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Marc Bregman

## The Recovery SERACH of Joseph's Bones

A SHEET OF LIGHTNING ENVELOPED the midnight sky over Goshen like a dazzling white prayer-shawl. One finger like a pillar of sapphire fire stretched forth from the hand of God, curling a cord of blue around a single point in the heavens. When darkness settled again, there remained only the barest sliver of light. "This month shall be for you the beginning of months," thundered the Voice to Moses and Aaron, who stood together in awestruck silence, alone in the desert watching the birth of the new moon of Nisan. "This shall be the first of the months of the year for you. A fortnight from now you and all the children of Israel shall make a sacrifice of blood, leave this place and be liberated from Egyptian bondage forever." Moses and Aaron each pointed a finger at what they had seen and heard, while uttering, as with one voice, "This is God—our God forever; He shall lead us even unto death."

The lambs for sacrifice had now been set aside. The clamor in the Israelite settlement had been rising in a slow crescendo for days. Preparations were well underway for the exodus from Egypt. Whatever provisions could be prepared without alerting the Egyptian

taskmasters had already been packed. Many of the Israelites had seized the opportunity to borrow valuables from any Egyptian acquaintances they had, but with no intention of returning them. They justified their behavior to themselves and to each other by recalling how the Egyptian people had enslaved them for generations. The seventy elders and the heads of the tribes, had been trying to organize the people as much as possible for what would no doubt be a dangerous attempt to flee across the sea, and a long and arduous journey through the desert to the Promised Land.

No one had been working harder than Moses. It seemed he had not stopped for even a moment's rest for days on end. Three days before the date set for the Exodus, after midnight, Moses finally managed to fall into a deservedly deep sleep. In the small hours of the morning, Moses had a dream. He awoke with a start, trying to desperately snatch at least some of its strands, which were rapidly unravelling behind his eyes. All he could capture of the dream that seemed so significant were four Hebrew words, which seemed to echo in his head. *Chakham lev yikach mitzvot*—"the wise in heart shall take on commandments."

Try as he might, Moses couldn't recall any more of the dream, but in his heart he knew that this verse must be the key to its message, a message that, on such a momentous night, surely had come from God. So still lying in bed, Moses began to think: What commandments have I still not taken to heart; what still remains to be

done here in Egypt before our escape on the fourteenth day of Nisan?

He began to mull over the Hebrew words in his mind. *Chakham lev*—God is telling me that now, more than ever, I must be "wise in heart." *Yikach Mitzvot*—But what "commandment" have I still not "taken"? Moses racked his brain. He began to repeat the words over and over in his mind. *Yikach Mitzvot, Yikach Mitzvot, Yikach Mitzvot*. Slowly the second word began to change as he repeated it. "*Yikach Mitzvot...Yikach atzamt...YIKACH ATZMOT YOSEF!* He shall take commandments. He shall take bones! He shall take the bones of Joseph! That's it!" It was as if the sun rose in Moses' mind and the dawn broke with a sense of recognition.

"This is the message that God was communicating to me through the dream, as strange as it sounds: 'The wise in heart shall take bones!' Why of course, we must take Joseph's bones with us up out of Egypt to reinter them in the promised land." And suddenly Moses' dream came back to him, as if the strands which had painfully unravelled themselves when he first awoke now reweave themselves into a lustrous and incredibly detailed tapestry. In the dream, Moses saw Joseph, whom Israelite tradition said had been the grand vizier of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh hundreds of years before, though now he was forgotten by the Egyptians and even by many of the less learned Israelites. In Moses' dawning reverie, Joseph was lying on his death bed, surrounded by his brothers, speaking his final words:

"I am about to die. God will

surely take notice of you, and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

And then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath, saying: "When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here."

Then Moses saw Joseph close his eyes and peacefully release his last breath. For Joseph knew that his descendants would now surely fulfill the oath to see that his final resting place would be, not in Egypt, but in the land where he had been born and raised.

