

Serah5 Bat Asher:

Biblical Origins, Ancient Aggadah and Contemporary Folklore

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If there ever was a legend that is the product of the collective Jewish imagination, it certainly must be the legend of the remarkable woman known as Serah5 bat Asher.

Serah5 in the Bible

The Hebrew Bible mentions her only three times, revealing little more than her name and family lineage. She makes her first brief appearance in one of those long and rather tedious sounding genealogical lists (Genesis 46:17): "The sons of Asher: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah, and their sister Serah5." From here we learn that Serah5 was the daughter of Asher (bat Asher in Hebrew) who was the son of the Patriarch Jacob. From the larger context of this passage we learn that Serah5 was one of those seventy souls who made up the household of her grandfather Jacob when they went down to Egypt to join Joseph who had risen to power there. Nahum Sarna, in his Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary on Genesis, makes the following perceptive comment on Genesis 46:17:

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.¹

Significantly, Serah5 is mentioned again in the much more extensive genealogical list based on the census of the Israelites who left Egypt at the time of the Exodus (Numbers 26:44-47, 51; cf. 1 Chr 7:30):

Descendants of Asher by their clans: Of Imnah, the clan of the Imnites; of Ishvi, the clan of the Ishvites; of Beriah, the clan of the Beriites. Of the descendants of Beriah: Of Heber, the clan of the Heberites; of Malchiel, the clan of the Malchielites ...

And then among all this painstaking genealogical detail, the biblical text suddenly seems to have a flash of recollection, and interjects: "The name of Asher's daughter was Serah⁵" (Num 44:46). And then the census rolls on with mathematical precision: "These are the clans of Asher's descendants; persons enrolled: 53,400 ... This is the enrollment of the Israelites: 601,730" (Num 44:47,50). Note that by this time the household of Jacob had grown from an extended family of 70 to the Israelite nation numbering over 600,000—and yet Serah⁵, Jacob's granddaughter, is mentioned by name and it would seem with some emphasis. Jacob Milgrom, in his Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary to Numbers (to Numbers 26:46), notes that Serah⁵ is one of the only females in the genealogical lists and adds suggestively: "... her presence remains a mystery."²

Serah⁵ of the Sages

The mystery of this unique female figure increases exponentially when she captured the imagination of the Rabbis of the talmudic period. For they seem to have reasoned that if Serah⁵ was mentioned by name in the census list of those who made the Exodus, she must have still been alive at that time. And thus, according to the sages, this same woman who came down from Canaan to Egypt in the time of Joseph was still alive and well several hundred years later when Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian enslavement on their way through the desert to the Promised Land. This seemingly insignificant interpretive innovation takes on great importance when we note that after Joseph dies at the close of the book of Genesis, the book of Exodus (1:8) opens with the following rather ominous note: "And Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that

generation ... And there arose a new king over Egypt who knew not Joseph" Thus the Rabbinic Serah⁵ seems to provide a link between the death of Joseph and the birth of the next great Israelite leader, Moses. Indeed one Rabbinic text (Pesiqta de Rav Kahana, Be-shalah, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 189) specifically puts the following allusive statement in the mouth of Serah⁵: ןַנְינְיַמ יְתַמְלִיחַ יְנָא םַנְיַמ יְתַמְלִיחַ יְנָא .לַרְצֵי לְוִי Which might be expansively translated: "I completed the number of seventy Children of Israel who accompanied Jacob to Egypt (see further below). I linked one faithful leader of Israel, Joseph (who is called םַנְיַמ, 'faithful,' in Genesis 39:4), with the next faithful leader of Israel, Moses (who is called םַנְיַמ, 'faithful,' in Numbers 12:7)."

Once it was determined that Serah⁵ "spanned the generations" between Joseph and Moses, and having granted her such remarkable longevity, it is perhaps only natural that the Sages included this extraordinary woman among those few immortals who "never tasted the taste of death" and "entered Paradise alive" (Yalqut Shimoni II, remez 367, Derekh Eretz 1:18). No wonder that this female figure from the beginning of Israelite history—about whom so little is said in the Bible, but who remained alive throughout subsequent generations—provided an irresistible stimulus for those who crafted Jewish legend throughout the ages.

