

Dear Chavraya,

Like a ship's manifest filled with Jewish names, extended families emigrating to a new land, this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayigash*, enumerates a lengthy intergenerational list of those who came down to Egypt with our father Jacob. The famine is severe now in Canaan, Yosef, viceroy of Egypt, has revealed himself to his brothers who have come in search of food. Amidst tears of joy and disbelief, in one of the most poignant moments to unfold on the stage of Torah, Yosef and his brothers are reunited. Having searched out the new land, the brothers return home to fetch their father and all of their families. As the trek begins, the Torah uses the same words that will soon introduce the book of Exodus, *These are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt*.

Among all the names on the manifest, there is one that stands out for its unfamiliarity. It is the name of a woman, *Serach*, daughter of Asher. Years later, sitting in an attic, immersed in family papers and lore, we might ask a parent or grandparent, "who is she?" "Ah, that is your great aunt, Serach, an amazing woman...."

The rabbis also thought that Serach was an amazing woman, weaving much lore around the mystery of her name. According to legend, she is born prior to the great migration to Egypt, and her life spans the entire four hundred years of Israel's enslavement. A woman of great wisdom, she facilitates the exodus when that great day arrives. Bound by solemn oath, Moses cannot lead the people out of Egypt unless he takes with them the bones of Yosef. Serach guides Moses to the coffin, the oath is fulfilled and the journey to freedom begins. Serach was a musician, a player of the harp, a singer of sweet song, known for her skill even as a child to bring joy to the downcast. Upon their return home, Yosef's brothers were unsure how to bring to their father, without shocking him, the glad news that his beloved son was alive and of great station in Egypt. It was Serach who brought the news to Jacob, calming his soul with soothing words that came gently on wings of song. At the end of her long life, Serach becomes one of eleven in Biblical tradition who does not die, but is welcomed into Paradise alive.

During the past week I fulfilled a promise made when I left Victoria, to officiate at the funeral of a dear elder friend when her time came. The funeral was in London, Ontario, where she had lived most of her days. Muriel Ginsberg, Malkah Yehudit, was a daughter of Serach, strong and loving and wise. Of indomitable spirit, Muriel overcame numerous health challenges, continuing to smile, to laugh, and to learn. Curious, ever eager to understand new ways of doing and being and knowing, she inspired others to embrace the beauty of life. I have never known another person whose arms could stretch so wide to bring others close. In the diversity of that universe of people who were her friends, there were no barriers or divisions, only people, ageless.

Nehar Shalom will always have a connection to Muriel. Soon before our first Purim, Muriel called and asked me if we had a megillah. I said no, that we would borrow one. She then said that she and her family wanted to donate a megillah to us, one scribed in Russia that had been in the family since the mid-nineteenth century. Residing in our aron hakodesh, this special megillah means so much to

me as a precious expression of faith in the endeavor of faith that is Nehar Shalom.

Megillah is a scroll, a turning, and *gilgul* is transmigration, the turning and returning of a soul. On a new journey now, Muriel's soul wings home to its Source. Hers will join other great souls on the manifest of our people's journey. Like that of Serach, the presence of Malkah Yehudit will continue to be felt among the living, and her caressing, encouraging love shall ever be a blessing.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor