

Serach Bat Asher

[There are only two references to Serach bat Asher in the Torah, both in lists. In both cases, she is one of the only women mentioned. These appearances are calculated to occur roughly 400 years apart:]

Genesis 46:8-17: *These are the names of the Israelites, Jacob and his descendents, who came to Egypt....Asher's sons: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah and their sister Serach.*

Numbers 26:44-47: *Descendents of Asher by their clans: Of Imnah, the clan of the Imnites; of Ishvi, the clan of the Ishvites...The name of Asher's daughter was Serach.*

Serach bat Asher & Jacob:

(1) *And they told him, saying, "Joseph still lives" (Gen. 45:26). Our rabbis say, they [the brothers] said: "If we tell him [Jacob] directly that Joseph is living, perhaps he will die!" So what did they do? They told Serach bat Asher, "Go, say to our father Jacob that Joseph still lives and that he is in Egypt." What did she do? She waited for him, until he was standing in prayer, and she said this rhyme: "Yosef b'mitzrayim, yoldu lo al birkayim, Menasheh v'Ephraim" ("Joseph is in Egypt, Menashe and Ephraim were born to him"). His heart stopped [he fainted] as he stood in prayer. When he recovered (*hishlim*), he saw the carts, and immediately Jacob's spirit was revived. (Midrash Hagadol, 13th century)*

It was the spirit of prophesy that was awakened in Jacob. He blessed her, saying that for her act of kindness 'The angel of death will not rule over her' and she would live forever. (*Sefer HaYashar*, 16th c.)

(2) *All the souls who came with Jacob into Mitzraim, his offspring, besides Jacob's sons' wives, all the souls were sixty-six, and the sons of Joseph, born to him in Mitzrayim, were two souls: all the souls of the house of Jacob that came into Egypt were seventy (Gen. 46:26-27).*

R. Levi said in the name of R. Samuel bar Nachman: Have you ever heard of a person who gives his friend sixty-six glasses, and then gives him another three, and counts them as seventy?! . . . Some say that Serach bat Asher completed (*hishlimah*) the number.

Thus it is written: *Then cried a wise woman out of the city: 'Hear, hear; say, I pray you, to Yoav: Come near hither, that I may speak with you.' And he came near to her, and the woman said: 'Are you Yoav?' (II Sam. 20:16-17) . . . "Who are you then" he asked her. "I am of them that are peaceable (*shelumei*) and faithful in Israel (ibid, v. 19)—it is I who completed (*hishlamti*) the number of Israel (in Egypt); it is I who made [the connection] complete (*hishlamti*) from faithful to faithful, from Joseph to Moshe." (Genesis Rabbah 94:9)*

(over)

Serach bat Asher & the Liberation from Slavery:

(3) Rabbi Eliezer said, there are five “doubled” letters in the Torah [that is, letters with a final and a regular form], all containing a secret of redemption . . . *Peh*: with it our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt, as it is said, *Pakod pakaditi etchem*, I will surely remember you (Ex. 3:16). . . And these letters were transmitted to Abraham our father, and Abraham transmitted them to Isaac, and Isaac transmitted them to Jacob, and Jacob transmitted them to Joseph, and Joseph transmitted them to his brothers, and Asher transmitted the secret of redemption to his daughter Serach. When Moshe and Aaron went to the elders of Israel and performed the signs for them, the elders went to their elder, Serach bat Asher, and said to her, “A man has come and done such-and-such signs before us.” She said to them, “There’s nothing to such signs.” They said to her, “But did he not say to us, ‘*pakod pakadti etchem*?’” She said to them, “He is the man who will redeem Israel from Egypt, for so I have heard from my father, ‘double *peh*,’ as it is said, *pakod pakadti etchem*.” The people immediately believed in God and in Moshe, as it is said, *And the people believed, and they heard that YHVH had remembered (pakad) the Israelites* (Ex. 4:31). (Pirkei d’Rabbi Eliezer 48)

(4) *And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him* (Ex. 13:19). This proclaims the wisdom and the piety of Moses. For all Israel were busy with the booty while Moses busied himself with the duty of looking after the bones of Joseph. . . But how did Moses know where Joseph was buried? It is told that Serach, the daughter of Asher, survived from that generation, and she showed Moses the grave of Joseph. She said to him, “The Egyptians made for him a metal coffin, which they sunk into the Nile.” So Moses went and stood by the Nile. He took a gold tablet, engraved on it the Tetragrammaton, threw it into the Nile and shouted, “Joseph son of Jacob! The time has arrived for the fulfillment of the oath that the Blessed Holy One swore to our father Abraham, that the Israelites will be redeemed. If you come up, well and good. And if not, we shall be guiltless of your oath.” Immediately Joseph’s coffin came to the surface, and Moses took it.

(Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael, *Beshallah*)

(5) Rabbi Yohanan was once sitting and expounding about how the waters became like a wall for Israel, on their right and on their left. Rabbi Yohanan explained that the waters looked like a lattice. However, just at that moment, Serach bat Asher looked in and said: “I was there, and they [the waters] were not like that, but rather like lighted windows.” (Pesikta d’Rav Kahana, *Beshallah*)

Serach in Paradise

6) Serach bat Asher presides over one of the palaces reserved for righteous women. Here, three times a day, a voice rings out announcing the visit of Joseph, the righteous one. Serach retires behind a curtain to gaze upon the light of his face and show him honor. And here, each day, she proclaims, “O happy day, that I brought the good tidings to my grandfather Jacob that you were still alive!” Then Serach returns to her women companions to teach them Torah and to join with them in praise and thanks to the Master of the Universe. (Zohar III, 167b)