But here Moses' vision began to cloud. And what he perceived ended with an increasingly indistinct and more disturbing image. For he saw, not the Israelites, but rather the Egyptian servants of Pharaoh taking away the Patriarch's body. These silent slaves took Joseph's remains into the dark inner recesses of Pharaoh's palace, where they seemed to be embalming him according to Egyptian custom and placing him in what looked like a leaden black Egyptian sarcophagus. Finally, the Egyptian embalmers carried off Joseph's body even deeper into the dark, as Moses' vision faded out completely and he awoke completely from his reverie.

Now in the full light of day, Moses began to think: "Clearly, it is I who must fulfill the oath that our forebearers swore to Joseph on his death bed. When we leave Egypt, we must make sure to take Joseph's bones with us. But where am I to find them now after so many hundreds of years?!"

And so for the final days before the exodus from Egypt, while

most other Israelites were engaged in packing provisions and some were busy with booty taken from their Egyptian neighbors, Moses was occupied with trying to find where the Egyptian embalmers who lived hundreds of years before had placed the remains of the Patriarch Joseph. Moses had only his dream to guide him.

Only a short while before the time appointed by God for the mass exodus of Israel, the people were deeply disturbed. Moses, who had been so passionately energetic in organizing their bid for liberation, had been sitting for over a day now by the entrance to his hut, listless and apparently totally dejected. Had their leader lost heart at this crucial hour? Moses was indeed lost deep in prayer and reflection. He stared up into the empty sky as if begging for some help from heaven, which seemed to have shut its brazen gates before him. Who could possibly know just what the Egyptians did with Joseph's earthly remains hundreds of years ago? As he framed this question in his mind, Moses noticed the incredibly clear blue of the sky at high noon over Goshen. And out of the deep emptiness he began slowly to perceive the lines of a face. The face of a woman, old but somehow also ageless. Moses felt that he recognized this face. He searched his memory. As the image crystallized clearly in his mind, he knew. Of course! This was the wise old woman who had revealed to him the secret of redemption! Serach, the daughter of Asher, the granddaughter of the Patriarch Jacob. She had already been a grown woman at the time of Joseph's death and if anyone still knew

where to find his bones to reinter in the Holy Land it must be her.

Moses jumped to his feet and shouted to those standing nearby staring at him in astonishment: "Find Serach bat Asher! Bring her to me right away. Hurry! There is no time to lose!"

Immediately, criers were dispatched throughout the Israelite settlement in Goshen. "Serach bat Asher! Serach bat Asher! Moses seeks to speak with Serach bat Asher!"

Moses stood standing like a tall, inscrutable statue at the entrance to his hut. A small figure emerged from around the back side of his dwelling and said quietly, in a soft but sure voice: "You called for me?" With a start, Moses turned and looked down. Instinctively, he bent his knees and lowered himself respectfully nearly to the level of the old woman who had appeared behind him.

"You are Serach bat Asher?"

"Yes, I am the daughter of Asher," she replied.

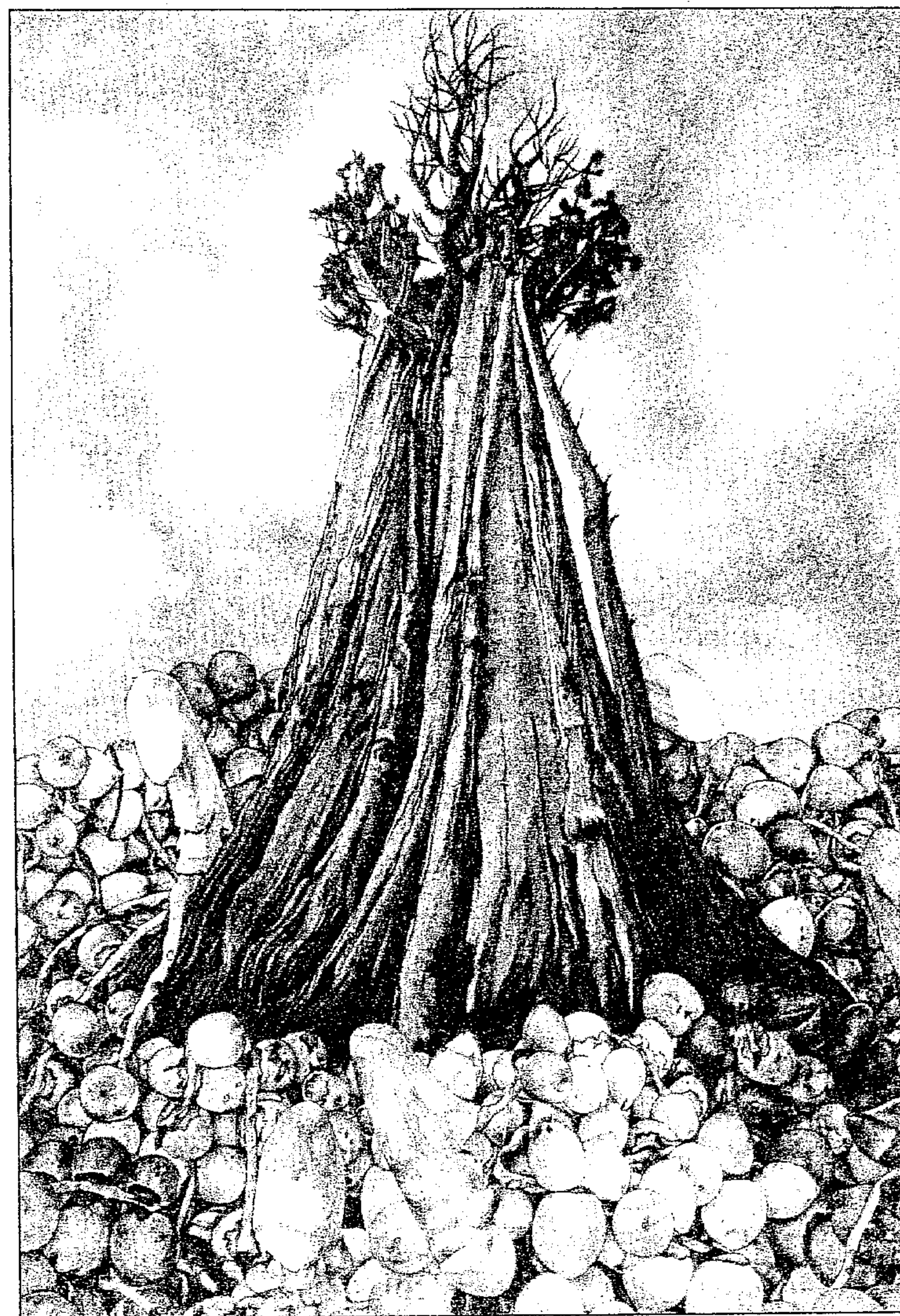
"Do you remember when his brother Joseph died?" asked Moses hopefully.

"Certainly, I remember when my uncle Joseph died," replied Serach.

"Do you know where his bones can be found? For we are sworn to take them with us for burial in the Holy Land, when we flee Egypt tomorrow," asked Moses, now almost in a pleading tone.

Serach looked straight into Moses' eyes. But it was as if she were looking through him, off into the blue heavens, lost for a moment in distant recollection.

"Forty days after Joseph died,



Pharaoh and his entire royal court, conducted a magnificent funeral procession for the deceased Grand Vizier. The cortege descended to the banks of the Nile. And there the Egyptian priests placed on the sarcophagus

the likeness of a bull, its horns festooned with flowers as if for a festal sacrifice. And they then carried the coffin onto one of Pharaoh's imperial barges. This ship was slowly rowed out onto the river to the sound of hymns sung by

Frances Oelbaum  
*The palm tree says: "The righteous man flourishes like the palm tree: he grows like a cedar in Lebanon." (Psalms 92:13)*  
8 1/2" x 11 15/16"

Pharaoh's slaves. And finally the priests sank the bull-headed sarcophagus containing Joseph's bones into the depths of the Nile."

Serach stopped for a moment, and seemed to cock an ear as if trying to recall something she had once heard. "I can recall one of the hymns that the priests sang at Joseph's royal funeral. They promised the Egyptian people that the bones of this holy man from the captive nation of Israel would provide a blessing to the waters of the Nile. For now they had forever harnessed in its depths the divine ox that turned the

**"The righteous of Israel are never deaf to the cries of their people, even after death...."**

primeval waterwheel causing the Nile to rise each year to inundate the land and renew the fecund silt of Egypt's delta."

And then after a pause, Serach continued: "But we Israelites knew that the real reason was to prevent us from ever leaving this accursed land, for the Egyptian rulers knew that our father Joseph had made us swear an oath not to leave without taking his bones with us. And so they sunk his body in a heavy metal sarcophagus in the depths of the Nile which they were sure we could never recover."

The old woman began walking as quickly as she could and Moses followed behind. After a short while he realized they were heading down towards the banks of the Nile. When they arrived, Serach waited until Moses stood at her side. The setting sun was behind them now, casting one short

and one long shadow on the silently flowing water of the great river. Having caught her breath, Serach said to Moses: "My voice is weak with age. And your voice is thick and your speech heavy. But perhaps if I help you find the words, you can make Joseph hear you. Moses looked at Serach uncomprehendingly. How could anyone long dead and buried possibly hear any voice? Serach read Moses' thoughts. "The righteous of Israel are never deaf to the cries of their people, even after death. Cry out from your heart and speak what you feel."

Moses looked into the dark waters of the river until words welled up from within him. "Joseph son of Jacob! The oath to redeem his children which God swore to our father Abraham has reached its fulfillment. But because of you we are delayed. If you arise, good! But if not, we—the descendants of Abraham—shall be released from the oath to redeem your bones from here that you made our forbearers swear to you."

Moses' words echoed out over the silent waters, but no other sound was heard. His tears fell into the waves lapping at his feet. Moses cried out again: "Israel is delayed because of you, the clouds of glory are delayed because of you.... God's Holy Presence, the Shekhinah, is waiting here for you to hear our cry."

A gentle gust of wind rippled over the waters and a few drops of rain began to fall from the heavens. The waves of the Nile rose slightly and now washed up over the feet of both Moses and Serach. Serach reached into folds of her robe and pulled from her bosom a thin metal pendant that had been hang-

ing by a fine gold chain around her neck. The pendant caught in the rays of the setting sun and flashed with a warm yellow light as she handed it to Moses.

At first Moses thought that it was covered with Egyptian hieroglyphs. But as he looked more closely he saw just one recognizable ideogram embossed in the gold foil—the image of a horned bull. Below it, incised in ancient Hebrew characters that he could only barely decipher, were the words: *Aleb Shor*— "Arise, Oh Bull." Immediately, Moses understood what he must do.

With all his strength he flung the gold pendant as far as he could. And as it arched out over the waters of the Nile, he cried out the words written on it: *Aleb Shor*. At first, all that was heard was the distant sound of the pendant splashing quietly into the waves. But then, a sound like far-away thunder was heard, coming—not from the sky, but from deep within the waters of the river.

As Serach and Moses gazed out over the Nile, two pointed tips began to come forth from the waters. As they rose higher and higher, curved horns became visible. And finally—as the thunder rolled like the lowing of a great ox, as rain pelted down and lightning flashed from the heavens—the head of a great golden bull emerged, atop a huge lead sarcophagus which miraculously bobbed on the waters like a piece of wood.

Serach turned to Moses and said calmly: "Do not be surprised. A prophet of God shall make iron float like wood, and you are destined to be the first and foremost of all God's prophets."

Moses waded into the river and shouldered Joseph's coffin, which seemed as light as a feather. But he bowed in deep humility as he passed by Serach bat Asher, silently showing his inexpressible gratitude. And Moses bent his back in deference to the holy burden he bore, the bones of the righteous Patriarch Joseph, which he carried back to the Israelite settlement.

Moses returned to the Israelite settlement still bearing Joseph's coffin on his shoulder. Now, the sacrifice of the lambs held in reserve, which God had commanded a fortnight before, could finally take place, for the last and most terrible of the plagues was about to fall on the Egyptians, the death of their first born sons. The Israelites rushed to daub the doorposts of their huts with the sacrificial blood so that the angel of God bearing the sword of vengeance would know to pass over their homes. As wails of mourning were heard all around rising from every Egyptian home, the Israelites sat scattered in groups around countless open fires roasting the meat for their final meal in Egypt.

At the outer edge of one such circle, unnoticed, sat a small old woman. As she gazed out into the vast emptiness beyond, the dancing light of the fire caught for a moment in her white hair and flashed forth into the desert. 🏠