

Serach Bat Asher

The Grande

Dame of The Exodus

By Danny Siegel

Attention Deficit Disorder Strikes Again

In many ways, my A.D.D is like the Beatles' song "The Long and Winding Road."

Getting to where I wanted to be in this piece of writing was circuitous, time consuming, heavily-laden with books from the shelf to the table by my easy chair. It usually begins in the middle of the night, 1:00 or 2:00 or 3:00 a.m., when I frequently wake up.

Before these long nights, though, it started in synagogue when, talking to a friend. I was trying to figure out who were Amram's and Yocheved's oldest, middle, and youngest children. After some discussion, we concluded: Miriam, Aaron, and Moshe ("the baby").

Then, back home, my mind wandered, as it all-too-often does, to Serach Bat Asher, whom I had researched a few years ago.

She is very popular with Jewish feminists, has been written about too many times to count — even with a doctoral dissertation about her for a candidate at Hebrew University.

Before I began looking at the sources — having glanced at one which referred me to so many others, my mind was swimming, actually drowning. Since I am not a scholar, and do not have what is colloquially called *zitzfleish*, the kind of fat on my rear-end to let me sit continuously for hours on end, I conducted the research at different times. Besides, I have always felt — at least for myself — too much study and mental activity often interferes with my creativity.

Some things we ought to know about her are: She is barely mentioned in the Bible — only 4 times — and there only as a daughter of Asher, and sister of many nearly-unpronounceably-named siblings. For centuries our sages were so taken with her she is described as sister, daughter, stepdaughter (raised by Jacob), mother, harp player, beautiful (aren't all the Biblical heroines except for Leah stunning?), with a tradition from who-knows when that she is buried in a village 30 kilometers southeast of the Iranian city of Isfahan.

What clearly struck our teachers was the fact that among all of Jacob's descendants, more than 50 males are mentioned, and she is the only female. It's the Midrashic principle of "this sticks out like a sore thumb", otherwise known as, "this demands free imaginative Midrash, even occasional fantasy (but with a didactic purpose)".

Oh, and Serach was the oldest woman in the Bible. She lived more than 215 years by the least far-fetched stories. *And*, and this is what attracted me to her the most: She was one of nine personages who entered Paradise alive, not having gone through human death and living forever in the Garden of Eden, alongside Pharaoh's daughter, savior of Moses, and no less a Giant than Elijah!

Picturing Serach

Serach came with the original clan of Children of Israel to Egypt. And she left with the Hebrew masses on the night of the Exodus. I picture her as a five or six year old, either travelling with her father Asher, or according to some texts, her adoptive father, grandfather Jacob.

What is difficult to picture is this: by such an early age, with eleven uncles and their wives and who-knows-how-many first and second and third cousins, how busy was her mind, and was it overloaded with experiences of life? (In my own family, I remember trying to recall which Sophie was married to which Uncle Harry or Max, and there was the confusion about my Russian born, Spanish-speaking Uncle Mike, which made sense once I knew that America's doors weren't always open to Jews, (and Cuba was Uncle Mike's escape route.) I know the author Thomas Mann wrote a book *Joseph and His Brother*, which has been on the shelf for at

least three decades. But it has more than 1200 pages long, surely a killer of AD-me. I've just never tried.

Among the pictures of Serach that I have in my mind of Serach is this Grand Old Lady sitting around in the evening, any evening, but particularly the night of the Exodus, with a multitude of offspring and offspring's offspring, many great-greats. What tales she had to tell!: The trek from the Land of Israel, how she survived all these years of hard labor, and the assurances that, indeed, the people will leave slavery for freedom imminently! How many were there in that room with Serach? My friend Arnie Draiman once took me to the grave of his uncle or great uncle which stated in engraved letters on the headstone that he left more than 400 living descendants.

How old? I recently was taken to the grave of my mother's father's father's mother and father. Avraham Silberblatt died in 1918, at age 70. Which takes me back to 1848. Ruchel, his wife died in 1922, age 70 — 1852. Avraham's father's name is Eliezer about whom we know nothing, other than he must have been born in the 1820's — not quite 200 years ago. We found a picture of Avraham years ago, with Ruchel, his son, daughter-in-law, and five grandchildren. (Grandpa Sam appears to about 17 or 18 in the picture. What is strange is that for a deaf-mute tailor, Avraham is dressed formally, as are all of them for the portrait — even wearing a top hat!) But we have no picture of *his* father, Eliezer, and to compare to Serach, I would need not only a photograph or drawing, but also to have known him personally and to have heard his stories of poverty and pogroms and the lousy life of the Jews in Russia. What a marvelous scene it must have been with Serach, all the descendants gathered around this matriarch with tales upon wondrous stories from what, by all accounts, was a woman with a prodigious memory, in complete control of her faculties.

