



D'var Torah – Parshat Pinchas, July 27, 2024

By Sandy Remz

I. Introduction

- Grows out of Project Zug Chevrutah learning on Midrash that Robbie Fein and I did together under the brilliant guidance of Rabbi Ethan Tucker of Hadar
- Through that, we observed how obscure references in the Torah can be grist for some fascinating and quite unexpected midrashim and insights

I. Genealogies

- How many people get excited by genealogies in the Torah?
- How many people, like me, have their eyes glaze over when we come to a genealogy and either space out or perhaps get into the rhythm of the Torah reading and some unusual names, but pay scant attention to the actual words?
- Well, in this parshah we encounter a genealogy that, if you focus closely on it, is super interesting and gives rise to a host of creative midrashim about the heroine of this drash, Serach bat Asher – the daughter of Asher and granddaughter of Yakov.

II. Background of Serach Bat Asher

- Serach is mentioned in the genealogy in Pinchas stemming from the second census of B'nei Yisrael, almost 40 years after the first census, as they are preparing to enter the Promised Land (2d Aliyah, Num. 26:46)[READ 44-47]
- What is unusual about Serach Bat Asher here? – With the exception of the 5 b'not Tzelophchad, who are mentioned because Tzelophchad had no sons, Serach is the only woman mentioned in the census out of a total of about 80 names.
- Perhaps this is a hint of her importance and merit, in that she is mentioned even though Asher *did* have male offspring, and surely at least some of the other tribal chieftains had daughters
- Do we know anything else about Serach aside from her name and that she was alive at the time of the entry into the Promised Land?
- She is mentioned only one other time in the Torah: Parshat Vayigash, Breishit 46:17 – which lists in a genealogy all of the 70 members of Beit Ya'akov who came to Egypt [READ 46:8 and 17]
- Again, it is only a list and it says nothing about Serach other than she was part of the entourage and was the sister of the four named sons of Asher
- So, what is unusual about the inclusion of Serach in that genealogy in Breishit? Bingo, she is the only woman included in that genealogy.
- And, aside from her status as a woman in these two genealogies, what else makes Serach unusual?

- ANSWER: ACCORDING TO THE TORAH, SHE IS THE ONLY MEMBER OF B'NAI YISRAEL WHO BOTH CAME TO EGYPT AND WAS PART OF THE EXODUS SOME 430 YEARS LATER AND MADE IT THROUGH THE MIDBAR TO THE PROMISED LAND.
- That is remarkable and gives rise to a series of midrashim about her, just based on the sparse references to her in the two genealogies

III. Why does she deserve this attention? As we look at some midrashim, that will help explain it.

- Given her longevity, she becomes the repository and symbol of cultic memory
- She also appears to embody some of the human traits that we value that all too often seem to be lacking in male dominated society then and now, including especially WISDOM
- And, keep in mind that this sketch of Serach in the midrashim was one created by the rabbis, a decidedly male group

IV. Now, to some Midrashim

- Midrashim about Search informing Jacob in her own way that Joseph was alive (Midrash ha_Gadol to Gen. 45:26)
 - Yosef's brothers had just returned from Egypt after Yosef revealed himself to them
 - Now, they had a different problem than merely accounting to Yakov for Shimeon when he was left behind in Egypt, and then Binyamin when he was left behind: They were afraid that Yakov's "soul would fly out" – i.e., that he would have a stroke -- upon hearing the news about Yosef
 - So, they passed the buck to their young niece Serach (in the case of Asher, his daughter) for her to deliver the message to Yakov
 - And, according to the midrash, she did so brilliantly
 - She decided gently to inform Yakov while he was deep in tefillah (yes, the Avot davened, of course), and she did so in the form of rhyming questions:
 - Quote the questions in Hebrew and English (see Sefariya)
- - יוסף במצרים
- - יולדו לו על ברכים
- - מנשה ואפרים

"Joseph is in Egypt/

There have been born on his knees/

Menasseh and Ephraim" [three rhyming lines]

- Yakov was then overcome with joy, not by a stroke
- Indeed, there is a related midrash in Breishit Rabbati in which Yakov tells Serach that she shall live forever on account of her righteousness based on her wisdom in breaking the news to Yakov about Yosef.

