

Bubbe Maisehs?

Category: Beshalach, Shemos

Should you be listening to your grandmother?

Who Really Knows

Several years ago, there was a 17 year-old yeshiva student traveling within the United States who stood up in middle of his flight to put on tefillin.

Unfortunately, however, the stewardess had no idea of what she was looking at, and she went into a panic. She thought there was a terrorist right there trying to blow up the plane. All the young man's explanations didn't help. They thoroughly inspected the plane and brought in the FBI to interrogate the young "terrorist."

Now, that story happened relatively recently. But it reminds me of another story involving Chabad and tefillin—this one in the Soviet Union back in the 1980s.

There was a Chabad rabbi who traveled to Russia during the Communist era, bringing along with him ten pairs of tefillin. At the airport in Russia, as the Chabadnik passed through customs and they opened his bags, the customs agent found the tefillin and didn't know exactly what they were. So he called his superior and described what he was looking at: some kind of black boxes with leather straps attached to them.

To the Chabadnik's surprise, the superior yelled at the customs agent over the phone, saying, "He's Yevreski!"—meaning, he's Jewish, and the "black boxes" are Jewish items. Let him bring them in.

In Russia, of all places, where Judaism was banned, the KGB knew exactly what tefillin were—but here, the Feds needed to dissect an entire airplane because they didn't know what tefillin were—which brings us to this week's Torah portion.

The Longest Living Jewess

In this week's Parshah, we read about the glorious Exodus from Egypt.

Now, the Egyptian police were not like the FBI. If anything, they were like the KGB. They knew the littlest details about the Jewish people—and they used those details to hurt the Jews.

At the beginning of our Parshah, we read how Moshe Rabbeinu took Yosef's bones with him. Why? As the verse tells us, "Because he had adjured the sons of Israel, saying, "G-d will surely remember you, and you shall bring up my bones from here with you'" (Shmos 13:19).

Along comes the Talmud (Tractate Sotah 13a) with the following episode. "How did Moshe know where Yosef had been buried?" the Talmud asks. "He was told that Serach the daughter of Asher was still left from that generation. Moshe went to her and said to her, "Do you know anything about where Yosef is buried?' She said to him, "Egypt made him a metal casket and set it in the Nile River so that its waters would be blessed.'" And the Midrash adds that the Egyptians had wanted to hinder the Jewish exodus from Egypt with this burial.

Now, who exactly what this Serach bas Asher?

For starters, Serach is only mentioned in the Torah twice: Once in the book of Bereishis (46:17) in the Torah portion of Vayigash, when the Torah lists the original 70 souls who went down to Egypt, and the second time in the tally of the entrance to the Holy Land over 200 years later. In that census, which was held on the Plains of Moav outside the Holy Land, the only woman mentioned by name other than the daughters of Tzelafchad is the one in the Book of Bamidbar, Chapter 26, verse 46: "And the name of the daughter of Asher was Serach."

From the fact that she was mentioned among those who went down to Egypt, and among those who entered the Holy Land, the Sages deduced that she lived an extremely long life.

Along comes the Midrash and tells us how Serach merited to such a long life.

Three Stories

Everyone knows the story of the selling of Yosef as a slave. But what you may not have heard is what happened when they finally discovered that Yosef was still alive. How were they supposed to break the good news to their elderly father

Yaakov, who had been mourning for his beloved and supposedly dead son for 20 years at that point?

So Yosef's brothers returned to the Holy Land from Egypt, where they had found Yosef alive and well—and the de facto king of the country, for that matter—worrying about how to tell Dad the good news. He might have a heart attack! It might blow his mind!

So instead, they asked his precious granddaughter to go tell her grandfather, “Od Yosef chai”—“Yosef still lives.” So little Serach took her harp and went to visit her Zaidy, singing and playing a little song to the words “Od Yosef chai,” thus gently breaking the news to him. And the Midrash tells us that in the merit of the great nachas—that Serach gave Yaakov, he blessed her with long life.

But there's another story in the Midrash about Serach bas Asher.

When Moshe and Aharon showed up in Egypt and told the Jewish People that G-d had sent them to redeem them, the Midrash states the following: “They performed the signs before them, and they went to Serach bas Asher and said to her, ‘A man has come to us and performed such-and-such signs before our eyes.’ She said to them, ‘He has no substance.’ They said, ‘But he said “pakod yifkod Elokim es'chem!” (“G-d will surely remember you!”)’ So she said to them, ‘He is the man destined to redeem Israel from Egypt, because that's what I heard from my father: that the redeemer will use the exact words pakod yifkod.’”

