



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

41 Pinchas — Serah, Daughter of Asher

Text

במדבר כו

מִן הַשֵּׁם בֵּת-אֲשֵׁר שְׂרָח.

Bamidbar 26

46 The name of Asher's daughter was Serah.

Context

Our parasha is named after the *kohen*-priest Pinchas who at the end of the last parasha impales an Israelite man, Cozbi, and a Midianite woman, Zimri, who are fornicating and worshipping Ba'al-Peor. In our parasha, Pinchas receives the reward of an eternal covenant of peace and priesthood for staying divine anger that is the cause of a plague. Moshe and his son Elazar take a census of the tribes and their descendants in order to apportion shares of the Promised Land. The daughters of Zelophchad who have no brother successfully petition to receive their family's portion. God instructs Moshe to prepare to die once he has seen the land from a distance. At Moshe's request, God appoints Yehoshua to succeed Moshe, to lead the Israelites onward into the land. Aharon's son, Elazar is charged to commission Yehoshua as the new leader. The last part of the parasha sets out the order of the regular ritual sacrifices – daily, weekly, monthly, and for the festivals – portions of which we read on *Rosh Hodesh*-the new moon, on *Rosh Hashana*-the New Year, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Pesach, and Shavuot.

Explorations

Throughout the Torah, we encounter lists of families and descendants – from the genealogies in Bereishit (chapters 4, 5, and 10) to the census records in Bamidbar (chapters 1, 2 and 26). The Tanakh scholar Nahum Sarna comments about the inclusion of Serah daughter of Asher in the Bereishit genealogy of chapter 46,

It is inconceivable that Jacob's twelve sons, who themselves had fifty-three sons in all, should have had only one daughter. In light of the general tendency to omit women from the genealogies, there must be some extraordinary reason for mentioning her in this particular one, although no hint of it is given in the text. (JPS Tanakh on Ber 46:17)

The census lists mention women only three times – the daughters of Zelophchad; Serah bat Asher; and Yocheved and Miriam. Two of the occurrences of women in the census are in our parasha. Here we focus on the little-known figure, Serah, mentioned in our parasha (chapter 26:46).

The list of tribe members remarkably tells of five sisters who receive their family's land allotment - the daughters of Zelophchad (see study link below). In addition, a daughter of Yakov's son Asher is named – Serah. *Ramban* comments on our verse, Bamidbar 26:46,

The name of Asher's daughter was Serah. “Because she was still alive [at the end of Israel's period of bondage in Egypt, and after forty years in the desert, and was one of the seventy people mentioned in Genesis 46 who went down to Egypt with Jacob], Scripture mentions her here.” That



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is Rashi’s comment. And Onkelos translates [the verse as follows]: “and the name of the daughter of Asher’s spouse’s first spouse, was Serah.” By this he intended to say that she was a daughter that possesses an inheritance [in the Land in her own right] (Bamidbar 36:8), and therefore Scripture mentions her here just as it mentions the daughters of Zelophehad, for [Serah] is included amongst [those referred to in the verse], Among these the Land shall be divided (26:53).

Now had she been the daughter of Asher himself, she would not have inherited [a portion in the Land], since he had male children [as stated in Verse 44]. But [Serah] was the daughter of [Asher’s] spouse from another man [namely Asher’s spouse’s first spouse], who did not have a son; therefore his inheritance [in the Land] passed to his daughter. In that case, the reason [why Scripture uses the phrase] and Serah their sister (Ber. 46:17) is because she was a [half-]sister to Asher’s sons, but was not his daughter. And therefore it says [here], The name of Asher’s daughter was Serah, and it does not say “and Asher’s daughter [was Serah],” because [the intention of the verse] is to say that her name was [i.e., she was known as] “Asher’s daughter,” and she was [actually] called Serah.

