

No matter if we are philosophers (like Quine), scientists, or grand viziers of Egypt (like Joseph), we all constantly engage in the process of slotting the “disordered fragments of raw experience” into an overarching framework. And, Quine notes, however strictly we cleave to the path of greatest simplicity, we still exercise some choice in constructing these narratives. On revealing himself to his brothers, Joseph makes clear that he has developed such a framework; in the words of Aviva Zornberg, he has “discovered a vocabulary to describe his life” (*Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, 335).

וְעַתָּה אֶל-תַּעֲצְבוּ וְאֶל-יָחַר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם כִּי-מָכַרְתֶּם אֶתִּי הַנָּה כִּי
לְמַחְיָה שָׁלַחֲנִי אֶל-הַיָּם לְפָנֵיכֶם. . . . וְעַתָּה לֹא-אַתֶּם
שָׁלַחְתֶּם אֶתִּי הַנָּה כִּי הָאֱ-לֹהִים

“Now, do not be sad or angry with yourselves that you sold me, because God sent me before you to save lives. . . . So it was not you that sent me here, but God” (Gen. 45:4–8).

Joseph’s certitude about his life’s mission, about why he was sold into slavery and why he rose to prominence in Egypt, is at once enviable and disturbing. Who wouldn’t like a little more assurance about what they have achieved and what their purpose is, something to cling to when the world is in turmoil? But the price for this confidence is that the brothers’ agency has been eliminated.

We all depend on the frameworks that we create to make sense of our experiences. The challenge is to forge narratives for our lives that are strong enough to hold us steady when confronted with life’s ups and downs, yet flexible enough to allow others in so that they can impact our lives.



Vayiggash 5781

ויגש תשפ"א



A Song of Hope

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In a curious foreshadowing of the book of Exodus, in this week’s Torah reading (Gen. 46:8) we read, “*Ve’eleh shemot*—These are the names of the children of Israel who came into Egypt . . .” This is verbatim the same report as the opening verse of the book of Exodus. But there, the names are limited only to Jacob’s actual sons, and the full enumeration of their own offspring is absent.

Here, however, we get the list of Jacob’s sons, and his grandsons, as well. Curiouser, there is even mention of great-grandsons: Judah’s son Perez’s boys Hetzron and Hamul are listed (Gen. 46:12), as are some others. Curiouser and curiouser, in addition to the matriarchs who were Jacob/Israel’s wives, we learn the name of Jacob’s daughter Dinah (Gen. 46:15). And then, although unnamed, we find out in that same verse that Jacob had sons and daughters (note the plural)! The only one of Jacob’s daughters we know by name is Dinah; and we only know about her thanks to her sad misadventure and likely rape at the hands of Shekhem, the local prince, and the violent rampage by her brothers that followed (Gen. 34).

But look carefully, for most curious of all is the mention of Jacob’s son Asher, and Asher’s daughter, Serah. Serah bat Asher is Jacob’s granddaughter. She is mentioned again briefly in another genealogy list in Numbers 26:46, and finally in 1 Chronicles 7:30. Serah bat Asher is, mentioned three times in the Bible; and unlike her aunt Dinah, she seems to have merited mention without extreme suffering and violence.

Her repeated appearance is one of those occasions in Scripture that scream for Midrash to fill in the gaps. Within the Torah, her chief virtue seems to be that she was among the Israelite clan who went down to Egypt during the famine to live off the largesse of her long-lost uncle Joseph. But it’s hard to see

what separates her from her unnamed (and unnumbered) sisters who also made the journey. Yet through Midrash, like Alice through the looking glass, in Serah bat Asher, our sages of blessed memory have given us a heroine for our times!

Early in the third century CE, the Rabbis imagine Serah is still alive in Egypt after centuries, when the Israelites are on the cusp of Exodus. Before they can leave Egypt, the children of Israel must fulfill a vow that their ancestor Joseph had placed upon them. In the very final verses of Genesis, which we will read next week, he adjures them, “Carry up my bones from here” (Gen. 50:25).

But at that point in the Exodus story, centuries have passed since the Israelites entered Egypt. Who even remembered the vow that Joseph made them take? Why Moses, of course! In the midst of the tumult of the Exodus we are quietly informed, “And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him . . .” (Exod. 13:19). How did faithful Moses know where Joseph’s bones were buried? The Tosefta Sotah (4:3) teaches that our heroine, long-lived Serah bat Asher, informed him, “In the River Nile are Joseph’s bones!”

Many centuries after the Exodus, long after the Land of Israel has been conquered, a certain no-goodnik named Sheba ben Bichri rebelled against King David (2 Sam. 20). Sheba sought refuge in a town that David’s general Yoav then besieged. Yoav threatened to destroy that town if they did not surrender Sheba. Scripture teaches that a “wise-woman” counseled them to give up the rebel and save the town. Who was that unnamed wise woman, the Rabbis ask a millennium later (*Eccl. Rabbah* 9:18:12)? Why she was Serah bat Asher; who else?

How long did Serah live? One midrash (*Pesikta Derav Kahana* 11:13) reports that the third-century CE Sage Rabbi Yohanan claimed that when the Red Sea parted, the walls of water that formed were like an impervious net. Serah bat Asher showed up to correct him, saying, “I was there! The walls of water had transparent windows!”

It is tempting to add to Serah’s adventures. Perhaps we could suggest that she was in another besieged city, Jerusalem, when the King of Babylonia, Nebuchadnezzar, surrounded it on the 10th of Tevet, which this year coincidentally falls on December 25th. Or maybe Serah was there to save us on so many other December 25ths during pogroms in the Pale of Settlement.

Does Serah dwell among us yet today?

A late Midrash, probably from around the year 1300 CE, called *Sefer Hayashar*, commenting on this week’s Torah reading, tells us why Serah merited to live forever: When the sons of Jacob went down to Egypt during the famine and were met there by their long-lost brother Joseph—he who forgave them, fed them, and helped them survive—they realized they would have to inform their father, who was still anxiously awaiting their return to the Land of Canaan. It would be difficult to let their father know of the cruel deception they had perpetrated upon him, allowing him, for all those years, to believe his beloved Joseph was dead, and watching Jacob mourn him without cease. Who could they send to break this terrible, yet exhilaratingly revivifying, news to him?

The brothers sent Serah bat Asher. She took her lyre and sang to the elderly Jacob, “*Od Yosef hai*—Joseph still lives” (Gen. 45:26). When he heard her song, his heart grew faint; for through all his years of despair, he yet held hope. *Od Yosef hai*, she sang—the very words that Jacob longed to hear. With tears streaming down his cheeks, Jacob rewarded his granddaughter for being the bearer of such good tidings. He blessed her and rewarded her with the promise that she might live forever.

May that song always be our hope: “*Od Yosef hai*.” For so long as Joseph still lives—and through us forgives and nourishes his family, which is our family—Serah and the Jewish people live forever.

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דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



A Narrative for Our Lives Rabbi Tim Daniel Bernard, Director of Digital Learning and Engagement, JTS

“[W]e adopt, in so far as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged. . . . But simplicity as a guiding principle in constructing conceptual schemes is not a clear and unambiguous idea.”

W.V.O. Quine, “On What There Is,”
From a Logical Point of View, 16–17