

The main thing I remember from studying the holidays in elementary school was cataloguing the names of the holidays - they had so many! For this one, there was *Chag Hamatzot*, for the matzah we eat throughout, *Zeman Cheruteinu*, acknowledging this as the season of our freedom, our liberation, and *Chag Haaviv*, recognizing the centrality of the season of spring in the Exodus and its remembrance. Each is relatively straightforward. And then there is Pesach, perhaps the most basic name of this holiday. Pesach, though, is a little more complicated than it seems. At first glance it seems simple - it's named for the Passover sacrifice. Except that the Torah tells us that the Passover sacrifice itself is named for what God did on the night of our deliverance from Egypt. After describing the Passover sacrifice without giving it a name in the beginning of Chapter 12, the Torah says:

(יא) וְכָכָה תֹאכְלוּ: אֹתוֹ מִתְנִיכֶם חֲגָרִים נִעְלִיכֶם בְּרִגְלֵיכֶם וּמִקְלָכֶם בְּיַדְכֶם וְאָכַלְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בַּחֲפוּזֹן **פֶּסַח** הוּא לִיקּוֹק: (יב) וְעִבְרַתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּלַיְלָה הַזֶּה וְהִכִּיתִי כָל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵאָדָם וְעַד בְּהֵמָה וּבְכֹל אֱלֹהֵי מִצְרַיִם אֲעֹשֶׂה שְׁפָטִים אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק: (יג) וְהָיָה הַדָּם לָכֶם לְאֵת עַל הַבָּתִּים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם שָׂם וְרֵאִיתִי אֶת הַדָּם וּפִסַּחְתִּי עֲלֵכֶם וְלֹא יְהִי בְכֶם נֶגֶף לְמִשְׁחִית בְּהִכְתִּי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: (יד) וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן וְחֲגַגְתֶּם אֹתוֹ חֵג לִיקּוֹק לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם חֻקַּת עוֹלָם תִּחְגַּגּוּ:

11 This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the LORD's Pesach. 12 "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. 13 The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will "pesach" you. There will be no destructive plague upon you when I strike Egypt. 14 "This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD—a lasting ordinance.

Of course, the classic translation of this word **Pesach** has come to be "pass over", hence the holiday's English name. Although it originally referred just to that night of the 15th of Pesach, it has come to be a name for the whole holiday - in fact, the most popular by far, I think!

But this translation is not simple, and the stakes are high. Arguably, this was the moment of deliverance, the turning point of our national history, the Divine response to the first national ritual, so what was it, and what does it mean for us? In all the discussions of slavery to freedom, national ritual, and all of that, the actual

understanding of how God behaved toward this new nation of adherents often gets left out, and I want to give it a little attention this morning.

In the Mechilta, the Midrash on the Exodus (Masechta D'Pischa 7), the rabbis debate the meaning of this act of *pasachti* (whatever God did to the Israelite houses that night). One opinion suggests it should be read like *pasa'ti*, I stepped, and it means God stepped over our houses. This gives rise to, or supports, the classic explanation of skipping over, or passing over.

A second approach, however, suggests that *pasachti* means I showed compassion - as in Isaiah 31:5:

כְּצִפְרִים עֹפוֹת כֵּן יִגֵן יְקֹוֹק צְבָאוֹת עַל יְרוּשָׁלַם גְּנוּן וְהִצִּיל פֶּסַח וְהַמְלִיט:

*“Like birds hovering overhead, the LORD Almighty will shield Jerusalem; will shield it and deliver it, will **pasoch** it and will rescue it.”*

In this verse in Isaiah, ‘save and deliver’ is parallel to ‘*pasoch* and let escape’. ‘*Pasoch*’ here is some kind of act of protection, but how?