Unfortunately what has come down to us about the legend of Serah⁵ in the classical texts of Talmud and Midrash is painfully fragmentary. All that seems to survive are snippets of traditions in which Serah⁵ seems to suddenly appear, and then disappear, only to reappear at critical moments in Jewish history. One of my personal dreams is to try to reweave these separate strands into what must have once been a contiguous and richly woven tapestry of legend about Serah⁵—one flowing narrative telling her epic story from the days of Jacob until the final redemption. Let me show you the some of the

threads I have so far managed to gather. The following discussion has no pretense of being an "exhaustive" recitation of the many Serah5 legends.

Jacob's Blessing of Immortality

One of the earliest episodes in Serah5's life explains how it was that she was granted immortality. Ironically, this legend is found, in its fullest form, in one of our latest midrashic sources (compare Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis 46:17). Sefer Ha-Yashar (Va-Yigash), which was apparently written in Italy in the 16th century, tells the following story:

Jacob's sons, who had sold their brother Joseph into slavery and told their father he was dead, later discovered Joseph was second only to Pharaoh in Egypt. And the brothers now had to somehow tell Jacob that Joseph his son and their brother was still alive. Afraid of breaking this news to their elderly father too suddenly, they decided to employ Asher's daughter, Serah5, since she knew how to play the harp in a soothing manner. At their instigation, she sat near Jacob—according to one parallel (Midrash Ha-Gadol to Gen 45:26) while he was deep in daily prayer—and sang repeatedly: "Joseph my uncle is alive and rules over the land of Egypt". Not only was Jacob understandably delighted with this lyric revelation. But, "the spirit of God came upon him and he knew that all she said was true." And so Jacob blessed Serah5 ... and said to her: "My child, may death never rule over you for you brought my spirit back to life."

Notice how this rabbinic retelling differs daringly from the biblical narrative (Genesis 45:25-28) while creatively reworking biblical materials. For in the biblical text it is simply Jacob's sons who tell him: "Joseph is still alive and he rules over the land of Egypt." However, the biblical narrative goes on to relate that Jacob's "heart fainted and

he believed them not," until he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him back to Egypt. Only then "the spirit of Jacob their father revived."

Serah5 Receives and Reveals the Secret of Redemption

Serah5 received via Jacob and her father Asher yet another redemptive secret. According to another legend (Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer 48, Exodus Rabbah 5:13), there was a secret password that would be known by one who was to redeem Israel from Egyptian enslavement. This verbal sign was given to Abraham, apparently at the time of the Covenant of the Pieces in Genesis Chapter 15, which predicts this enslavement and its eventual end. Abraham handed this secret of redemption on to Isaac and Isaac to Jacob. Jacob passed it on to Joseph, and Joseph shared it with his brothers at the time of his death in Egypt (Genesis 50:24-25).

And Joseph said to his brothers, "I die, but God will surely visit you (ukta dwqpy dwqp uyhlaw), and bring you up out of this land to the land of which he swore to Avraham, to Isaac and to Jacob." And Joseph made the children of Israel take an oath, saying, "God will surely visit you (dwqp ukta uyhla dwqpy), and you shall carry up my bones from here."

The legend goes on that Asher handed on this secret password dwqpy dwqp ukta uyhla, "God will surely redeem you," not to any of his sons but to his daughter Serah5. And wisely too, for as we have learned it was Serah5 who survived into the generation of Moses. When Moses came to the Elders of Israel and performed miracles before them to prove that he had been sent by God to lead Israel out of Egyptian enslavement, the people immediately believed—according to the biblical narrative (Exodus 4:29- 31a). But according to the rabbinic legend, the Elders first went and consulted with Serah5. She told them: "These miracles are worthless!" But when they

then told her, 'Moses has also brought what he says is the word of God, (מִקְטָא יִתְדַּקֵּן דְּוִקֵּן) 'surely I have redeemed you' (compare Exod. 3:16, 4:31b), immediately Serah⁵ said: 'This is the man who will redeem Israel from Egypt for this is the secret password that I learned from my father.'

The Whereabouts of Joseph's Bones (Exod. 13:19)

Perhaps the most famous Serah⁵ legend is about how she helps Moses discover where Joseph's bones lay hidden in Egypt. The rich variety of traditions about the whereabouts of Joseph's bones are based on Exodus (13:17-20), which relates how the Israelites actually left Egypt, after Pharaoh relented from his previous refusal.

Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds. Now the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt. And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath of the Children of Israel, saying, "God will be sure to take notice of you: then shall you carry up my bones from here with you." They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness.

Sensitive readers of the biblical text perceived what seems to be a disturbance in the smooth flow of the biblical narrative. The statement "Moses took with him the bones of Joseph," seems to have been inserted, almost as an afterthought, into a more general description of how the entire people of Israel left Egypt, and particularly by what route. To further complicate matters, the continuation of this curious verse suggests that Joseph had made the oath concerning his bones incumbent, not upon any single Israelite leader, but upon all the Children of Israel. Modern biblical scholarship is quick to point out that

the this somewhat elliptical passage in Exodus simply serves to recall and resolve the fuller story related at the end of the book of Genesis (50:22-26, partly quoted above). We have already noted the break in the continuity of generations suggested by the beginning of the book of Exodus (1:6-8). This discontinuity explains why most Israelites living in Egypt at the time of the Exodus did not know about Joseph's oath to take up his bones with them when they left. Clearly only someone possessed with a very special kind of wisdom, such as Moses, could know to fulfill such a long forgotten command. But the question remained: How did Moses know where to find Joseph's earthly remains which had been buried by the Egyptian embalmers? The Sages answered this question by again summoning Serah⁵ to aid Moses, as exemplified in a snippet of what seems to have been an early rabbinic sermon preserved in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael (Be-Shallah, ed. Lauterbach, Vol. I, pp. 176-177):

And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him (Exod 13:19). This proclaims the wisdom and the piety of Moses. For all Israel were busy with the booty while Moses busied himself with the duty of looking after the bones of Joseph. Of him Scripture says: "The wise in heart takes on duties" (Prov 10:8). But how did Moses know where Joseph was buried? It is told that Serah⁵, the daughter of Asher, survived from that generation and she showed Moses the grave of Joseph. She said to him: "The Egyptians put him into a metal coffin which they sunk in the Nile."

The Wise Woman in Avel of Bet-Ma; akhah (2 Sam. 20:16)

Serah⁵ makes another appearance in the time of King David. Here again, thanks only to the rabbinic retelling of another biblical narrative. In Second Samuel chapter 20, Yoav, David's captain, has pursued the rebel Israelite, Sheva ben Bikri, to the fortified town of Avel Bet Ha-Ma; akhah. Just as Yoav is about to breach the wall and destroy the town, according to the biblical narrative (verses 16ff), a "wise woman," *hmkj hva*,

suddenly cries out from the city and convinces Yoav to let the town hand over the rebel rather than be completely destroyed. Significantly the "wise woman" identifies herself by saying (verse 19): *larcy ynwma ymwlv ykna*. In the biblical context this is usually translated: "I am from among the peaceable and faithful of Israel." As pointed out by Isaak Heinemann in his influential book Darkhey Ha-Aggadah,³ the rabbinic sages tend to identify unnamed characters in the Bible with named ones. Heinemann called this tendency *ʿm hjyrbh twymynwnah*, "the flight from anonymity." In this case, the sages identify the "wise woman" who saved the city of Avel with none other than Serah⁵. And this led to a reinterpretation of her statement, *larcy ynwma ymwlv ykna*, which was now understood to mean: "I completed the faithful of Israel," alluding to her role in completing the number of seventy "faithful" souls who accompanied Jacob to Egypt (see above) (Genesis Rabbah 94:9, Midrash Samuel 32). In this way, by means of midrashic method, Serah⁵ became the archetypal (or more properly, the "oicotypal") "Wise Old Woman" of Jewish legend.

In the Study House of Rabbi Yoh⁵anan

The Sages not only wrote Serah⁵ into the days of Moses and David, but they even gave her an honored role in at least one episode from their own times. According to one midrashic text (Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana, Be-shalah, ed. Mandelbaum, p. 188):

Rabbi Yoh⁵anan was once sitting and expounding about how the waters became like a wall for Israel [at the time they miraculously passed through the Sea which had split open before them to permit their Exodus from Egypt (see Exodus 14:29—*plawmvmw μnymym hmwj μhl μymhw*, "and the waters were a wall for them on their right and on their left"). Rabbi Yoh⁵anan explained (in the Aramaic dialect of Roman Palestine) that the waters looked "like a lattice" (*ayylyqnq ʿylyak*). However, just at that moment, Serah⁵ bat Asher looked in and said (*hrmaw rva*

tb jrc tqyda): "I was there and they (the waters) were not like that but rather like lighted windows" (afmwpma ^ylyak).

