households of Israel that will cross the Jordan River and conquer Canaan. These genealogies may strike the modern reader as boring. The reader that skips this genealogy, however, will miss something quite surprising. I quote from Numbers 26 starting with verse 44:

The sons of Asher according to their families: of Imnah, the Imnite family; of Ishvi, the Ishvite family; of Beriah, the Beriite family; of the sons of Beriah: of Heber, the Heberite family; of Malchiel, the Malchielite family. The name of Asher's daughter: Serah. These are the families of the sons of Asher according to their count: 53,400.ⁱ

Did anything just peak your interest? Aren't you curious as to how that woman -- Asher's daughter Serah -- got to be part of that list? Other women are listed, too. Zelophehad's five daughters are each listed by name. That can be understood as foreshadowing. These five females will shortly play a major role in the narrative. But how did Serah get to be in this list? At no place in the Tanakh does anyone named Serah bat Asher do or say anything. Yet she is listed in the Torah by name; why? It is quite unlikely that Serah was Jacob's only granddaughter. As Nahum Sarna noted, it is inconceivable that Jacob's twelve sons, who among them had fifty-three sons, should have only one daughter.ⁱⁱ What makes Serah special?

The answer to this question comes from that part of the Jewish tradition known as midrash, a method of filling in the sparse biblical text. Midrashic explanations permit the reader to project inner thoughts but are always based on the wording of the biblical text and are NOT just made up fantasies. There are multiple collections of midrashim, and indeed the body is not yet closed -- there is modern midrash. Let us look at what the ancient rabbis tell us about Serah bat Asher via some of the midrashim about her. Serah bat Asher's name is found three times in the Tanakh, always (as here) almost as an aside in a larger list. The first time her name appears is in Genesisⁱⁱⁱ as one of the people who came to Egypt with Jacob. Serah's name also occurs in I Chronicles^{iv} as part of its very long genealogy, going over multiple chapters. So from the pshat, there is no further information about this woman.

There is disagreement as to who should be on the list of the 70 descendants of Jacob who came to Egypt with Jacob. The number 70 is given,^v but some commentators put Jacob himself on the list while others don't. Some commentators put Moses' mother, Jochbed, on that list; others don't. Some count

the Shekhinah (which I do not understand, since there is no way she could be considered Jacob's descendent). One of these must be counted in order to get 70 since the Torah lists only 69 people. However, sometimes two (in particular Jacob and Jochbed) are counted, so that someone needs to be dropped. The one dropped is Serah. The justification for dropping her is that she is not a descendant of Jacob. Serah is Asher's daughter by adoption. Read the midrash for the details of how and why;^{vi} there is no time today to explore this tangent.

Although Serah may not be counted among the 70, it is clearly stated that she did go to Egypt with Jacob and that she also left Egypt with Moses 210 years later. How can that be? The Torah clearly states that Joseph and all of that generation died.^{vii} But Serah was not of the brothers' generation, so it does not contradict Torah to explain this curiosity by claiming Serah had not yet died; indeed that Serah had been granted eternal life. OK, so how did that come about? It came about because of a blessing from Jacob.

The Torah states^{viii} that when Jacob's sons returned home, they informed (va-ya-ge-do) him that Joseph was alive and vizier in Egypt. It does not explain the method used to tell Jacob the news. The midrash does. The brothers were concerned if they just came out and stated that Joseph was alive, the shock would kill their father. As the brothers were nearing their abode, they spied Asher's daughter Serah, who they knew was wise, comely, had a pleasing voice, and was a talented harp player. Her father and uncles summoned Serah and bade her tell Jacob about Joseph. So Serah took her harp, sat before her grandfather, and sang with an agreeable melody about Joseph's being alive and viceroy of Egypt. As she kept singing her song, Jacob started to become excited. He rewarded Serah with the words: "My daughter, may death never have power over thee, for you revived my spirit." And so it was. A blessing from Jacob enabled Serah to be in the list of those who went to Egypt and those who left.

Indeed, according to the midrash, Serah played an important, but not recorded, role in the Israelite exodus. She persuaded the Israelites to believe Moses when he claimed that God had sent him to free them from slavery. The people had been fooled by a false redeemer about 30 years before Moses came back to Egypt from Midian. A descendant of Ephraim claimed he had been sent by God to take the Jews out of Egypt. Thousands escaped with this false redeemer and were slaughtered by the Philistines (as an aside, that is why the Israelites did not go by way of the shorter route through the land of the Philistines and those are the bones to which the Ezekiel will later prophesy). So when Moses came to free the Jews, the elders wanted proof that he was legitimate. So we read^{ix} that Aaron spoke all the words that Hashem had spoken to Moses, and he performed the signs. The elders consulted with Serah. She told them that the signs were worthless (cf. Deut: 13), but that because they used the phrase, "I have surely remembered you," this is the man that shall free Israel. For that phrase was the secret password passed on from Jacob to Asher to Serah.

When the children of Israel get ready to leave, we read in the first verses of parsha Beshalach that Moses took along the bones of Joseph. This statement is inserted into a general description of how the entire people left, in particular by what route. Now from the final verses of Genesis we know that Joseph was embalmed and placed in a coffin inside Egypt. However, Egypt is a big place, and the rabbis wondered how did Moses know where to find Joseph's coffin? He knew because Serah bat Asher told him. For three days and night Moses looked for Joseph's remains,^x but his hunt was in vain. Then Serah met the frustrated Moses and asked what was the cause of his weariness. Serah told him to look in the Nile River where the coffin had been sunk.^{xi} Thus, Serah enabled Moses to carry Joseph's bones out of Egypt.

Serah pops up, but not by name, in one other book of the bible. In 2 Samuel 20, she is the wise woman in Avel Beth Maakkah that saves the city from Joab, King David's general. Serah makes an appearance to correct the great sage Rabbi Yochann on the appearance of the Sea of Reeds while it was split. Serah spans the generations from biblical time until today. In our generation, contemporary Jewish story tellers continue to spin new tales about Serah, her wordly wisdom, her Torah knowledge, and her spiritual power. In the mid 1980s, I remember reading a story where she was a central character in the Jewish periodical *Midstreams*.

The midrash answered many questions that came from a close reading of one verse in today's reading. Had we looked one chapter further we would have read that Zelophehad died for his own sin. What did Zelophehad's daughters mean by that statement?

¹ⁱ Translation from Stone edition TANAK, ArtScroll Series, Mesorah Publications, Ltd. New York, 1996.

¹ⁱⁱ See essay by Marc Bregman "Serah Bat Asher: Biblical Origins, Ancient Aggadah and Contemporary Folklore,"

<http://fp.arizona.edu/judaic/bilgray/bregman/Bregman.htm>

¹ⁱⁱⁱ Gen 46:17.

^{1iv} I Chronicles 7:30.

^{1v} Gen 46:27.

^{1vi} The Legends of the Jews, Louis Ginzberg, Vol II, page 39.

^{1vii} Exodus 1:6.

^{1viii} Gen 45:26.

^{1ix} Exodus 4:30.

^{1x} See Exodus 12:3-6 for how the rabbis knew Moses searched for three days.

^{1xi} There are multiple reasons for why Egypt would sink Joseph's coffin; check the midrash.