Now if she were still alive [at the end of the period of Israel’s sojourn in the desert], as Rashi explains, then she was like the daughters of Zelophehad as regards [receiving] an inheritance [in the Land in her own right], but if she had died [by then, Scripture mentions her here to indicate that] her family received [a portion in the Land] because of her [since she was amongst those who went down to Egypt].

According to the simple meaning of the text, Serah had a large family which was called by her name, and she is included in the phrase, These are the families of the sons of Asher according to those that were numbered (47). Scripture, however, did not want to trace their ancestry to a woman, by saying: “Of Serah, the family of the Serahites,” but instead [only] alluded to this matter.

Based on [Onkelos](#) who translates not, “*Asher’s* daughter’s name was *Serah*” but, “*Asher’s* stepdaughter’s name was *Serah*”, *Ramban* suggests that *Serah* (or her descendants) received a portion of land according to the ruling prompted by the daughters of Zelophchad. Therefore, all of the women appearing in the census in our parasha might be named because they receive a portion in the Promised Land.

Serah’s name appears in the Tanakh a few times. Beyond naming her, no details are offered about her life. According to the view accepted by Rashi, Serah lived a long life - from the time of Yakov through the time of Moses—a span of approximately four hundred years.

Many midrashim elaborate about her character and legendary wisdom. The stories fall into three main categories: in relation to Yakov, redemption scenes, and the wise woman at Avel-Beit-Ma’akha.



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1. In relation to Yakov

Preceding the descent of Yakov's family to Egypt, the following story tells of Serah,

When the ten sons of Yakov, returning from Egypt with Yosef's message, arrived at the border with Canaan they stopped. How should they approach Yakov? Yosef told them not to startle him lest he die from the shock. Furthermore, how would he believe them? ‘The words of a liar are never believed—even when they are telling the truth’ (Sanhedrin 89b).

Just then they caught sight of Serah. She was very beautiful, wise and skilled in playing the harp. They told her to play before Yakov and sing him the news. She sang the words: ‘Yosef, my uncle lives; he rules over the whole of Egypt; he is not dead!’ Yakov heard this several times and each time became more joyous until ‘his spirit awakened in him’ and he knew she was telling the truth (*Pirkei de Rabbi Eliezer* 37).

Continuing this story in a different version of the same legend, Yakov blesses Serah in return saying, “May you live forever and never die.” According to this midrash, Serah was eventually permitted to enter Heaven alive, something achieved only by [Enoch](#) and [Elijah](#) (*Midrash Avot*, 45).

Another midrash explains about the scene where Serah played music for Yakov that she awakened the spirit of prophecy in him. He blessed her [Serah] saying that for her act of kindness ‘The angel of death will not rule over her’ and she would live forever’ (*Alpha beta de ben Sirach* 13). Rashi points out that Serah is “still alive” (on Ber. 26:46).

2. Redemption Scenes

Serah counts among those who descended to Egypt: “The children of Asher: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Beri'ah, with Serah their sister.” (Ber. 46:17); and similarly in I Chronicles 7:30. According to a midrash, Serah went down to Egypt, and was enslaved there (*Pesikta de Rav Kahana* 7:8).

Serah appears in the genealogies in our parasha listing those who left Egypt and traveled through the wilderness back to the Promised Land (Bamidbar 26:46). Many stories elaborate Serah's role in redemption scenes.

One midrash tells of how the elders consult Serah to authenticate Moshe's role leading the redemption movement out of slavery in Egypt. She says at first that the miracles he performs are worthless. The elders then quote the phrase Moshe received in his revelation at the burning bush to promise redemption – *pakod pakadeti* – “I have visited with mercy and brought life/redemption” (Shmot 3:16). Serah reveals that this is indeed the code she learned from Asher her father that informs the Jewish people when redemption is immanent. Serah thereby confirms Moshe's legitimacy (*Pirkei di'Rabbi Eliezer* 48).