- Midrash about Avraham referring to Serach to buttress his argument with G-d about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Midrash Tanchuma Buber, Vayera 12)
 - Involves a bit of time travel
 - Torah text: Avraham says “Challilah l’cha” -- Far be it from you G-d to kill the righteous with the wicked
 - The Midrash has Avraham saying: “I see through the Holy Spirit that a certain woman is going to deliver an entire town. So am I not worthy to deliver these [five] cities?”
 - That certain woman is Serach, who presumably was not even alive then, and the town he refers to is one that King David’s general, Yoav, was about to destroy in its entirety but for Serach’s wise, compassionate and timely intercession backed by her quoting Torah to convince Yoav he should not massacre everyone in the town

- Midrash re Serach knowing where Yosef was buried
 - Mechilta de R. Shimon bar Yohai on Ex. 13:11 (in which Moshe took Yosef’s bones with him upon Yetziyat Mitzrayim)
 - “And how did our teacher Moshe know where Yosef was buried? They said: Serach bat Asher remained from that generation. Moshe went and said to her: “Where is Yosef buried?” She responded: ‘The Egyptians made him a metal coffin and set it in the Nile so its waters would be blessed.’”

 - This Midrash portrays Serach as the trusted repository of national memory, keeper of the faith and respected elder

V. Eternal Life

- As if 430 -500 years were not enough, there are multiple traditions that Serach lived for far longer, like millennia or maybe even forever, in accordance with the blessing that Yakov gave her in the Midrash I just referenced

- [Midrash from Pesikta de Rav Kanhana] –
 - Roughly 2000 years after entering Egypt, Serach appears in the 3d century beit midrash of Rabi Yochanan (not earlier great Raban Yochanan ben Zakkai). Rabi Yochanan was the preeminent Talmudic authority of his time in the land of Israel.
 - R. Yochanan was expounding on the pasuk from Shemot (14:22) describing the crossing of the Red Sea: “and the waters were like a wall for them on their right and on their left.”
 - [READ MIDRASH]. “R. Yochanan was sitting and lecturing, “What were the waters like when they became like a wall for Israel?” R. Yochanan lectured, “They were like lattice work.” Serach bat Asher got agitated and said, “I was there, and they were like doors on hinges!”
 - This midrash presents the radical notion of a woman showing up the revered, self-assured, preeminent Torah scholar of his time with her authoritative response.
- Tradition that she is 1 of 7 granted eternal life in Gan Eden, as one of the faithful of Israel (Kallah Rabbati 3:25) (Others have her as 1 of 9.)

- [Persian tradition of her living in Ifhasan until a fire in the great synagogue there in the 12th century, which rebuilt Bet Knesset was named after her]

VI. CONCLUSION

- So, through these and a number of Midrashim, the rabbis breathed life into Serach based on nothing more than two passing references in genealogies
- Through the midrashim about Serach and other midrashim Robbie and I studied with Rabbi Tucker, I have developed a greater appreciation for the art of Midrash

- Previously, I had a skeptical view of midrash – often, in my mind, a bunch of crazy stories displaying rabbinic imagination on steroids
- But, upon further reflection, I believe that we have a lot to learn from midrash
- They reflect a close reading of the Torah text, one that leads to filling in gaps in the text
- Ethan Tucker: Midrash is “the meeting place between the features of a text and an idea in need of articulation.” “Not only is the darshan focused on every detail, even those that seem irrelevant, but they also come to the text expecting to have some kind of emotional and cultural resonance that goes beyond the words on the page.”
- Of course, we do not take Midrashic stories literally, just as most of us do not take many narratives in the Torah literally
- But, based on a close reading of the text and even from seemingly obscure references in the text, they can transmit important values and insights, whether or not the stories themselves are plausible. So, for example, while no one really believes that Serach actually lived 2,000 years and then showed up in R. Yochanan’s Bet Midrash, her decisive role in that Midrash speaks volumes.
- And, it is also reassuring that midrashim can, (though by no means do they always) reflect surprisingly modern, enlightened values – including in this instance showcasing the wisdom and virtue of Serach; and conveying the messages, among others, that women are or can be transmitters of historic legacy and memory, can teach us a thing or two about empathy and understanding, must be taken seriously and are very much the equals of (if not superior to) their male counterparts.