Now at first glance this may seem like a rather minor point of biblical interpretation. But what is remarkable here is that we have a woman—who is not even to be invited into the all-male preserve of study house or synagogue—contradicting the teaching of one of the most famous Talmudic sages. Note that Serah⁵ is able to correct the rabbinic teaching not by bringing an alternative interpretive tradition from the Oral Torah, but on the basis of her own personal experience and eyewitness account of the biblical event being expounded. It seems we have here a relatively rare rabbinic acknowledgment that women, who are generally excluded from being the bearers of the "learned" tradition, may possess "experiential" knowledge that may be superior.

Serah⁵ in Paradise

In medieval Jewish mysticism, Serah⁵ is granted an honored place in Paradise. According to the Zohar (III, 167b):

Serah⁵ bat Asher presides over one of the palaces reserved for righteous women. Here, three times a day, a voice rings out announcing the visit of Joseph, the righteous one. Joyfully, Serah⁵ retires behind a curtain to gaze upon the light of his face and show him honor. And here, each day, she proclaims: "O happy day, that I brought the good tidings to my grandfather Jacob that you were still alive." Then Serah⁵ returns to her women companions to teach them Torah and to join with them in praise and thanks to the Master of the Universe.

Several of the traditions we have seen so far share a common theme. Serah⁵ possesses and transmits special wisdom. Perhaps the rabbis, by granting such a role to

one woman who "spanned the generations" and lives on in Paradise, are in some way admitting that women in general may bear secret knowledge. And this feminine wisdom deserves to find expression—even if it has to be shouted into the Study House from outside or even it is Torah learning to be shared primarily with other righteous women in heaven!

Serah5 in Later Jewish Folklore

In Jewish imagination, Serah5 the granddaughter of Jacob survived not only into the days of Moses, David and Rabbi Yoh5anan. According to one very interesting line of tradition, she followed her people from the Land of Israel into the Babylonian Exile and continued her legendary existence there. Despite the Talmudic tradition that Serah5 was granted immortality, the Persian Jews of the city of Isfahan believed that Serah5 bat Asher actually lived among them, until she died in a great synagogue fire in the 12th century CE. This synagogue and its successors were subsequently known as the Synagogue of Serah5 Bat Asher. In the Jewish cemetery of Isfahan, there was to be found, at least until the end of the 19th century, a gravestone marking the final resting place of "Serah5 the daughter of Asher the son of our Patriarch Jacob" who died in the year equivalent to 1133 CE. The gravesite of Serah5 bat Asher marked by a small mausoleum known as heder Serah5, "Serah5's Room," remained for centuries one of the most well known pilgrimage sites for the Jews of Persia.

It is perhaps fitting that Serah5 not only continues to live on, but even managed to return to the Holy Land in the folktales of contemporary Jewish storytellers living in the modern state of Israel. I think it best to conclude this modest investigation of the legend of Serah5 with paraphrase translations of two previously unpublished examples. Let the storytellers take over again from here. Israel Folktale Archives (IFA) number 11999

recorded by Moshe Sarshalom in 1978 as told by the Darshan ("Preacher") Mullah Shmuel Shammai from Yazd, Persia reads:

Once there was in Isfahan a boy name named Hayyim who lost his sight. When the physicians gave up hope of curing him, Hayyim was told by his neighbors to go and prostrate himself at the gravestone of Serah⁵ bat Asher and there to lift up his hands in supplication to the Heavenly Healer.

Here the storyteller explains as follows:

In the Iranian Exile the Jews are accustomed to prostrate themselves at the gravestone of Serah⁵, as the custom here in Israel is to prostrate oneself at the tomb of our Matriarch Rachel in Bet Lehem. Like the tomb of Rachel, so too the tomb of Serah⁵ is located in a "room" (i.e., a mausoleum). This room has wondrous doorposts. It is well-known that only people who are of good character and deeds may enter; but anyone else—the entrance to the room shrinks before him and prevents him from entering.

