

## The Bridge Between Life and Death

*Haftorah Vayechi*

1 *Melachim* 2:1- 12

*This Haftorah touches upon the bridge between life and death and mentions a very hidden woman in the Bible, Tzeruriah who really sparked my interest. I am also sharing with you some highlights on why we pray for someone using the name of their mother while after death they are mentioned together with the name of their father.*

### The Dead Son of His Father – The Live Son of His Mother

The first instruction King David gives to the newly anointed young Shlomo is to take care of his most difficult unfinished business: “You, too, know all that Yoav ben Tzeruah did to me – what he did to the two officers of the hosts of Israel, to Avner ben Ner and to Amasa ben Yeter, that he killed them, and shed the blood of war in peace... Act according to your wisdom, and do not let him die a peaceful death of old age” (*Melachim* I 2:5-6). Yoav was King David’s general who on various occasions killed people against David’s will. Therefore, avenging was necessary in order to maintain Shalom and justice. What I found interesting in this quote is that both of the victims are mentioned by the name of their fathers, Ner and Yeter, while the perpetrator, Yoav, is mentioned by the name of his mother, Tzeruah. Yoav, who is still alive, is mentioned as the son of his mother, while the deceased Avner and Amasa are mentioned as the sons of their father. This is congruent with the traditional way we mention others in prayer. It is the accepted custom to pray for someone who is alive by mentioning the name of the person together with the name of his mother, while after death we mention the person together with the name of his father. What is the reason for this custom?

### The Father’s or the Mother’s Child?

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev explains that in *tefilah* (prayer) it is important to be as specific as possible. Since the identity of the mother can more easily be ascertained than that of the father, the name of the mother distinguishes a person more explicitly. Therefore, we pray for a person as the child of his or her mother. The *Mikdash Melech*, page 84, explains that this principle applies to people on earth who may not be sure of the true identity of their father. However, after a person’s death, his name is known in Heaven. Therefore, in memorial prayers the father’s name is used. According to Ramban, (*Vayikra* 12:3), the body of the child derives from the blood of the mother, while the form of the child is related to the father. Therefore, people are connected on a more primary level with their mother while being alive, yet after death; they are identified by the name of the father. The explanation I connect with most is that when praying for compassion for a person, we mention the name of his or her mother, since the mother embodies the character-trait of compassion. She is the one who carried him in her womb – (*rechem*) a word which also means mercy. By mentioning the name of the mother in prayer, we attempt to identify with the compassion of the mother of the person we pray for, and tap into the tears that the mother sheds for her child.

## Can Capital Punishment be Compassionate?

It doesn't seem to make sense that David intended to arouse the attribute of mercy when commanding the execution of Yoav? Yet, perhaps the mother's name alludes to the ultimate mercy even when implementing justice. Although today capital punishment seems cruel and archaic, when it is decided by the anointed one of G-d, it entails the final compassion of bringing about *tikun* (rectification) for the cruelty of murder. Except for his death, no retribution could atone for the innocent blood shed by Yoav. It cleansed his soul for the eternal afterlife. The righteous King David cared only for executing Hashem's will with utmost compassion which included mercy for Yoav's soul, who also happened to be David's cousin.

## Tzeruiah – Unknown Woman in the Bible

Very little is mentioned in the Torah about Yoav's mother Tzeruiah. However, her sons are invariably mentioned with the metronymic "son of Tzeruiah," in contrast to people in many other cultures and other Biblical characters who are known by the name of their father. This seems to indicate that Tzeruiah was an exceptionally strong or important woman, though the specific circumstances are not given. All we are told about her is that she is the daughter of Yishai, sister of David, and mother of Yoav, Avshai, and Asa-el all of whom held key-positions in David's army (1 *Divrei HaYayamim* 2:16). There are two opinions as to whether she is the sister or stepsister of David. In 2 *Shemuel* 17:25, Tzuriah and her sister Avigail seem to have a different father than David, by the name of Nachash. According to the Talmud Yishai is called Nachash (serpent) because he never committed a sin but died only because of the bite of the serpent, which caused the mortality of all humans. The Rama of Pa'ano mentions that the name Tzeruiah derives from the word *metzar*, which means a constricted place or distress, such as "Out of my distress (*metzar*) I called upon Hashem..." (*Tehillim* 118:5). Tzeruiah certainly must have cried out in distress over the bereavement of her sons. According to the Rama of Pa'ano, these three sons were the reincarnation of Korach's three sons, Asir, Elkana, and Aviasaf, their death was their ultimate rectification. The numerical value of the word Tzeruiah (311) equals that of Korach (308) when the three letters of his name is added. (*Gilgulei Neshamot* 2). May Tzeruiah's tears mixed with the tears of every mother in Israel for all the innocent blood spilled among our distressed people reach Hashem's altar of peace, and may "...He answer us from His place of space!" (*Tehillim* 118:5).