



Who Says Serach Played the Harp?

How did the brothers break the news to Ya'acov that his favorite son, Yosef, was still alive, without causing a shock that could lead to a heart attack, G-d forbid? Everybody knows that Serach, daughter of Asher, played the harp for her grandfather while gently singing, "Yosef is still alive; he rules over all Egypt..." Each year, during the week of *Parashat Vayigash*, kids in every religious school—in all parts of the world, come home with a coloring page of Serach playing the harp. How do we know it is true that Serach was the one who told Ya'acov about Yosef being alive? Moreover, how do we know that she played the harp while breaking the news to Ya'acov? You would expect such a famous biblical tale to be written directly in the Torah. Yet, Serach is only mentioned twice in the Torah, once in the list of Ya'acov's descendants as they enter Egypt:

ספר בראשית פרק מו פסוק יז ובני אשר ימנה וישוה וישוי ובריעה ושרח אחתם...

"The sons of Asher were Yimnah, Yishvah, Yishvi, and Briah, and Serach, their sister..." (*Bereishit* 46:17), and once among the families of Asher who were to receive a portion in the land of Israel: "The name of the daughter of Asher, Serach" (*Bamidbar* 26:46). Only her name is mentioned and of whom she was a sister and daughter. That's all. Well, if the story about Serach and her harp is not in the Torah then you would think that it would at least be found in the midrash. I have an extensive Torah library program with an excellent search engine, which I use perpetually for my research in preparation for articles and teachings. Among all the well-known Midrashim such as Midrash Rabbah, Midrash Tanchuma, Yalkut Shimoni, Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer and more- not one of them mentions Serach playing the harp.

Torah Sources for Serach Breaking the News to Ya'acov

There is no mention in the Talmud or early Midrash about Serach bringing the good news to Ya'acov that his favorite son Yosef was still alive. Besides Rashi, who writes, "...I told Ya'acov that Yosef was alive. (Rashi, II *Shmuel* 20:19), the earliest source that mentions Serach being the harbinger of the good news to Ya'acov is Targum Yonatan on *Bereishit* 46:17. However, after doing some research, it turns out that Targum Yonatan on the Chumash (Pentateuch) is not Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel from the time of the Roman occupation from 2000 years ago. His translation and commentary was exclusively on the Nach (Prophets and Writings). The commentary on the Chumash was not by Rabbi Yonatan at all but actually Targum Yerushalmi! Most likely, the names got mixed up because both abbreviate as ת"י/T"Y. The timeframe of this commentary is disputed. Since Rashi doesn't mention it at all, but Rabbi Menachem Recanti from the late thirteenth century refers to it, Targum (Pseudo) Yonatan must be from around the 13th century. If Targum Yonatan lived after Rashi the question still remains what was Rashi's source for stating that Serach told Ya'acov that Yosef was alive?

Here is what Targum Yonatan writes:

תרגום יונתן על בראשית פרק מו פסוק יז ...

ושרח אחתהון דאידברית כד היא קיימא לגינוניתא על דבשרת ליעקב דיוסף קיים...

...Serach, their sister, she was brought when she was alive in the Garden of Eden because she told Ya'acov that Yosef was still alive... (Targum Pseudo Yonatan, *Bereishit* 46:17). On which source this medieval commentary bases himself is a mystery since there is no mention of Serach being the bearer of the good news to Ya'acov in known earlier sources. Note that this Targum Yonatan does not indicate that Serach plays the harp. There is an anthology of small Midrashim called *Otzar Midrashim* published in 1915 by Yehuda David Eisenstein. Its collection of Midrashim spans a time period from year 400-1200. *Otzar Midrashim* explains that since Serach revived Ya'acov's soul by telling him that Yosef was alive, she was blessed with eternal life:

אוצר המדרשים (אייזנשטיין) עמוד תל"ג ד"ה פרשה ב': או אוצר המדרשים עמוד לה

ויש אומרים אנשים מבני אדם נכנסו בחיים בגן עדן. אמר לו מי הם? אמר לו חנוך וסרח בת אשר, ובתיה בת פרעה וחירם מלך צור, ועליעזר עבד אברהם, ועבד מלך הכוש, ועבדו של רבי יהודה, ויעבץ, ורבי יהושע בן לוי... סרח בת אשר בעבור שאמרה ליעקב יוסף חי אמר לה יעקב זה הפה שבשרתני על יוסף שהוא חי לא יטעום טעם מות.

