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Serach bat Asher

In the Passover Haggadah we say “the more one talks about the Exodus, the more praise one deserves.” With this in mind, the following texts will examine a little known figure from the Exodus story, Serach the daughter of Asher. As you will see, Midrashic literature links Serach to the Exodus story and the rest of Jewish history. Serach offers a wonderful female character to incorporate into the Passover story. As her character is developed in the midrashic sources, she also raises important questions about Jewish memory. As you read through the sources, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Can you think of any underlying themes that her character brings out?
2. What is the connection between the different historical events with which Serach is associated?
3. How would you incorporate Serach into a Passover Seder?
4. What kind of programs could you develop using the Serach sources?

We start by looking at the two verses in the Torah in which Serach’s name appears:

Genesis 46:17

וּבְנֵי אֲשֵׁר יִמְנָה וַיִּשָׁוֶה וַיִּשְׁוִי וּבְרִיעָה וְשָׂרַח אֲחֹתָם וּבְנֵי בְרִיעָה חֶבֶר וּמְלִכִיאֵל:

Asher’s sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah, and their sister Serach. Beriah’s sons: Heber and Malchiel.

Numbers 26:46

וְשֵׁם בֵּת אֲשֵׁר שָׂרַח:

The name of Asher’s daughter was Serach.

Curiously, Serach’s name is included in two censuses that occurred hundreds of years apart. The first census, from Genesis, is of those people who went down to Egypt with Jacob. The second is the census of the Children of Israel in the desert as they are about to enter the Land of Canaan. The Midrashic literature picks up on this.

Braita de-Seder Olam Rabba, Chapter 9

סָרַח בַּת אֲשֵׁר הִיְתָה מִבְּנֵי מִצְרַיִם וּמִיּוֹצֵאֶיהָ מִבְּנֵי מִצְרַיִם דְּכָתִיב (בראשית מ"ו) וְסָרַח אֲחֹתָם. וּמִבְּנֵי

הארץ שנאמר (במדבר כ"ו) ושם בת אשר סרח. ויוכבד היתה מבאי מצרים ט) ומיוצאיה.

Serach the daughter of Asher was among those who came to Egypt and among those who left Egypt. She was among those who came to Egypt, as it says "and Serach their sister" (Genesis 46:17). She was among those who entered the land [of Canaan], as it says, "The name of Asher's daughter was Serach" (Numbers 26:46).

Batei Midrashot, Section 2 -- Midrash "Eshet Chayil"

פיה פתחה בחכמה זו שרח בת אשר שלא טעמה טעם מיתה

Her mouth is full of wisdom (Proverbs 31:26) -- This refers to Serach the daughter of Asher who did not taste the taste of death.

1. Why is it important to have someone who came down to Egypt with Jacob still be around for the Exodus led by Moses?

Why did Serach merit to never die? A couple of Midrashim attempt to answer this question.

Midrash ha-Gadol, Genesis, 46:25

[The brothers said:] If we tell him [Jacob] right away "Joseph is alive!" perhaps he will have a stroke. What did they do? They said to Serach the daughter of Asher, "Tell our father Jacob that Joseph is still alive, and he is in Egypt." What did she do? She waited until he was standing in prayer, and then said in a tone of wonder, "Joseph is in Egypt/ There have been born on his knees/ Menashe and Ephraim." [Yosef be-mitzraim/ Yuldu lo al birkayim/ Menashe ve-Ephraim.]

Otzar ha-Midrashim (Eisenstein) page 35

אמר לו מפני מה מלאך המות שולט בכל הבריות חוץ מדורו של מלחם העוף, אמר לו ולא דורו של מלחם העוף בלבד אין מלאך המות שולט במי כי אם דורו של יונדב, ויש אומרים אנשים מבני אדם נכנסו בחיים בגן עדן. (כ"א) אמר לו מי הם? אמר לו חנוך וסרח בת אשר, ובתיה בת פרעה וחירם מלך צור, ואליעזר עבד אברהם ועבד מלך הכושי, ועבדו של רבי יהודה, ויעבץ, ורבי יהושע בן לוי, וכל זרע יונדב וזרעו של מלחם העוף. א"ל [ולמה? א"ל] אני אספר לך: ..סרח בת אשר בעבור שאמרה ליעקב יוסף חי אמר לה יעקב זה הפה שבשרני על יוסף שהוא חי לא יטעום טעם מות...

