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CBE Kabbalat Shabbat: Parashat Vayigash

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Serach Bat Asher and the Legacy of 2020

In trying to come out with its annual Word of the Year, the publisher of the Oxford English dictionary said that “What struck the team as most distinctive in 2020 was the sheer scale and scope of change...[the pandemic] was experienced globally and by its nature changed the way we express every other thing that happened this year.”¹ We may feel like 2020 has aged us about four hundred years, like we’ve lived a lifetime of global events over the course of one year. There is no guarantee of a happy ending in 2021, no Exodus miracle to redeem us from this broken world. But that’s not the end of the story...

In Parashat Vayigash, we see the happy conclusion of the Joseph story that has been unfolding for the past few weeks. Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, resulting in a joyful, tear-filled reunion. Eventually, Joseph’s whole family moves down to Egypt, where they can live out the rest of the famine in the stability of Pharaoh (and Joseph’s) government. And they lived happily ever after. But, of course, that isn’t the end of our story, and happy endings rarely last...

I’d love to focus tonight on an often overlooked part of this Torah portion. As Jacob’s clan is relocating to Egypt, we get one of those long lists that often happens in the Torah: a meticulous genealogy of seemingly endless names. For example, in chapter 46 verse 17, we get a list of the family members of one of Jacob’s sons, Asher:

“Asher’s sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah, and their sister Serah. Beriah’s sons: Heber and Malchiel.” (Gen. 46:17)

The rabbis have an interesting observation about one particular name on that list: Asher’s daughter, Serach. You see, Asher’s clan consists mostly of the male heirs: four sons and two grandsons. But there is one daughter thrown in the mix, Serach, also known as Serach bat Asher,

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/22/arts/oxford-word-of-the-year-coronavirus.html?searchResultPosition=2>

Serach the daughter of Asher. Other than being one of the few women mentioned by name in the Torah, her name actually appears twice. After her first mention in this parashah, she is again mentioned in Numbers 26 as part of a census of the Israelites that Moses conducts right before they enter the land of Israel.² Serach is explicitly listed as both being part of the group that *entered* the land of Egypt and the group that *left* Egypt and entered the Promised Land four hundred years later. So how is it possible for the same woman to be present in both of those biblical events that supposedly took place centuries apart?

Rashi explains that the second mention of Serach in Numbers 26 proves that Serach was still alive at the time of the post-Exodus wandering in the desert. And cue the bible fanfiction! When you start looking into the name of Serach bat Asher, you'll find that she starts popping up all over the Talmud, the midrash, the Zohar, and even in historical accounts. The rabbis imagined the mysterious Serach as a wise keeper of memory, as a holy mother in Israel, and even as a transmitter of the secrets of redemption.

The commentators created an origin story to explain Serach's long life. When Joseph's brothers came home to tell their father the news that Joseph was still alive, they worried that if they tried to tell Jacob the good news all at once, he would be so stunned that he would not be able to process the information, and might even die from shock. Enter Serach, their niece. According to the midrash, Serach was an "exceptionally wise" young woman who also happened to play the harp. So the brothers asked her if she would deliver the news to Jacob using her music, so that he would be able to process it in a gentler, more soothing way. The midrash describes Serach's song repeating the news that Joseph is alive, once, twice, three times, until "joy entered [Jacob's] heart due to the gratifying nature of her words. The spirit of God came upon him, and he knew all her words were true." So thankful was Jacob for Serach's song that he blessed her, saying, "My daughter, death will never rule over you, eternally, for you have revitalized my spirit" (*Sefer HaYashar*, Book of Genesis, Vayigash, Ch. 14).

Jacob blessed Serach with eternal life, and she became the "leftover," the one person who was able to witness all of the most formative moments of our people's history: entering Egypt, the Exodus, Revelation, and entering into the land of Israel. Yet she also lived through great suf-

² "The name of Asher's daughter was Serah." (Numbers 26:46)

fering: four hundred years of slavery in Egypt, brutal violence and war, and even the exile, after which Serach is believed to have traveled with her people to Persia and lived on for many more years. There is actually a synagogue named after Serach in the Persian city of Isfahan, in modern-day Iran. Legends say that Serach bat Asher lived in this community until about 1133 CE, when she was allegedly buried in their local cemetery. Accounts say that there was a tombstone bearing her name there, but it disappeared in the late nineteenth century. Serach's tomb is one of the most famous pilgrimage sites for Persian Jews, with its own unique folklore and magical legends attributed to it over the centuries.

Beyond her legacy as a wise woman, Serach is believed to carry the “secret of redemption.” It turns out that there was some sort of secret, delivered from Jacob to Joseph, from Joseph to his brothers, and then from Asher to his daughter Serach. What was the secret? Well it has something to do with the word *lifkod*, to visit or to remember:

פקוד יפקוד אלהים

“God will surely visit you” (Gen. 50:24)

In the Exodus story, when Moses appeared with Aaron out of nowhere as the savior of the enslaved Israelites, the people tried to figure out whether they should trust this guy or not. Who did they ask? None other than Serach. The elders of Israel said to Serach, “This random guy appeared and started performing miracles. Should we trust him?” She said to them: “No. Those signs aren't real.” Then they said to her: “Well, he said this phrase *pakod yifkod*, ‘God will surely visit you.’ Are you sure we shouldn't trust him?” Then she changed her mind, and said: “Actually, yes! He is the man who will redeem Israel in the future from Egypt.” From then on, the people believed in God and in Moses, God's messenger, as it is says, ‘And the people believed when they heard *ki fakad Adonai*, that God *had visited* the children of Israel’ (Ex. 4:31).”³ It was the phrase *pakod yifkod* that somehow held the secret to redemption.

³ Pirkey DeRabbi Eliezer 48:17

If this year has taught us anything, it is that life is sacred, and every person deserves to be treated with dignity. Our human compassion connects us to one another, even when we cannot be physically close together. As we enter the final Shabbat in 2020, a year filled with so much suffering and pain felt across the world, perhaps we can draw strength from the wisdom and experience of Serach. Much of Serach's wisdom comes from the firsthand experience she had, living through slavery, exodus, war, and exile. Yet midrash scholar Dr. Tamar Kadari teaches that "Serach's appearance [in the text] seemingly confirms that God's promises will be fulfilled."⁴ Perhaps the appearance of Serach in this week's Torah portion, at the tail end of 2020, can act as our beacon of hope. We are the witnesses, the survivors who carry the memories and traumas with us, moments of love, and moments of pain. We are the ones who will be able to say, from firsthand experience, what 2020 was really like. Like Serach, we too can bring our acquired wisdom and a pursuit of truth into this next stage of history, whatever 2021 may bring. May we all carry forth the legacy of Serach, knowing where we have been, and entering the new year with hope and the wisdom of experience.

⁴ <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/serah-daughter-of-asher-midrash-and-aggadah>