Young Hayyim prayed and fasted so that he would be found worthy to enter the room and in the evening he went to the room of Serah⁵ in Isfahan and the doorposts of the entrance open wide before him. He entered and spread out his hands before the Heavenly Healer. He cried with a broken heart and offered his petition: O Heavenly Healer, return to me by the merit of this righteous woman the light of my eyes. But if you say: I have promulgated an irrevocable decision and I cannot repeal it, then be it known to you that my soul longs for Torah. Give me, then, my father and my king, the light of Torah. Give me wisdom to understand Your teaching. When Hayyim had finished his prayer, he fell asleep. At midnight, while dreaming, there appeared to him a woman, whose face was like the face of an angel of God. She said to him: I am Serah⁵ bat

Asher. I have joined in your prayer. Behold I bring you good tidings that God has had mercy on you and has granted your second petition. Hayyim was happy that his prayer had been answered and awoke from his dream much encouraged.

As time went on, Hayyim learned Torah. He knew it and the Siddur and the Mahzor by heart. As Hayyim grew, his dream was fulfilled. He immersed himself in the depths of Torah. He became a much sought after H5azan ("Cantor"), a well-known preacher and a famous Mullah. Behold, he is none other than the Mullah, Hayyim Rushan ("the Blind" in Iranian) from Isfahan. May his merit protect us!

IFA 9524 (Story 28), recorded by Tamar Agmon as told by the Hakham Eliahu Mudgukshvili (from the village of Kolashi in Gerusinia, at the time 40 years old living in Ashkelon), reads:

Once there was a king who made laws against the Jews so that people would laugh at them. He made them wear funny hats and strange clothes and odd shoes, one red and one black. So the Jews were embarrassed to go out of their homes.

One day the king was hunting in the forest with his soldiers. He saw a doe and chased after it but was unable to catch her. Suddenly the doe stopped, turned, looked straight at the king and charging at him, jumped right on his head. But still the king couldn't catch her. And he was very embarrassed in front of his soldiers. So the king chased after the doe until he had left his soldiers far behind. The doe entered a cave and the king followed. This cave had a door and the door closed behind the king and he was caught there in the dark. Several days passed while the king was caught in the dark. Then the king suddenly saw emerging out of the dark a beautiful maiden, a woman warrior with her female soldiers.

She called the king to come to her. She asked the king: Do you recognize me. He said: No. She said: I am the doe that you were chasing who jumped on your head and you were unable to catch. I want to know— Why have you made laws against the Jews?

The king then asked her: Who are you? She answered: I am Serah⁵ bat Asher. Joseph was my uncle and my other uncles went down to Egypt and found him alive. When they came back home they told me to play my harp and to sing that Joseph is still alive and rules over the whole of the land of Egypt. The Holy Spirit possessed Jacob our father and he blessed me with immortality. Angels took me to Gan Eden (Paradise).

The king promised her that he would revoke the laws against the Jews and she released him from the dark cave. The king kept his word and gave the Jews beautiful clothes so they could celebrate all their holidays. The king told the Jews what had happened to him and asked them if there was in their books someone called Serah⁵ bat Asher. They answered: Yes, sure (j f b ^ k, a colloquial idiom); she was blessed by our father Jacob with immortality.

Now this king had a certain priest whom he called and told to remove his ceremonial hat and robe. He said to him: You are no longer my priest for what you tell me is lies. The name of the God of the Jews is truth. Then the king ordered all the shopkeepers to sell to the Jews for less than they had been charging. And then the king built a big synagogue where he had entered the cave so that the Jews could pray on all their holidays as a memorial to Serah⁵ bat Asher.

And here the storyteller comments, again in rather colloquial style: "And even today there is a place like this still standing—I donno know exactly—it's written in the Torah that there's a place like this."

In the wonderful world of the Jewish imagination, everything—even the synagogue memorializing Serah⁵ bat Asher—is somehow "written in the Torah". What could be a more apt actualization of the statement in Mishnah Avot (5:22): "Search through the Torah and search through it again, for everything is in it!" As we have seen, Serah⁵ bat Asher, who "spanned the generations" from biblical times until today, can still be glimpsed between the lines of Torah. The separate strands of tradition about this immortal lady of legend still beckon to be retold and reunited.

¹ (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) 315.

² (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) 226.

³ (Jerusalem: Magnes Press/Hebrew University, 1949).