There are those who say, there are people who entered the Garden of Eden alive. Who are they? Chanoch, Serach bat Asher, Bitya the daughter of Pharaoh, Chiram the king of Zur, Eliezer the servant of Avraham, the servant of the Black king, the servant of Rabbi Yehuda, Ya'avetz, and Rabbi Yehoshua son of Levi... Serach daughter of Asher because she told Ya'acov, Yosef is alive, Ya'acov told her, the mouth that told me the good tidings that Yosef is alive shall not taste the taste of death (*Otzar Hamidrashim* p. 133).

Additionally there is another late 'Midrash' – *Midrash Hagadol, Vayigash, Bereishit* 45:26, which mentions Serach giving over the good news to Ya'acov. *Midrash Hagadol* is attributed to Rabbi David ben Amram Adani, from Yemen during the early 14th century. Again, none of these earliest sources – of Serach's telling Ya'acov that Yosef is alive – as much as hints to her playing any instrument in general or a harp in particular.

What is the Origin of the Well Known Story of Serach Playing the Harp?

So did the Serach harp story derive out of thin air? Actually, there is one and only one source that mentions Serach playing the כינור/kinor – 'harp.' This is *Sefer HaYashar*, printed in Venice, year 1625. The printer Yosef ben Samuel claimed the work was copied by a scribe named Ya'acov ben Atyah, from an ancient manuscript whose letters could hardly be made out. Here is the original text with English translation, which I adapted from https://archive.org/stream/cu31924088174754/cu31924088174754_djvu.txt.

יעקב אביהם : ויבואו עד גבול הארץ ויאמרו איש אל רעהו מה נעשה בדבר הזה לפני אבינו : כי אם נבוא אליו פתאום ונגד לו הדבר ויבהל מאד מדברינו ולא יאבה לשמוע אלינו : וילכו להם עד קרנם אל בתיהם וימצאו את שרח בת אשר אשר יוצאת לקראתם והנערה טובה עד מאד וחכמה ויודעת לנגן בכנור : ויקראו אליה ותבא אליהם ותשק להם ויקחוה ויהנו לה כנור אחד לאמר : בואי נא לפני אבינו וישבת לפניו והך בכנור ודברת ואמרת כדברים האלה לפניו : ויצאו אותה ללכת אל ביתם והקה הכנור ותמהר ותלך לפנייהם ותבוא ותשב אצל יעקב : ותשיב הכנור ותנגן ותאמר בנועם דבריה יוסף דודי חי הוא וכי הוא מושל בכל ארץ מצרים ולא מת : ותוסף ותנגן והדבר כדברים האלה וישמע יעקב את דבריה ויערב לו : וישמע עוד כדברה פעמים ושלוש ותבא השמחה בלב יעקב מנועם דבריה ותהי עליו רוח אלהים וידע כי כל דבריה נכונה : ויברך יעקב את שרח כדברה הדברים האלה לפניו ויאמר אליה בתי אל ימשול מות כך עד עולם כי החיית את רוחי : אך דבר נא עוד לפני כאשר דברת כי שמחהני בכל דבריך : ורסוף ורנגן כדברים האלה ויעקב שומע ויערב לו וישמח ותהי עליו רוח אלהים : עודנו מדבר עמה והנה בניו באו אליו בסוסים ומרכבות ובגדי מלכות ועבדים רצים לפנייהם : ויקם יעקב לקראתם וירא את בניו מלוכשים בלבוש מלכות וירא את כל הטובה אשר שלח יוסף אליהם : ויאמרו אליו התבשר כי יוסף אחינו חי והוא המושל בכל ארץ מצרים והוא אשר דבר אלינו ככל אשר דברנו אליך : וישמע יעקב את כל דברי בניו ויפג לבו she spoke these words before him, and he said to her, my daughter, may death never prevail over you, for you have revived my spirit; only speak yet before me as you have spoken, for you have gladdened me with all your words. She continued to sing these words, and Ya'acov listened and it pleased him, and he rejoiced, and the spirit of G-d was upon him (*Sefer Ha'Yashar*, p. 200).