Later, when the Jews needed the tradition of previous generations, they turned to Serach bas Asher again. When it came time to leave Egypt, and Moshe Rabbeinu needed to know something that had been passed down from generation to generation, he asked Serach where Yosef had been buried.

But Serach's name is not just part of the history of the Exodus, but also appears in Jewish history hundreds of years later, during the era of King David.

In the Book of Samuel II (Chapter 20), we are told about a man named Sheva ben Bichri. Sheva rebelled against King David, declaring, “We have no part in David and no inheritance in the son of Yishai!” (Yishai was King David's father.) This Sheva ben Bichri then ran away to a place called “Avel Beis Ma'acha” and hid there.

Now, Yoav ben Tzeruya, the general of King David's army, was sent to catch Sheva ben Bichri and suppress his rebellion. But since Sheva had taken cover among the city's civilians, meaning, that they were sympathetic to him, Yoav wanted to destroy the entire city. The Book of Samuel tells us the following: "A wise woman from the city called Yoav... "'Come here!' and he came to her." The woman then convinced Yoav not to destroy the city.

This woman who convinced Yoav not to lay waste to the city, and who also convinced the citizens to shut down the rebellion, was none other than Serach bas Asher herself, as Rashi (Samuel II 20:19) tells us in the name of the Midrash.

But it wasn't the last time that the Midrash tells us about Serach bas Asher.

In this week's Torah portion, we read about the Splitting of the Reed Sea. The Torah tells us that the water split into two bodies and the Jewish Nation passed through the center: "And the water was a wall to them to their right and to their left."

The Midrash tells us that the Sages sat and expounded upon the actual event: "Rabbi Yochanan expounded: 'How were the waters like a wall? Because you could not see through them.'" But the Midrash continues and says something fascinating: "Serach bas Asher looked on and said, 'I was there, and the waters were but like transparent windows!'"

Now, the period of the Sages was about 1,500 years after the Exodus from Egypt! Yet there she is mentioned again, and the Midrash tells us that her words were accepted over the words of Rabbi Yochanan.

Listen to your Bubbe

Now, my friends, what do we learn from the story of Serach bas Asher? It is just a nice legend about a woman who lived forever and ever? Or is there something deeper to it?

What we learn from the story of Serach is not just to respect our elders, or to find just the right words to say things, but something so very important: We learn that the entirety of Jewish tradition depends on those elderly women "who are left from that generation." And by that, I mean Holocaust survivors, grandmothers,

old-time community members—Jewish women who were children in eras long gone.

The story of Serach bas Asher teaches us that Judaism rests upon the stories of elderly Jewish women in every generation. They are the ones who pass our traditions on from one generation to the next.

Unfortunately, in today's world, the gossip columnists and the people who track down and confirm every rumor are considered the authorities, the people to listen to. But stories from old ladies?! Old wives tales?! Who pays any attention to them at all!

In Yiddish, we call them “bubbe meyses”—“grandmother stories.”

In direct contrast, the Rebbe would constantly quote the words of the Rashba, the Talmudic commentator, who says, “Six hundred thousand Jews do not have the power to negate a custom observed by elderly Jewish women.”

Perhaps we can say that it is this lesson that we learn from Serach bas Asher—that it is the Serach bas Asher in every family, in every community and in every generation that constantly reminds us of our traditions. It was Serach bas Asher who knew exactly where Yosef was buried and exactly how the sea looked at the Exodus, and it is our Serach bas Ashers who set us straight, who tell us what is right and wrong, and who tell us exactly what it means to be a Jew.

Indeed, all of Judaism is built on tradition. That's why Shlomo Hamelech, King Solomon, says, “Don't abandon your mother's teaching”—because the Jewish mother, the classic “bubby,” is the one who tells us how they did things in her house when she was growing up.

In today's world, when we want to change or innovate something, we turn to the experts. But in Judaism, we try to change things as little as possible and to protect our traditions as much as possible—and when it comes to tradition, there's just nothing like the Jewish grandmother who can testify exactly how it was done a generation or two ago.

The story is told about two young Jewish girls sitting at their grandmother's feet a few weeks before she passed away. And what was the grandmother giving them? Her recipes!

As they sat there, their grandmother wrote down her recipes for the classic Jewish foods she would always make for them. In those moments, she conveyed to them how to make gefilte fish, latkes, kneidlach, gribines, kreplach, and so on. It is these Jewish foods that protected, and continue to protect, the Jewish identity of many Jewish families. And if a Jewish grandmother teaching her grandkids how to make gefilte fish can keep their Jewish identity alive, how much more so are the lessons we hear from our Serach bas Ashers, our beautiful and worthy bubbies, who teach us so much about our past.