The following midrash elaborates a scene before the flight from Egypt,



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The sages taught: Come and see how beloved mitzvot were to Moshe Rabbenu. When all Israel was busy with the spoils (of Egypt), he was involved in mitzvot [taking the remains of Yosef out of Egypt, as Yosef had requested on his deathbed (Bereishit 50:25)] as it says: “The wise of heart take mitzvot but the prattling fool will stumble” (Proverbs 10:8). How did Moshe know where Yosef was buried? They said, “Serah bat Asher remains from that generation.” Moshe went to her and said, “Do you know where Yosef is buried?” She said, “The Egyptians buried him in an iron casket and placed it in the Nile so that its waters would become blessed.” Moshe went and stood at the banks of the Nile. He said, “Yosef, Yosef, the time has come that the Holy One, blessed be S/He, swore that S/He would redeem them. The time has also come for the oath that Israel swore (to bury Yosef in the land of Israel). If you show yourself, well and good. If not, we are free from your oath.” Immediately, Yosef’s casket floated to the surface. (Sotah 13a)

Serah's counsel enables Moshe to fulfill Yosef's will - to carry his bones forth in the Exodus from Egypt. Indeed, this is one of Serah's functions – to enable transmission of tradition from one generation to the next.

According to *Pesikta de Rav Kahana* (11:13) Serah appears one day while Rabbi Johanan was teaching and corrected his account of the crossing of the Reed Sea.

3. The Wise Woman at Avel-Beit-Ma'akha

Rashi cites a midrash that identifies a wise woman in chapter 20 of the Second Book of Shmuel with Serah daughter of Asher (on II Shmuel 20:16); the Radak agrees that the wise woman is Serah.

During a rebellion against King David, under Yoav's command, David's troops lay siege to Avel-Beit-Ma'akha in order to capture the traitor Sheva ben Bikhri. A woman intervenes by speaking directly with Yoav. She negotiates to save the city from destruction by decapitating Sheva and handing over his head to Yoav, thereby ending a civil war and averting destruction (see Bereishit Rabba 94.9).

In her conversation with Yoav, the woman appraises the worthiness of the people, their expectation to be consulted and to reach an agreement without violent conflict,

They [the inhabitants of Avel] were wont to speak at first, saying, 'They shall surely ask counsel at Avel; and so they ended the matter.' We are of them that are peaceable and faithful in Israel; do you seek to destroy a city and a mother in Israel? Why will you swallow up the inheritance of the Lord? (II Shmuel 20: 18-19)

Yoav accepts the woman's peaceful initiative, drops his plan to destroy the entire city, and proposes an alternative,

Yoav answered and said, “Far be it, far be it from me, that I should swallow up or destroy. The matter is not so; but a man of the hill-country of Efrayim, Sheva the son of Bikhri by name, has lifted up his hand against the king, even against David; deliver him only, and I will depart from the city.” (II Shmuel 20: 20-21)



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The woman makes a clear ethical judgment on behalf of the town – she deems the life of the already condemned traitor Sheva to be an acceptable price to secure the safety of the rest of the population, a small-scale redemption.

A leading rabbi of the past generation, Rabbi Soloveitchik asks why it is crucial that Serah play a role in redemption. He explains that the generation of the Exodus witnessed signs and wonders on an extraordinary scale (see eulogy for R. Chaim Heller in *Divrei Hagut ve’Ha’aracha*). The excitement evoked by those experiences could easily lead their generation to look down upon past generations. Soloveitchik's view highlights the importance of Serah's role as a person whose wisdom connects generations. Some compare her to the prophet Elisha who appears throughout history, and ultimately will herald the arrival of redemption.

Questions for Discussion

Patrilineage – tracing descent through the father's line - is part of the structure of patriarchy. Some feminist critics interpret the attempt to apply the male name as a means to assert control over the pregnancy-birth-lactation process. Whereas motherhood is explicit and evident, fatherhood is not determinable (until modern DNA testing). Trying to cope with the angst of uncertainty about paternity, Sigmund Freud considered patrilineage to be a logical deduction. (One of the exemplary works of feminist criticism of psycho-analysis is Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis*.)