They came to the borders of the land, and they said to each other, what shall we do in this matter before our father, for if we come suddenly to him and tell him the matter, he will be greatly alarmed at our words and will not believe us. They went along until they came close to their houses, and they found Serach, daughter of Asher, going forth to meet them. The young woman was very good and wise, and knew how to play the harp. They called her and she came before them, and kissed them. They took her and gave her a harp, saying, go now before our father, and sit before him, strike the harp, and speak these words. They commanded her to go to their house, she then took the harp and hastened before them, and she came and sat near Ya'acov. She played well and sang, in sweetness her words: "Yosef my uncle is alive. He rules throughout the land of Egypt, and is not dead. She continued to repeat these words, and Ya'acov heard her words and they were sweet to him. He listened while she repeated them twice and thrice, and joy entered the heart of Ya'acov at the sweetness of her words, and the spirit of G-d was upon him, and he knew all her words to be true. Ya'acov blessed Serach when

Eliyahu Fink dismisses *Sefer HaYashar*, claiming, "The book is full of fantastic legends that would never be considered "Torah True™" in frum circles. I don't think there are any frum rabbis or laypeople that take this book as a serious book of Torah." Based on his extensive research he concludes, "We have to question whether the legend of Serach and her harp should be a basic part of the way we teach and learn *Vayigash*." The question remains why has the story from only one questionable source become so well known and accepted by all?

Instrumental in Israel's Transitional Moments

I do not believe that it is by chance that Serach's harp made its way into the hearts of children and adults alike, as well as into many reputable modern Torah commentaries including, *The Little Midrash Says*. Could it really be that Serach's harp story was invented by the creative author of *Sefer HaYashar* in the seventeenth century? Serach is an enigmatic woman who peeks out unexpectedly at times of transitions for the Jewish people. She was the last person to complete the seventy souls of Ya'acov's house that went down into Egypt (*Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 94:9). Serach was also instrumental in bringing the Israelites up from Egypt as she was the one who confirmed that Moshe indeed was the redeemer when he pronounced the password "*Pakod Pakadti*" which had been passed down to her:

"And Aaron spoke all these things... and the people believed..." They heard that Hashem remembered, by the tidings they believed, and not by seeing the wonders... They had a tradition from Ya'acov, Ya'acov handed the secret over to Yosef, Yosef to his brothers and Asher the son of Ya'acov handed the secret over to his daughter Serach, and she was still alive. This is what he said to her: Any redeemer who will come and say to my children "*I have surely visited you*", (*Pakod Pakadti etchem*) he is a true redeemer. When Moshe came and said *pakod pakadeti etchem* the people immediately believed... (*Shemot* 3:16 and 4:31); (*Midrash Shemot Rabbah* 5:13).

Transmitting the Melody of Life, Unity and Redemption

Serach facilitated the redemption from Egypt by revealing to Moshe the whereabouts of Yosef's casket, without which the Israelites were unable to leave Egypt, as they had made an oath to bring Yosef's bones back with them to Israel (*Midrash Tanchuma, Beshalach* Chapter 2). Many generations later, the persona of Serach appears as the wise woman who unifies the fractions of Israel and prevents a civil war, thus enabling the establishment of David's kingdom, without excessive bloodshed. She, who revealed *Od Yosef Chai* (Yosef is still alive) is the one who supports the eternity of the throne of Mashiach, son of David from the house of Yehuda (*Midrash Bereshit Rabbah* 94:9). Serach completed the numbers of the people who went to Egypt. She announced the right time for leaving Egypt, and she crushed the resistance against King David. Just as Serach pops out at pivotal historical redemptive moments for Israel, it could not be more in line with her character to reconnect Ya'acov and Yosef through the spiritual harp transmitting the melody of life, unity and redemption during transitional times for Israel. A story so essentially true does not need a written source. It naturally resonates in the hearts of everyone who hears it as the story is passed on from grandmother to granddaughter throughout the generations.

Serach's Song

C G F6 Esus
 Grandpa lighten up your tired eyes
 F6 Esus
 Let in the light
 F G
 For I have a great secret to share
 Esus F6
 To give you renewed life
 Am G F6
 Od Yosef Chai
 C Dm F G
 Ay dididay Ay diddiday
 Am G Am G
 Yosef Chai Yosef Chai



C G F6 Esus
 Israel lighten up your tired eyes
 F G
 For I have a great secret to share
 Esus F6
 To give you renewed life
 Am G F6
 Pakod Pakadeti Etchem
 C Dm F G
 Ei dididay Ey diddidem
 Am G Am G
 Pakadeti Etchem Pakadeti Etchem
 F G Am
 Pakadeti Etchem

Listen to Serach's Song by Rebbetzin Chana Bracha (for women only)