It was asked, why does the Angel of Death have control over all creatures except for the generation of Malchas ha-Of? They replied, it is not only the generation of Malchas ha-Of, over which the Angel of Death has no dominion, but also the generation of Yonadav, and some say that there are humans who entered alive into the Garden of Eden. They are: Chanoch, **Serach the daughter of Asher**, Eliezer Abraham's servant, the servant of the Kushite king, the servant of Rabbi Yehudah, Ya'abetz, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, and all of the descendants of Yonadav and of Malchas ha-Of. It was asked why [did these people merit never dying]?...**Serach the daughter of Asher, because she told Jacob that Joseph is still alive. Jacob said, this mouth that informed me that Joseph is still alive will never taste taste of death....**

Your Midrash Navigator

1. Do you think that Serach's serving as a news bearer is merit to live forever? Why or why not?
2. Why did the brothers choose Serach to inform Jacob that Joseph is still alive?
3. Why does Serach inform Jacob that Joseph is alive in a poem?
4. Note that Serach is the only woman listed in the last Mishnah as people over whom the Angel of Death has no dominion.
5. Can you think of any reasons why the people listed in our Midrash merited to "enter alive into the Garden of Eden"?

Serach's character is further developed in other Midrashic sources. In the first set of sources she plays a major role in the Exodus from Egypt.

Yalkut Shimoni, Genesis, 12:64

רבי אליעזר אומר חמש אותיות נכפלו וכולן לשון גאולה. ך"ך שבו נגאל אבינו אברהם מאור כשדים שנאמר לך לך מארצך. ם"ם בו נגאל אבינו יצחק מיד פלשתים שנאמר לך מעמנו כי עצמת ממנו מאד. ן"ן בו נגאל אבינו יעקב מיד עשו שנאמר הצילני נא. ף"ף בו נגאלו ישראל ממצרים פקד פקדתי. ק"ק בו עתיד הקב"ה לגאול לישראל בסוף מלכות רביעית שנאמר איש צמח שמו ותחתיו יצמח וכולן נמסרו לאברהם. אברהם מסר ליצחק ויצחק ליעקב ויעקב ליוסף ויוסף לאחיו שאמר להם פקד יפקד אלהים אתכם. ואשר בן יעקב מסר סוד גאולה לסרח בתו וכשבאו משה ואהרן אל זקני ישראל ועשו אותות לעיניהם הלכו זקני ישראל אצל סרח בת אשר אמרו לה בא אדם אחד ועשה אותות לעינינו כך וכך א"ל אין באותות הללו ממש א"ל והלא אמר פקד פקדתי א"ל הוא האיש לגאול את ישראל בא שכך שמעתי מאבא ף"ף מיד ויאמן העם:

Rabbi Eliezer says, five letters were doubled and all of them indicate redemption. *Kaf-kaf* with which Abraham our forefather was redeemed from Or Casdim, as it says *leCH leCHa* "Go forth from your native land" (Genesis 12:1). *Mem-mem* with which our forefather Isaac was redeemed from the Philistines, as it says *ki atzamta mi-menu me-od* "And Avimelech said to Isaac, 'Go away from us, for you have become far too big for us'" (Genesis 26:16). *Nun-nun* with which our forefather Jacob was redeemed from Esau, as it says *hatzileni na* "Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother from the hand of Esau" (Genesis 32:18). *Peh-peh* with which Israel was redeemed from Egypt [as it says] *pakod pakadeti* "Go and assemble the leaders of Israel and say to them: the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, 'I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt'" (Exodus 3:16). *Tzadi-tzadi* with which God will redeem the Children of Israel at the end of the current exile, as it says *ish tzemach shemo u-mitachtav yitzmach u-vana et heichal Adonay* "and say to him, 'Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Behold, a man called the Branch shall branch out from the place where he is, and he shall build the Temple of the Lord'" (Zechariah 6:12). All of them were given to Abraham. Abraham passed them to Isaac, and Isaac to Jacob. Jacob passed them to Joseph, and Joseph to his brothers, as it says *pakod yifkad Elohim etchem* "The Lord will surely remember you" (Genesis 50:24). Asher, the son of Jacob, passed the secret of redemption to Serach his daughter. When Moses and Aaron came to the elders of Israel and performed signs in front of them, the elders went to Serach the daughter of Asher and said to her. "One man has come and performed signs in front of us." She said, "there is no significance in these signs." They

said to her, “he said ‘*pakod pakadeti.*’” She said, “the man who will redeem Israel has come. For I have heard from my father [the secret of] *peh-peh*. Immediately, “and the people were convinced” (Exodus 4:31).

1. Why did Asher pass the signs to Serach, his daughter?
2. Why is Serach the only woman entrusted with the signs of redemption?
3. How did the elders know to go to Serach to see if Moses was the true redeemer?