Let us return to the harp playing for a moment. When the brothers return from Egypt to tell Jacob that Joseph is alive, they were afraid that Jacob's anger would be overwhelming. So they chose Serach to play for him, and to sing to him gently, Soothingly, which she did, interweaving the news about Joseph in the song. It worked, Jacob was accepting, calmly, ready to join Joseph in Egypt. He offered a blessing for Serach that, since hers was a message of life, that she should be blessed to live forever. And that is how it came to be that she was one of the nine mortals who made it to Paradise without dying a human death.

The Night of the Exodus

Now, to the reason I wrote this article — going 1-2-3 in no order of importance will make it easier:

1. The Children of Israel could not leave Egypt unless they found Joseph's bones. They had promised him that when they were to go free they would take his bones with them to the Promised Land.

2. Who could have possibly known where they were? Many sources record that they sunk his body in an iron coffin into the Nile. The reason: either they didn't want Egyptians to worship him, or because by contact with his (even-lifeless) presence, the waters of the Nile would be blessed since he was such a righteous person.

3. There were actually three people still alive who came with the original class from the Land of Israel, but the other two were disqualified for serious infractions of God's word. That left only one: Serach!

Now here is my final picture: Did Serach go to Moses or Moses come the Old Woman, just one of hundreds of thousands of Jews? Is this about The Great Humble One seeking out the nobody-body-so-special, just an Old Woman>

There are two versions:

1. Moses, knowing that the Exodus is imminent, runs around frantically for three days and nights looking for the body of Joseph. Finally he gets the insight to ask Serach who would have seen the funeral and burial, a grand affair to be sure.

2. Serach was informed that the Exodus was imminent, so she went to Moses to tell him where to find Joseph's bones.

A few curious questions arise:

1. Why did it take so long for Moses to decide to go to Serach?
2. Was he so preoccupied with the logistics of the entire operation of taking them out of slavery to freedom that he could not think clearly?
3. Did Serach live at the far end of the homes of the Hebrews, and he, 80 years old, found it too burdensome to go there? (This is the least likely one since the closing verses of the Chumash tell us that when he died at 120, he was still in full vigor.)
4. Did Serach hesitate at first, thinking, “Who am I, just some Old Woman, to play such a part in the history of the Jewish people? Who am I to go to the Great Moses to tell him that I know what he doesn’t know? Is that not a kind of arrogance?”

I personally like both pictures: Moses, desperately wanting to fulfill God’s instructions, and humble enough to seek out this old woman? Perhaps his delay was that he didn’t really know about her and her longevity until, like on an episode of *Law and Order*, someone gives him the right tip. I really rather doubt that he did now who she was and where she lived. *Everyone* must have known about Serach. Moses, I think, just had to focus. (I am *not* implying he had A.D.D., which is why he was running hither and yon, up and down for three days and three nights.) He was just too intensely wrapped up in God’s Word and the task at hand.

And as for Serach. Well, longevity in and of itself is something nice, but not especially sublime. It is clear to me that she somehow knew that *this* is why she lived to be 215 or 216, not just to buy Chanukah and birthday presents for her great-to-the 12th-power grandchildren nor to take her place of honor at their Bnai and Bnot Mitzvah and brisses and weddings and baby namings, Pidyon HaBens. This hero of ours, without whom we wouldn’t be here today as Jews, grasped the full cosmic meaning of her place in this incredible moment, no less than Moses. I think she strode rather vigorously – without cane or walker – to Moses’ home and with great self-assurance said to him, “Follow me. I know where Joseph is buried. Come, and then we can all be free.”

Centuries Later

Mordechai Tells Esther that the Jews are in grave danger and that it is up to her to approach Achashuerosh to intercede and save them. He says to her (Esther 4:14), “And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.” *This* is your moment of meaning, just as with Serach the Old Woman of Old. I have no doubts that Serach did all kinds of Mitzvahs all her life, but this was The One.

And later still, the Rabbis of the Talmud taught in a beautifully-articulated line (Avodah Zarah 10b), “There are those who gain eternity in a single moment.”

The meaning for us, we everyday Jews? I believe that perhaps it is time to review our past lives and at the same time look into the future to see if there might not have been or might yet be such cosmic moments.

One Final Scene

Most of us are fixated on Cecil B. DeMille’s melodrama of *The Ten Commandments*. Who doesn’t call to mind the wildly enthusiastic chattering human masses, the bleating goats and lowing cattle included, the noise, the imagined smells of us leaving Egypt? There isn’t a person I know that doesn’t know that Edward G. Robinson played one of the Bad Guys. And yet, and yet, something I think is missing from the scene: In the front of the line should be Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, of course. But right there, in Row #1 should be a white-haired woman with wondrously dignified bearing – one might imagine looking quite elegant – leading them, no less than Moses, to freedom. And long, long into the future, to her Life Eternal.