Obscure Serah's Ongoing Message

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Pinehas

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Some time ago, my wife and I attended a synagogue where the Rabbi was celebrating his 36th anniversary with the congregation. In the middle of his sermon, he stopped and looked around the room. He pointed to one seat, and then another, and then yet another. “I remember who sat there,” he said, “and who sat there, and who sat there.” In his 36 years with the congregation, he shared life with so many congregants, and he remembered all those who had passed on to their eternal reward. The congregation had texture, a historical memory. The rabbi and other long-standing members remembered the voices of all those congregants who had been part of the community during their lifetimes. As long as they were remembered, they still mattered to the congregation. They still were part of the living texture and tradition of the community. Shared memory fosters a sense of togetherness, the linking of generations.

People need and want a sense of community and continuity. Yet, our world seems to be increasingly obsessed with undermining societal wellbeing. The contemporary catchwords are “new,” “change,” “technological innovation.” While these terms reflect much that is valuable, they also reflect social malaise, breakdowns of families and communities, increasing alienation from the past, from historic social texture.

Communities and congregations change. Some people move away. Some die. New people join. Elders often become strangers in the synagogues they’ve attended for many years. The sense of continuity fractures.

We need to find the formula for being receptive to the “new” without losing the continuity and strength of the “old.”

This week’s Torah portion mentions Serah bat Asher, an enigmatic figure who is mentioned just twice in the Torah. She is listed among those of Jacob’s family who came to Egypt where Joseph had become a powerful leader (Bereishith 46:17). And here (Bemidbar26:46), she is listed again as the Israelites are counted in advance of entering the Promised Land. The Torah gives no details about her.

Since Serah is mentioned these two times—spanning over 250 years—tradition has it that she lived a very long life. She was with the Israelites when they first entered Egypt; she was with them throughout the centuries of slavery; she was with them when they ultimately entered the Promised Land.

Why would the Torah mention this obscure figure in such a way as to suggest her incredible presence throughout the formative years of the People of Israel?

Perhaps the Torah lists Serah as a symbol of continuity and social context. By spanning the generations, she had a unique role to play in keeping the Israelites united. Her memories bound the people together. Presumably, people could come to her and learn about the “old days”, the earlier experiences of slavery and redemption. They could draw on the wisdom she had gained through many years of an eventful life.

Wouldn’t it be special to have a cup of coffee with Serah, to hear stories from her long life, to gain her insights and to share her dreams for the future? Wouldn’t we all be stronger and happier by feeling the personal presence of someone whose life has spanned so many years, who connects personally with so many generations?

Actually, our communities and congregations today have their own Serah figures, people who have lived long and active lives, who remember the “old days” and the personalities of earlier generations. Wouldn’t it be special for us to have a cup of coffee with them, hear their stories, learn from their experiences, share their dreams for the future? Wouldn’t it be wonderful for our elders of today to be valued for the continuity they represent, rather than have them feel as strangers or relics?

The obscure figure of Serah continues to remind us of the mystery of the generations, the need for intergenerational continuity and communication. The Torah only mentions her twice, but in a way that underscores the importance of linking the generations with a shared historical memory, a shared social context, a shared destiny. Even today, the obscure Serah continues to lead the way for us.