Yalkut Shimoni, Deuteronomy 34:965

ויקבר אותו בגי' במה זכה משה שהקב"ה נתעסק בו אלא בשעה שהיו ישראל עסוקין בביזה היה מסבב את העיר שלשה ימים ושלשה לילות למצוא ארונו של יוסף ולא מצאו, אחר שנתיגע הרבה פגעה בו סרח בת אשר אמרה לו רבינו משה למה אתה יגע כל כך, אמר לה [שלשה ימים ושלשה לילות סבבתי את העיר] לבקש ארונו של יוסף ואיני מוצאו, אמרה לו בוא עמי הוליכו לנהר נילוס, אמרה לו במקום הזה עשו ארון של עופרת של חמש מאות ככרים ונתנוהו בתוכו וחתומוהו והשליכוהו בתוך הנחל, שהחרטומים אמרו לפרעה רצונך שלא תצא אומה זו מתחת ידיך עשה שלא ימצאו עצמות יוסף ולא יצאו מכאן לעולם שכך השביעו, מיד עמד משה על הנחל ואמר יוסף יוסף אתה ידעת היאך השבעת את ישראל פקד פקד ותן כבוד לאלהי ישראל ואל תעכב גאולתן של ישראל, מעשים יש לך בקש רחמים לפני בוראך ועלה מן התהום, מיד התחיל ארונו לפעפעע ועולה מן התהום כקנה אחד, נטלו על כתפו וסבלו וכל ישראל אחריו מסובלים כספס וזהבם, אמר לו הקב"ה אם בעיניך דבר קטן שעשית חסד, גדול הוא בעיני שלא השגחת בכסף וזהב ואף אני ארד בכבודי ובעצמי לעשות עמך חסד כשתפטר מן העולם

He buried him in the valley (Deut. 34:6) Why did Moses merit to have God bury him? At the time that Israel was occupied with the spoils of Egypt (before they left Egypt they were told to get gold and silver and other riches from the Egyptians, see Exodus 11:2-3), Moses walked around the city for three days and three nights looking for Joseph's coffin, and didn't find it. After he troubled himself greatly, he met Serach the daughter of Asher. She asked him, “Moses, our teacher, why are so troubled?” He said, “for three days and three nights I have wandered around the city searching for Joseph's coffin and I haven't found it.” She said, “Come with me” and led him to the Nile River. She said, “In this place they made a coffin of lead that weights 500 talents, put Joseph inside it and sent it into the river.” For the magicians had told Pharaoh, “If you do not want this people to leave from under your rule, make it so they won't find Joseph's bones and they will never leave, because Joseph made them take an oath.” Immediately Moses stood by the river and said, “Joseph, Joseph: You know how you made Israel take an oath, ‘God will surely remember you...’ (Genesis 50:24). Give honor to the God of Israel, and do not delay Israel's redemption. You have good deeds in your favor, ask for mercy from your Creator and arise from the depths!” Immediately the coffin began to crumble and rise out of the depths like a single reed. Moses took it on his shoulders and carried it. All of Israel was behind him carrying their silver and gold. God said to Moses, “If in your eyes it is a light matter that you did kindness, it is great in My eyes that you did not concern yourself with gold and silver. I will descend with My honor and by Myself to do kindness to you when you depart this world.”

1. Why was Serach not with the rest of Israel gathering gold and silver?
2. What would Moses have done if Serach did not show him Joseph's burial place? Would the Israelites have been redeemed?
3. Is Serach properly rewarded for her role in finding Joseph's coffin? Why or why not?

Tradition connects Serach to another incident that happened hundreds of years after the Exodus from Egypt. During the reign of King David, a man named Sheva ben Bichri led a rebellion against David. David's general, Yoav, pursued Sheva to the town of Avel, where he laid siege to the city. A wise woman from the city approached Yoav and asked why he would destroy the entire city. Yoav answered that his intention was not to destroy the city, but only to kill Sheva ben Bichri. The woman delivered Sheva ben Bichri's head to Yoav and the city was saved. (See 2 Samuel 20)

The following Midrashim discuss this story:

Midrash Mishley Chapter 31

פיה פתחה בחכמה ותורת חסד על לשונה. זו האשה שדברה אל יואב, שהצילה את העיר בחכמתה, וזו סרח בת אשר

Her mouth is full of wisdom (Proverbs 31:26) -- This refers to the woman who spoke to Yoav and saved the city with her wisdom. And she is Serach the daughter of Asher.

Midrash Agadat Breishit, Chapter 22

אמר אברהם לפני ה"ה רבש"ע צופה אני ברוח הקודש שהאשה פולטת עיר שלימה ואני איני כדאי לפלט חמשת כרכים הללו ואיזה אשה זו שהצילה את העיר זו סרח בת אשר בשעה שמרד שבע בן בכרי וברח מן דוד באבלה

Abraham said before the Holy One Blessed be He: "Master of the universe, I see with my prophetic vision that a woman is going to save an entire city, yet I am not worthy to save these five towns." Who is the woman that saved an entire city? Serach the daughter of Asher, when Sheva ben Bichri ran away from David to Avel.

1. Is Serach greater than Abraham? Why or why not?

Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 11:13

ר' יוחנן הוה יתיב דרש כיצד היו המים עשויין לישר' כחומה דרש ר' יוחנן כאילין קנקילייא אדיקת שרח בת אשר ואמרת תמן הוינא ולא הוון אלא כאילין אמפומטא

Rabbi Yochanan was sitting and expounding, how the waters were made into a wall for Israel. Rabbi Yochanan explained they were like opaque walls. Serach the daughter of Asher grew angry and said, "I was there and they were like nets!"

1. Why is Serach angry at Rabbi Yochanan? Is her anger justified?