

# שֶׂרַח בַּת אֲשֵׁר / Serakh Bat Asher

## or: Lady Elijah

### Biblical Text

Now these are the names of the children of Israel who were coming to Egypt - Jacob and his children: Jacob's firstborn, Reuven. Asher's sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Beriah, and their sister Serakh. *Genesis 46:8, 17*

Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel.. The sons of Asher, according to their families. The name of Asher's daughter: Serakh. *Numbers 26:1, 46*

The sons of Asher: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Beriah, and their sister Serah.

*I Chronicles 7:30*

### Serakh in the Midrash

Serakh bat Asher was among those who came to Egypt and those who left it. [She was] from those who came to Egypt, as it is written, "And Serakh their sister" (Genesis 46:17), and [she was] from those who came to the Land [of Israel], as it says, "And there was the daughter of Asher, Serakh" (Numbers 26:46). *Seder Olam Rabbah 9*

And after the death of Asher's wife he went and took Hadurah for a wife, and brought her to the land of Canaan. And Serach her daughter he brought also with them, and she was three years old; and the damsel was brought up in Jacob's house. And the damsel was of comely appearance, and she went in the holy ways of the children of Jacob, and the Lord gave her wisdom and understanding. *Sefer HaYashar, Ch 14*



When Jacob's sons returned from Egypt with the news that Joseph is alive, they said: If we tell him straightaway, his soul will fly from his body. So they told Serakh to play on her harp and sing, "Joseph lives, Joseph lives, and he is the ruler of Egypt, so that he should absorb the message slowly. Said Jacob to her: "The mouth that informed me that Joseph lives shall not taste death." Serakh was among those who came out of Egypt and among those who entered the Land; she was the "wise woman" who handed over Sheva ben Bichri to Joab (II Samuel 20); in the end, she entered paradise alive.

*Midrash Sefer HaYashar*

**GOD BURIED MOSES IN THE VALLEY** (Deut. 34:6) Why did Moses merit to have God bury him? [Just before the Exodus], Moses walked around the city for three days and three nights, looking for Joseph's coffin - and he didn't find it. After he had tried very hard, he encountered Serakh bat Asher. She asked him: "Moses, our teacher, why are you so troubled?" He said, "for three days and three nights, I have wandered around the city, searching for Joseph's coffin and I have not found it." She said, "Come with me",

and led him to the Nile River. She said, “In this place they have made a coffin of lead that weighs 500 talents; they put Joseph inside of it and threw it into the River.” For the magicians had told Pharaoh, “If you want this people never to leave from under your rule, make it so they won’t find Joseph’s bones and they will never leave, because Joseph made them take an oath.” Immediately, Moses stood by the River and said, “Joseph, Joseph: You know how you made Israel take an oath...Give honor to the God of Israel, and do not delay Israel’s redemption. You have good deeds in your favor; ask for mercy from your Creator and arise from the depths!” Immediately, the coffin began to crumble and rise out of the depths like a single reed. Moses took it on his shoulders and carried it.

*Midrash Yalkut Shimoni*

R. Yohanan was sitting in the *Beit Midrash* and expounding the verse (Ex. 14:22): “the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.” How could the water become as a wall? R. Yohanan explained that it looked like a lattice. Serakh appeared, and said: “I was there, and it looked like glass windows.”

