

THE RABBI'S NECKTIE

TIES TO TORAH AND TRADITION



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PARASHAT VAYIGGASH

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Gentle Words for Difficult Truths

Genesis 44:18 – 47:27

בראשית מ"ד:י"ח-מ"ז:כ"ז

The high drama that has been the last twenty-two years in the life of Jacob's family finally reaches its dramatic conclusion. A long-awaited family reunion takes place. Jacob moves south for his retirement. This move south is not a move to Florida. It is a move to Egypt.

There, he will live under the care of his favorite son, Joseph. The challenge is that Jacob has been in perpetual mourning since Joseph's supposed demise. How shall Joseph's brothers, who initially led Jacob to believe that Joseph was dead, tell their father that the reports of Joseph's death were premature? Well, when in doubt, pass the buck.

We meet Serach, the daughter of Asher. Serach has a special relationship with her grandfather. Moreover, she is both a musician and a poet. Legend has it that she played the lyre. During this section, she will be listed amongst the people who move with Jacob down to Egypt. Her name pops up as well in several other places in the Torah.

The brothers volun-tell her to inform Jacob that the earlier insinuations of Joseph's demise were a clear example of alternate facts. She is aware that this might be hard for him to hear. But then she remembers...special relationship...lyre...poetry. She grabs the lyre and goes to pass the good news. In doing this, Midrash says that she sings a song:

יוסף במצרים, יולדו לו על ברכיים, מנשה ואפרים.

I try to avoid transliteration. However, transliteration might be necessary from time to time, perhaps in order to see the rhyming pattern that a translation cannot capture.



יוסף במצרים, יולדו לו על ברכיים, מנשה ואפרים

Yoseph b'Mitzrayim. Yuldu lo al birkayim, Menasheh v'Efrayim.

Joseph is in Egypt. He has children, Menashe and Ephraim.

It is not just here that we encounter Serach. She will later tell Moses where Joseph's remains are when it is time to disinter them for return to the Land of Israel. She will advise Rabbi Yochanan that his description of what the Sea of Reeds looked like when the Children of Israel crossed is wrong. She is a towering Midrashic giant. One rabbinic tradition says that she never died.

I want to meet her. I want to meet the woman with the temerity to call one of the great rabbis of the Talmud on the carpet for an error. I want to meet the woman who, either deliberately, or by Forrest Gump-ian chance, ends up in the crucial places of Jewish history.

Most importantly, I want to meet the woman who understands that we must all both deliver and receive challenging news at different times of our lives.

To understand that there may be better ways than just blurting it out, perhaps instead with music and poetry, is a reminder that דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים בְּנֶחֱת נִשְׁמָעִים, *divrei chakhamim bnachat nishma'in*, the words of sages are best understood when we communicate gently (Ecclesiastes 9:17).

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Until I meet this towering Midrashic giant, I will honor her to the best of my abilities. For Serach the musician, who knew to communicate musically, my necktie is decorated with musical instruments.

