

Questionable Miracles—Unquestionable Stories

- **The conversation begins with three biblical verses that share a motif:**

Joseph said to his brothers: I am about to die. God will certainly take note of you/pakod yif'kod and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised. (Genesis 50:24)

Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has appeared to me and said: I have taken notice of you/pakod pakad'ti and of what is being done to you in Egypt. (Exodus 3:16)

And the people believed when they heard that the Lord had pakad/taken note of Israel. (Exodus 4:31)

- **Ancient sages read their questions and experiences into the biblical story:**

Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of Israel. Aaron spoke all the words that God had said to Moses and performed the signs in the sight of the entire people. And the people believed when they heard that the Lord had pakad/taken note of Israel. (Exodus 4:31)

Is it possible that the people did not believe until they had seen the signs? No, rather: *the people believed when they heard that the Lord had pakad/taken note.* They believed because of what they heard and not because of the signs that they saw. And in what did they believe? It was in the cue '*pekidah/taking note*' that Moses spoke to them; for that was the tradition/*masoret* that they had from Jacob.

Jacob had transmitted/*masar* the secret to Joseph, and Joseph to his brothers. Asher, one of Jacob's children, transmitted/*masar* the secret to Serah his daughter who was still alive when Moses appeared. This is what her father said to her: A redeemer who will come and say to my children: *I have certainly taken note of you/pakod pakad'ti* (Exodus 3:16). That one is the true redeemer. When Moses came and said [repeating what God had said to him,] *I have certainly taken note of you/pakod pakad'ti*, then immediately: *the people believed.* In what did they believe? They believed in the story that they heard from Serah, as it is written: *that the Lord had taken note/pakad of Israel and had seen their plight and they bowed and prostrated. They bowed concerning the pekidah/taking note; they prostrated because God had seen their plight.*

(4th-6th century midrash found in Exodus Rabbah 5:13)

- **Serah, the daughter of Asher, is the hero of the story because of two short biblical verses:**

These are the names of the Israelites, Jacob and his descendants, who came to Egypt... Asher's sons, Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, and Beriah, and their sister, Serah. (Genesis 46:8, 17)

The descendants of the Israelites who came out of the land of Egypt were... Descendants of Asher by their clans: of Imnah, the clan of the Immites; of Ishvi, the clan of the Ishvites; of Beriah, the clan of the Beriites... The name of Asher's daughter was Serah. (Numbers 26:4, 46)

- **Later sages make the story into a freestanding legend independent of biblical verses:**

Jacob transmitted the cues concerning redemption to Joseph, Joseph transmitted them to his brothers. Asher, Jacob's son, transmitted the secret of redemption to Serah, his daughter. Now when Moses and Aaron came to the elders of Israel and performed signs in their presence, the elders of Israel went to Serah the daughter of Asher and said to her: A man has come and performed such and such signs before our eyes. She said to them: There is nothing substantial about his signs. They said to her: But he also said, I have certainly taken note. She said to them: Then he is the one who will redeem Israel from Egypt. For this is what I have heard from my father... Immediately the people believed in God and in Moses.

(9th century midrash Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 48)