*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 11:13*

## Contemporary Midrash

Joseph’s brothers were jealous because their father, Jacob, favored him. They hated Joseph and decided to throw him into a pit in the desert to die. They told their father that a wild beast had killed Joseph, and Jacob never stopped mourning for his lost son. But Joseph survived. Traders pulled Joseph from the pit and sold him. He became a slave in Egypt. Many years later, when his brothers went down to Egypt to buy food during a famine, they discovered that Joseph had risen to become Pharaoh’s top advisor. When Jacob’s sons returned from Egypt to tell their father the good news about Joseph, they were afraid that the depressed and fragile old man would die from shock. Rather than tell him directly, they found Serakh, who was wise and skilled at playing the harp, and she played a song for Jacob over and over again with these words: “Joseph is in Egypt. There have been born on his knees Menashe and Ephraim.” (In Hebrew the phrases rhyme: *Yosef b’Mitzrayim/yuldo lo al birkayim/Menashe v’Ephrayim*). Gradually the words began to penetrate, and Jacob’s heart filled with joy. “My daughter,” he said to Serakh, “May death never have power over you, for you revived my spirit.” As a result of Jacob’s wish, Serakh lived a long life and instead of dying she became one of the few people taken up to heaven while she was still alive. Because she never really died, Serakh returned over the ages to help her people at critical moments when they needed her. Serakh went down to Egypt with Jacob’s family. Eventually, a new Pharaoh arose who did not know Joseph. He enslaved the Israelites. Hundreds of years later, Moses came to liberate them, but the Israelites did not believe that God had really chosen him to lead them out of Egypt. At the burning bush, God told Moses what to tell the Israelites in order to convince them but the Israelites did not believe that God had really chosen him to lead them out of Egypt. At the burning bush, God told Moses what to tell the Israelites in order to convince them. God said to tell them, “I have surely remembered you, *pakod pakadti*.” The people heard these words and saw the special signs God had given Moses. But they still refused to believe him. Only Serakh could convince the Israelites that Moses was indeed God’s chosen leader.

*David Arnow, Creating Lively Passover Seders (2004)*

I learned how powerful songs could be. My Saba taught me. He even guided me in breaking the news to him about Joseph. I used the harp my uncles gave me, but Saba asked me to repeat the words again and again, singing to him: "Joseph is alive and he rules in Egypt." This brought him so much pleasure. He breathed in each word, and his face got brighter and brighter. The words revived him and allowed him to feel God's *Shekhinah* [divine feminine/indwelling presence] again. This is how I learned from him to calm a troubled heart with song.

My Saba taught me so much. Like how to open my heart with silent compassion. He was my first and best teacher. Maybe he knew, too, but he wouldn't tell his sons, except on his deathbed. He even had a private farewell with me, and repeated the blessing of eternal life to me again...

You want to know why I was counted in each census? Without me, Jacob would still be depressed. Without me, there would have been no Exodus, no journey to the Promised Land. Those uncles- they all thought that wisdom comes from ideas, and lessons, and parchment scrolls--they were so bound by their rules. Compassion leads to wisdom that resides in the heart of silence. If I had dared cry out when I saw my children and my friends buckling under the whip of a Pharaoh, who had forgotten Joseph, do you know what would have happened? Enslavement comes slowly, in baby steps: First they take away one freedom, then another, and another. Before you even realize it, everything is oppression and forced labor. To cry out would mean torture, not death for me, but pain. So I learned to listen and watch and learn from those who knew.

Rosie Rozensweig, *Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women*  
ed. Penina Adelman (2005)



Eighteen miles southwest of the city of Isfahan, lies the town of Pir-i Bakran, the home of one of the holiest sites in Iran. This is the shrine to Serakh bat Asher, the granddaughter of the patriarch Jacob. According to tradition, the inner room of the synagogue is Serakh's cave, with a secret tunnel that leads directly to Jerusalem. The shrine attracts pilgrims from all over the country, appealing for help with anything from personal misfortune to national crises.

A stone inscribed in Hebrew found beneath the synagogue bears an illegible date that some have argued may be equivalent to 1130 AD, while others argue that it is a later date. Archeologists discovered a stone dating to 500 BC in Pir-i Bakran's Jewish cemetery in 1948, suggesting that Jews have inhabited the area for at least twenty-five hundred years. This fits with another legend of Serakh, which suggests that she led some of the tribe of Asher into exile during the reign of Shalmaneser V (r. 727-722 BC)

Source: *Diarna.org* (Jewish Digital Heritage mapping website)