

Serach bat Asher

What's in a name?

שָׂרַח (סָרַח)

Overhanging, spreading or overlapping fabric - as with the mishkan (Ex. 26:12)

Serach bat Asher in Torah

Serach bat Asher appears twice in the Torah; both instances are in genealogies:

1. A list of those who descended to Egypt with Jacob to live with Joseph: *Asher's sons: Yimnah, Yishvah, Yishvi, and Beriah, and their sister Serach.* (Genesis 46:17)
2. A list of “the descendants of the Israelites who came out of the land of Egypt” (Numbers 26:4) includes, in Asher's line, *The name of Asher's daughter was Serach.* (Numbers 26:46)

Midrash ha-Gadol 4:26 (14th century)

[Joseph's brothers said:] “If we tell [our father Jacob] straight out, ‘Joseph is alive!’ his soul might fly away!” What did they do?

They said to Serach, daughter of Asher, “Tell our father Jacob that Joseph is alive and in Egypt.”

What did she do? She waited until he stood in prayer, and then recited in an tone of wonder:

Joseph is in Egypt

There were delivered on his knees

Menasseh and Ephraim

His heart failed while he was standing in prayer. As soon as he finished [praying], he saw the wagons [that Joseph had sent to bring to Egypt]: immediately “the spirit of Jacob revived” (Gen 45:27).

Sefer Ha-Yashar on Gen. 46:17 (9th - 16th century)

Jacob blessed Serach for having said these words to him. And he said to her, “My daughter, through eternity, may death not rule over you, for you have revived my spirit!”

Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 48:17 (8th or 9th century)

Rabbi Eliezer said: The five doubled letters [that have final forms], from all the letters of the Torah, each [hint at] the secret of Redemption... With “פּ פּ - *pei / pei*” our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt, as it is said, “I have surely taken note (*pakod pakad'ti*) of you... (Ex. 3:16)”

All of [the letters] were delivered exclusively to our father Abraham. Abraham delivered them to Isaac, and Isaac delivered them to Jacob, and Jacob delivered the mystery of the Redemption to Joseph... And Joseph, his son, delivered the secret of the Redemption to his brothers, as it is said, “And G-d will surely take note (*pakod yiphkod*) of you” (Gen. 50: 24). And Asher delivered the secret of the Redemption to his daughter, Serach.

When Moses and Aaron went before the elders of Israel and performed the signs before their very eyes, [the elders] visited Serach bat Asher. They said to her: “A certain person came to us and performed signs before our very eyes - this and that.”

She said to them: “There’s no meaning in these signs.”

They said to her: “He said (*‘pakod yiphkod’*) ‘G-d will surely take note of you’”.

She said to them: “He is the man who, in the future, will redeem Israel from Egypt! For this is what I heard from my father, (*‘pei / pei - pakod yiphkod’*) “I have surely taken note of you” (Ex. 3:16).

Immediately, the people believed in their G-d and in G-d’s messenger, as it is said, “And the people believed, and when they heard that the Eternal had taken note of G-d’s people” (Ex. 4:31).

Talmud Bavli, Sotah 13a (4th century)

How did Moses know where Joseph was buried? They said: “Serach bat Asher remains from that generation.” Moses went to her and said: “Do you know where Joseph is buried?”

She said to him: “The Egyptians made a metal casket for him and they buried it in the Nile in order to bless its waters.”

Moses went and stood at the banks of the Nile. He said: “Joseph, Joseph, the time has come that the Holy One, blessed be G-d, swore, “I will redeem you!” The time has also come for the oath that you made Israel swear. If you show yourself, well and good. If not, we are free from your oath.”

Immediately, Joseph’s casket floated [to the surface].

Serah, daughter of Asher: Midrash and Aggadah (*Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*)

...An additional tradition of Serah’s longevity has her still alive in the time of King David and identifies her with the wise woman of Abel-beth-ma’acah. When Joab, David’s military commander, asked her: “Who are you?,” she replied (II Sam. 20:19): “I am one of those who seek the welfare of the faithful [*shelomei emunei*] in Israel.” In the Rabbinical exegesis, she is saying to Joab: I am one of the Israelites who went down to Egypt with Jacob. I completed [*shelumai*] the count of Israel [*emunei Yisrael*; a wordplay on the root *shlm*, referring both to peace/welfare and completion] for the seventy souls that went down to Egypt. Do you want to kill the entire city, and also me, who am an important woman?” In this manner Serah saved the lives of all the inhabitants of her town (Eccl. Rabbah 9:18:2).