How do you understand patrilineality and the absence of women's names from the genealogies and census records in the Torah? Many societies continue to erase women's family names when they marry, and name children after the father. What ought we to do about this patriarchy today – in the Torah, and where we find it in society?

In the case of Avel-Beit-Ma'akha, the person whose life is taken to save the town is considered a traitor to the sovereign. Evaluate the ethical considerations in sacrificing one person to save the lives of an entire town. What would you have done in Serah's situation – when Yoav lays siege to your town?

While Elisha the prophet and harbinger of redemption figures largely in Jewish ceremonies and legends, Serah is barely known, though her character is legendary and in some ways similar. Consider how Serah might be integrated meaningfully into Jewish ceremonies and rituals.

Most cultures have traditions about wise people who appear at fortuitous moments. To what extent does Serah speak in a gendered voice? - “We are of them that are peaceable and faithful in Israel; do you seek to destroy a city and a mother in Israel?” How does the gender of the character affect his/her role? How do we and or ought we to view women's wisdom differently, if at all, from men's? Explain how and to what extent the differences are acquired through culture.



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Study Links

For a discussion of the inheritance rules that developed from the initiative of the daughters of Zelophchad in our parasha, see the 8th installment of *10 Biblical Women Weeks*, “[Machla, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milkah & Noah - Proper Pro-Portions.](#)”

[This website](#) about the customs and observances of Iranian Jews reports,

Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are the most important holy days and are occasion for *ziyarat* ("pilgrimage") to the shrine of Serah bat Asher in the village of Lenjan, near Esfahān.

German author Thomas Mann considered his novel *Joseph and his Brothers* to be his greatest work. In it, he composed an eloquent version of the scene between Serah and Yakov - she strummed “with dainty tanned fingers”. While Serah indeed softens the shock of the feigned death of Yakov's favorite son, Yosef, ultimately she is participating in a deception. Her song is lovely even while it is disturbing. Paul Bishop comments about the scene in the [Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann](#),

In Mann’s works, it is the relationship between the aesthetic and the moral that, time and again, he investigates; indeed, that is their central theme. . . . In the final book of the Joseph tetralogy, Jacob warns Serach that ‘poesy is always a dangerous, seductive and tempting thing’, because ‘the essence of song [Liederwesen] is unfortunately not far from dissoluteness [Liederlichkeit]’, adding: ‘The game is beautiful, but the spirit is holy’ (Joseph the Provider, Part vi: ‘The Holy Game,’ ‘Annunciation’; v, 1712).

Serah often appears in scenes of tremendous ethical, spiritual and aesthetic momentum.

Leila Leah Broner writes about Serah in the [introduction](#) to her book, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*,

No more than a mere name on genealogical lists in Scripture, Serah is transformed by the rabbis into a visionary, an advisor heeded by no less a leader than Moses himself.

Evidently, the sages found Serah to be a character worthy of elaboration. Ancient traditions were transmitted about her, generation to generation, traditions that did not balk at her gender.

Summary of Issues

Serah daughter of Asher is mentioned in the Torah a number of times, but there are no details about her life. Rabbinic sources elaborate tales about a wise woman who takes important initiatives to ensure the continuity of Jewish experience across generations and toward the redemption of her people. In the legends, and through our inquiry, Serah lives eternal life.



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Methods & Observations

Investigating lesser-known women who are named in the Torah refreshes with new insights about ancient society and how rabbinic traditions seek to elaborate their lives and significance, empowering an otherwise pale figure from biblical texts. The Torah text is not self-contained, but rather enmeshed in ancient and new interpretations. Posing challenging questions about the scarcity of women characters and biographies is part of the process that ensures the vitality and relevance of the Torah in every generation.

Contact

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