At the crux of this debate is the question of who killed the firstborn, and then we’ll circle back to what this means about Pesach and what it means for us. Remember, in the first set of verses in Exodus, when God is telling Moshe what to say to Bnei Yisrael, it sounds as if God is doing everything (look back to Exodus 12:13: “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will “*pesach*” you. There will be no destructive plague upon you when I strike Egypt”). Later in Chapter 12 of Exodus, when Moshe actually delivers the message, ‘*pasah*’ comes up again, as Moshe says,

(כג) וְעָבַר יְקֹוֹק לְנִגְף אֶת מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת הַדָּם עַל הַמַּשְׁקוּף וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וּפָסַח יְקֹוֹק עַל הַפֶּתַח וְלֹא יִתֵּן הַמַּשְׁחִית לָבֹא אֶל בְּתֵיכֶם לְנִגְף:

*Verse 23: When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, God will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will **pasach** that doorway, and will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.*

Now who’s doing the killing? It sounds here as if God has let loose some force of destruction over Egypt, and now it’s honing in on every firstborn in sight, and God is trying to spare the Israelites, and so ‘*ufasach*’ means that God actually came to rest on those houses, essentially blocking the destroyer’s access. In this meaning, ‘*pesach*’ means to hover over, not to skip over.

In fact it sounds like we have two different descriptions of the *'pesach'* moment. In the first, God is destroyer, and spares Bnei Yisrael. In the second, there is a separate destroying force, and God steps in to protect Bnei Yisrael.

While there is a bigger theological issue here about whether destruction comes from God, or is embodied in some kind of separate being, what strikes me as we celebrate Pesach is that there are these two distinct elements of Divine Protection to remember.

The first is to say, sometimes we feel God's presence stepping in and protecting us from some "external evil", so to speak. Of course if we feel everything comes from God, then God is in that evil, too, but we often don't experience it that way. There is a disaster, and we are spared, when we are, and we feel some sense of gratitude to the Divine, that God was there with us in that moment. It is precisely not a rational response, it is what I call a *religious optimist's response* - yes I was endangered, but somehow I felt God step in to protect me. Not everyone experiences this or feels this, but we sometimes do. That is *'pasach'* as God actually coming down over the house and blocking it from the destroyer that fateful night in Egypt.

Then there is a second. That is when somehow God's vengeful anger, whatever that means exactly, is upon the world, and God, Godself, spares us from that anger. God was after every firstborn in Egypt and then saw the blood on Jewish doorposts, and held back. Ironically in that moment we experienced deliverance as the absence of God! God was destructive, and God skipped us over. We actually wouldn't have wanted to meet God on that night.

These are the two possible readings of *'pesach'* - God intervening to save us from something, or God, so to speak, avoiding us when God was functioning as a vengeful destroyer.

For me, theology is often most powerful when applied as a model for human behavior - והלכת בדרכיו (and you should walk in God's ways (Dt. 28:9)). If on Pesach we want to think about what God did for us, and do it for others, how does this translate?

I think it reminds us that there are two very different ways we show love and protection. Let's take them in reverse order from our story. When *'pasach'* means hover over, we are reminded of our protective instinct towards those we love, or our commitment to protect those with whom we are in relationship. Pesach is a time to take that feeling of Divine Protection and pay it forward to family and friends - to jump in in a moment of danger and cover over those we love with protection and presence. This takes, sometimes, a going beyond ourselves, pushing ourselves into a situation - even in some kind of harm's way - to protect.

But then we return to the classical interpretation, in which '*pesach*' means to skip over. In that interpretation, God was the destroyer. The angry God avoided the Israelites, gave them an out with the ritual of the blood before swooping into Egypt to assert God's supremacy by taking lives of the first-born of the rest. This, to me reminds us that there are inevitably times when we are angry, upset, or out to prove something. It's not ideal, but it is sometimes even necessary, or feels necessary. In those moments, we often let those feelings bleed over to those whom we love. I too often feel that when I am upset or stressed, I relieve that feeling at the expense of those with whom I am closer, just because I can be my full self with them. But maybe these should actually be Pesach moments - moments of passing over them, of holding that in, or letting it out in the right place. Maybe those are times when the greatest love we can show is by skipping over, passing over.

This is even a stressful season in particular with preparations and busy-ness. It's a time when I find myself coming up short sometimes of my best self, and I time when I need to summon the strength to pass over letting that out in the wrong settings.

I realize this is not the typical Pesah drasha, but I want to suggest that this is a hidden message of the day, a little Tzafun for our Yom Tov, encoded in the debate about the very meaning of the word which titles our hag. Pesach sameach - may we find the courage to protect those around us by our presence, and by protecting them from our own selves in the moments when we need to. ***Pesach sameach!***