Pesikta D’Rav Kahanna 11:13 (6th to 8th century)

(*Pesikta De-Rab Kahana*, translated and edited by Rabbi William Braude, pp. 284-85)

From the teacher’s seat Rabbi Johanan sought to explain just how the waters of the Red Sea became a wall for Israel. Even as Rabbi Johanan was explaining that the wall of water looked like a lattice, Serah, daughter of Asher, looked down and said: “I was there. The waters rising up like a wall for Israel were shining because the radiance [of such personages as Moses and Aaron, who had drunk deep of Torah’s waters], made the waters shine.” (An alternate translation: “I was there. The openwork of the lattice looked like shining windows.”)

Serach bat Asher: Biblical Origins, Ancient Aggadah and Contemporary Folklore
(Dr. Marc Bregman)

In Jewish imagination, Serach, the granddaughter of Jacob, survived not only into the days of Moses, David and Rabbi Yohanan. 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 Serach was granted immortality, the Persian Jews of the city of Isfahan believed that Serach 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 Serach 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 “Serach the daughter of Asher the son of our Patriarch Jacob” who died in the year equivalent to 1133 CE. The gravesite of Serach bat Asher marked by a small mausoleum known as *heder Serach*, “Serach’s Room,” remained for centuries one of the most well-known pilgrimage sites for the Jews of Persia.

It is perhaps fitting that Serach 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 Serach 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 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 Serach 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 Serach, 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 Serach 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 Serach in Isfahan and the doorposts of the entrance opened 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 Serach 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 Hazan (“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?"

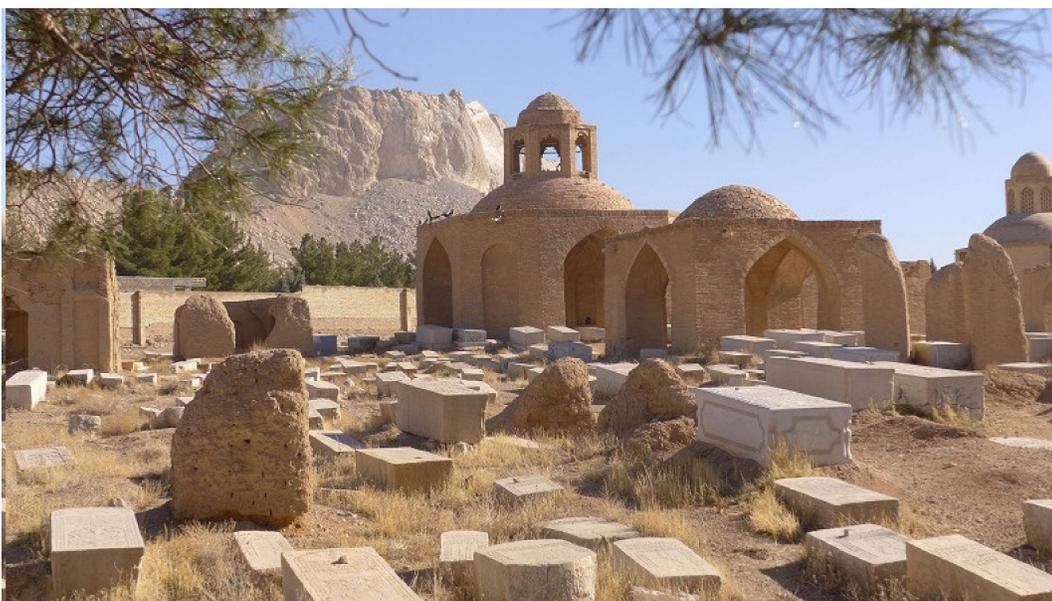
She answered: "I am Serah bat Asher. Joseph was my uncle and my other uncles went down to Egypt and found him alive. When they came back home they told me to play my harp and to sing that Joseph is still alive and rules over the whole of the land of Egypt. The Holy Spirit possessed Jacob our father and 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 Serah bat Asher. They answered: "Yes, sure (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 Serah bat Asher.

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

In the wonderful world of the Jewish imagination, everything—even the synagogue memorializing Serah 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, Serah 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.



Serach bat Asher's memorial, Pir Bakran (exterior)



Rabbi Soloveitchik's eulogy for Rabbi Chaim Heller
("Pleitat Sofreihem" in Divrei Hagut ve'Ha'aracha)

Why was it crucial that Serach play a role in the redemption? The generation of the exodus witnessed signs and wonders on an unprecedented scale. Such excitement could easily lead to a sense that their generation represents true religious greatness and that nothing that came beforehand really matters. Yet this conclusion is false. Every generation, irrespective of its accomplishments, needs to turn to its elders for counsel and wisdom. The living example of someone who knew *Ya'akov Avinu* was an invaluable resource for the generation of redemption. For the same reason, the blessing in the Amida refers to "the remnants of the scribes" (על פליטת סופריהם) rather than simply "the scribes." We want not only wise individuals but also those with memories of previous generations.

Serach bat Asher's memorial, Pir Bakran (interior)