

The Chronicle of Serah Bat Asher

Only a handful of the Children of Israel were brought into heaven alive. Moses was one, his sister Miriam another, and there were also Enoch and Elijah. Not only was Serah bat Asher one of those so blessed, but she also lived longer than anyone else, even longer than Methuselah, for she lived from the time of Jacob until the ninth century [C.E.], when she was taken into heaven.

Serah was the daughter of Asher, one of the sons of Jacob. She was among the sixty-nine who ascended with Jacob to Egypt, and she was among those who crossed the Red Sea and were counted by Moses in the census of the wilderness. Joseph sent his brothers to bring the House of Jacob to Egypt because of the famine in the land. They had to find a way to break the news to Jacob that Joseph was still alive. So they decided to have Serah, who was seven years old, play the harp for Jacob and sing the words “Joseph is alive.” This Serah gladly did, and when Jacob suddenly understood what she was saying, he cried out, “Is it true?” And when Serah assured him that it was, Jacob, in his joy, gave her a great blessing, which caused Serah to live for so long. Later she served as a midwife, but when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, she too was enslaved and forced to bend over a mill.

When the time came to be freed from slavery, it was Serah who identified Moses as the Redeemer. For there was a secret sign that God had communicated to Jacob, who passed it on to Joseph, who revealed it to his brothers, and in this way Serah came to learn of it from her father, Asher. The sign of the true redeemer is that he would say, “I will surely visit you.” And thus when Moses said these words, Serah identified him as the Redeemer at once.

It was also Serah who showed Moses where the coffin of Joseph could be found. Before his death, Joseph vowed that when the time came for the Children of Israel to return to the Holy Land, they should bring his bones with them. And when that day arrived, Moses searched everywhere for Joseph’s coffin, but no one knew where it was. Finally he encountered Serah, who said: “My Lord Moses, why are you so tired?” Moses replied: “For three days and nights I have been searching for Joseph’s coffin, and I cannot find it.” She said to him: “Come and I will show you where it is.” Moses was amazed. He asked: “Who are you?” She said: “I am Serah bat Asher, and I was present when the coffin of Joseph was sunk into the Nile.” She led him to the river and said: “In this place the Egyptian magicians and astrologers made a coffin for Joseph and cast it into the river. Then they returned to Pharaoh and said: ‘Your wish will be fulfilled. These people will stay here, because they won’t be able to leave unless they find the bones of Joseph.’”

Then Moses leaned over the bank of the Nile and called out: “Joseph, Joseph, we are leaving. If you want to come with us, come now. If not, then we have done our best.” At that moment Joseph’s coffin suddenly rose up from the depths, and when Moses lifted it out of the water, it was as light as a feather for him, so relieved was the spirit of Joseph that his bones were at last being taken to the Holy Land.

After that there were two arks that accompanied the Children of Israel in the wilderness: the coffin of Joseph and the Ark of the Tabernacle, the one representing the past and the other, the Torah, defining the future that lay before them.

When Serah was among the multitude at the Red Sea, she had a vision in which she saw things that none of the others saw. In the vision she saw the multitude of angels who had gathered to watch the Children of Israel cross the Red Sea. So too did she see the Divine Presence, who descended among them when Miriam played the tambourine and sang the Song of the Sea. And in that vision Serah even saw the Holy One commanding the waters of the Red Sea to part. For other than Moses, Serah was the only one alive in that generation who could look upon the Holy One and live.

There are many reports of Serah in the succeeding centuries. It was she who showed King David the location of the Foundation Stone, so that he knew where to build the Temple in Jerusalem. So too was it she who assisted Jeremiah in hiding the temple vessels after the Temple was destroyed.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai once asked his students to describe the appearance of the walls of the Red Sea when the waters parted for the Children of Israel to cross. When none could do so, Rabban Yohanan described them as resembling a wall of sprouting bushes. Then, all at once, they heard a voice say: “No, it was not like that at all!” And when they looked up, they saw the face of a very old woman peering in the window of the House of Study. “Who are you?” demanded Rabban Yohanan. “I am Serah bat Asher,” came the reply, “and I know exactly what the walls resembled, for I crossed the Red Sea.” “And what did they look like?” asked Rabban Yohanan. She replied: “They resembled shining mirrors, mirrors in which every man, woman, and child was reflected, so that it seemed like an even greater multitude crossed there, not only those of the present, but also those of the past and future as well.” And when Serah had finished speaking, none dared contradict her, for her knowledge was firsthand.

All of her days Serah bat Asher wandered wherever the Jews could be found. In the ninth century [C.E.] she lived in Persia, in the city of Isfahan. One day, while she was alone inside the synagogue, a fiery chariot descended from heaven and surrounded the synagogue with flames. Then the chariot ascended and the flames disappeared. There were many witnesses of this event. Afterward they rushed to the synagogue and saw with amazement that there was no damage to the synagogue at all. But when they went inside, Serah was gone. For she had ascended into Paradise alive, and was spared the taste of death. And that synagogue, which became known as the synagogue of Serah bat Asher, is still standing to this day.

Persia: c. Twelfth Century C.E.¹

¹ Taken verbatim from *Gabriel's Palace: Jewish Mystical Tales*. Selected and retold by Howard Schwartz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 47-50