

## Women and the Fast of the Firstborn

Traditionally, firstborn males have observed the fast of the firstborn on the Eve of Passover either by fasting or by participating in a *siyyum* or another *se'udat mitzvah*, where the obligation to eat or be part of the *simcha* overrides the fast. The original source for the fast in *Tractate Soferim* does not specify the reason for the fast, or whether the fast is limited to males. The *Vilna Gaon*, the *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Arukh Hashulhan* all point out that there are two possible reasons for the fast—either because the Israelite firstborn were saved in Egypt or because of the particular holiness of firstborn males. They indicate that if the former reason is correct, it is equally applicable to women, since women were also included in the miracle in Egypt, while if the latter reason is correct, women would not have to fast. The assumption that women were also saved is based on the *midrash* that relates that Bitya, daughter of Pharaoh, was spared in the merit of Moshe,

thereby implying that other female Egyptian firstborn were killed. The *Shulhan Arukh* therefore writes: “*v'yesh she'omer she'afilu nekeiva bekhora mitaneh*” (and some say that even a women fasts if she is a firstborn—*siman* 470, *se'if* 1). This is also the view of later Sephardi authorities (see *haggadah* of the contemporary Sephardi authority, R Ovadiah Yosef who adds leniencies for women who are pregnant or nursing, but says that if a firstborn woman can attend a *siyyum* without too much trouble she should do so). The *Maharil* and the *Bach* went further, saying that women should fast or go to a *siyyum*. Nevertheless, the primary Ashkenazi authority of the sixteenth century, the *Rema*, writes “*ein haminbag ken*” (this is not the custom). While this is endorsed by some other authorities, it might be that attending a *siyyum* on *Erev Pesach* is a custom that firstborn women today should adopt since many sources believe that women logically should have as much of an obli-

gation to fast as men.

It is interesting that while the *Rema* stated that it was not the custom for firstborn women to fast, he considered that a woman should fast instead of her young firstborn son if the father is also a firstborn. The rationale is that the father's fast is for himself, and cannot fulfill his son's obligation as well as his own. The *Mishnah Berurah*, noting that some authorities disagree and hold that the father's fast can fulfill the son's responsibility as well, advises that when it is very difficult for a woman to fast, there is room to be lenient and allow her not to fast. Thus it would seem that nowadays when the general practice is to attend a *siyyum* and not to fast, that a mother of a firstborn child whose father is also a firstborn should go to a *siyyum* on behalf of her child.

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## Yocheved and Serah bat Asher

Two women bridge the stories of Genesis with that of the Exodus. Both women are involved in the birth of the nation and its redemption. They are Yocheved and Serah bat Asher. Both are granddaughters of Jacob; both are identified in different sources as the seventieth member of the family of Jacob to go down to Egypt.

According to the *gemara* in *Bava Batra*, Yocheved, mother of Moses, Aharon and Miriam, was conceived on the way down to Egypt and was born “between the walls”—at the entrance to Egypt. Her face had the look of the Divine Radiance of Glory, and that was the meaning of her name—God's glory. Despite Pharaoh's decrees, Yocheved had the faith to give birth to Moses and then trusted in Divine Providence when she hid the baby in the bulrushes. She is also identified by the *Midrash* as Shifrah, one of the midwives who saved the Israelite babies during this period of great affliction. To reward her faith, we are told, she entered the Land of Israel at the age of 250, though none of her children did.

Serah bat Asher is mentioned three times in biblical genealogies and census figures. According to the *Midrash haGadol* and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, it was Serah who, in music and song, told Jacob that Joseph was still alive. (Thomas Mann in *Joseph and His Brothers* describes the scene beautifully.) Because Serah restored Jacob's life and spirits, she lived a long life and became one of the few individuals taken up to heaven to enter Paradise while still alive. According to one rendition, Jacob said to her, “the mouth that told me the news that Joseph is alive will never taste death.”

Serah, like Elijah, is said have returned through the ages to help the Jewish people when needed. Serah was the one who managed to convince the Israelites in Egypt that Moses was God's chosen leader because she recognized in Moses' speech the special verbal signs that her father had revealed to her. According to the *Midrash*, it was also Serah who was able to tell Moses before the Exodus where the bones of Joseph were located so that the promise to take him for bur-

ial in the Land of Israel could be fulfilled. During the reign of King David, the *Midrash* identifies her as the Wise Woman of Abel who managed to ward off a rebellion without a battle by persuading a city to surrender Sheba, a traitor and rebel, to Joab, David's general. Finally, *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* records a much later appearance of Serah in Jewish history, noting that in the first century C.E., it was Serah who was able to give details of the crossing of the Red Sea to Yochanan ben Zakkai and thus keep the miracle of the Exodus accessible for future generations.

Thus in Yocheved and Serah bat Asher we have two transitional figures that according to the *Midrash* were instrumental in ensuring the future of the Jewish people. Both of them appear in the quite extraordinary descriptions of women's paradise that are found in the *Zohar*, in other kabbalistic works and in certain *tekhines*, where women sit together and learn Torah.