



Joseph's Bones: Unfinished Family Business

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This week's Torah portion, B'shalach, features the defining moment of our national story: the children of Israel passing through the Sea of Reeds (a.k.a. the Red Sea). As the parashah opens, the children of Israel have just left Egypt and were on their way out of Egypt, but once again, Pharaoh changes his mind and pursues them with 600 horse-driven chariots. When the people are stuck between the sea and the rapidly approaching chariots, God tells Moses to stretch out his staff, and God parts the Reed Sea. The Children of Israel pass through the sea, while the Egyptian charioteers find themselves stuck in the mud and then drowned by the sea closing in on them. Upon reaching the far shore, Moses and the people sing a victory song, which is now called the "Song of the Sea" or Shirat Hayam.

However, in the third verse of the parashah, there is a curious verse that mentions another story, a story about Joseph's bones. In Shemot 13:19, it says that, "Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, 'God will be sure to take notice of you; then you shall carry up my bones from there with you.'"

There are many amazing midrashim about this verse, which describe Moses' search for Joseph's bones and how he eventually comes to find them. My favorite midrash about Joseph's bones is one where Moses tries to look for Joseph's bones for the three days and nights before the children of Israel are to leave Egypt. One might assume that the Egyptians would have buried Joseph in a magnificent tomb, along with Egypt's other illustrious leaders, but Moses cannot locate his coffin anywhere. Exhausted and frustrated, he sits down to rest. Then, Serach bat Asher, the daughter of Asher, Jacob's son, comes across Moses and asks him what is troubling him. Serach bat Asher is listed among those who go down to Egypt *and* those who leave Egypt during the Exodus, which makes her over four hundred years old. The Midrash portrays Serach as a wise old woman who has seen much and knows many secrets and mysteries. When Moses tells her what he is looking for, she leads him to the Nile, and tells Moses that Pharaoh and his magicians sunk Joseph at the bottom of the Nile, sealed up in a leaden coffin. They calculated that since Israel needed to fulfill the oath that Joseph made his brothers' take that the children of Israel could not leave without the coffin. With Serach's knowledge and wisdom, Moses is able to raise the coffin from the bottom of the Nile, and take it with him as they leave Egypt.

People often read the Torah from the perspective of where they stand at that moment. This week, when I looked at this verse and thought of this midrash, I saw a statement about

unfinished family business. I saw a family (a very large family) stuck in the past, hesitant about their future and I saw a wise old woman help that family move in the right direction.

This past Monday, I returned from my Grandma Sylvia's funeral in St. Louis, my birthplace. Her 96 years were long and full of accomplishments, joys and sadness. I have heard many eulogies, but it was different to hear my grandmother's eulogy. It taught me about aspects of my grandmother's life that I either had forgotten or never knew. That evening at the Shiva house, I heard more stories about this woman that I knew in some ways, and in others ways, never knew at all.

One thing I heard repeatedly about my grandmother was how she deliberately did things to keep the family close together, developed strong relationships with everyone in the family, no matter how distantly related they might be, and hosted events that brought people together.

My grandmother was one of the last in her generation to die, and as our family spreads out to various cities, some members of the family are concerned about how to maintain the closeness of our family. My cousin Becky very simply said that my grandmother's example was the secret to the whole thing. It is all about cultivating those relationships with each other, no matter how far we might be from each other, and creating those events that bring everyone together. Becky, who is turning out to be a key family organizer, said that she felt a new drive to follow her aunt's example.

My Grandma Sylvia was a Serach bat Asher for our family, the wise woman who gave advice to three generations of people, and through those who listened to her advice, she continues to share her wisdom. She was an accomplished marriage counselor and was a voracious reader with opinions on almost everything.

What are our "Joseph's bones," our unfinished business? Everyone has his or her own unfinished business. That task that they carry with them that wears them down. When someone in my family would find their task tiring and sit down to rest, my grandmother was the wise woman that could tell them the secret or the mystery that could help them carry on.

So what is the task that you bear right now? What advice have you been looking for day and night? Do you have a Serach bat Asher in your life to go to for wisdom and advice? Go and talk to her (or him) before it is too late.

Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi Andrew Pepperstone

AS A FAMILY:

- 1. Talk about the things about which you need advice. Whom can you go to for this advice?**
- 2. Who are your Serach bat Ashers, the old and wise people in your life?**

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THIS WEEK'S TORAH PORTION [B'SHALACH](#), ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS:

- 1. Why does God lead Israel the short way out of Egypt?**

2. **What guides Israel as they leave Egypt?**
3. **What do the Israelites say to Moses when they see Pharaoh's chariots chasing after them?**
4. **What makes Pharaoh's charioteers panic?**
5. **Which famous part from our Siddur comes from the Song of the Sea/Shirat Hayam?**
6. **What do Miriam and the women sing after Moses' song?**
7. **What happened to Israel three days after leaving Egypt?**
8. **What does God do for Israel in the wilderness of Sin?**
9. **What happens to the manna if people collect more than they need?**
10. **Which holiday does God teach Israel about with the manna?**
11. **Which people attack Israel after they leave Egypt?**
12. **How did Moses help with the battle from the hilltop?**