

What Does the Word “Passover” (פֶּסַח, *pesach*) Mean?”

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 2009

As we approach the coming of Passover, we are preparing our homes and our hearts to celebrate this annual festival of our redemption, זְמַן חֵירוּתֵינוּ, *z'man ch'ruteinu*, “the time of our freedom.” As we consider the rich history of this appointed time, we recognize that the primary focus of our celebration is the awesome power and faithfulness of God Who brought about our redemption from Egypt, an event that would forever stand as a model and demonstration of how God effects redemption, not only historically but also eternally.

Interestingly, the English word “Passover” has become so commonplace that many people never stop to ask what the word actually conveys. Most people when asked what the word “Passover” means have this idea: that as God went throughout Egypt taking the life of the firstborn in each household, He “skipped” or “passed over” the houses of the Israelites marked by the blood upon the door posts. For many people, the word “Passover” means to “pass by” or “skip.” But is this really what the Hebrew verb and its corresponding noun mean? While there is some debate about the range of meaning these Hebrew words convey, when we look at the various contexts in which the words are used, we discover some important and interesting facts.

The Hebrew verb פָּסַח (*pasach*), from which we derive the noun פֶּסַח (*pesach*, “passover”), appears to convey a “to limp,” “to stagger,” “to jump or move with an uneven gait,” or even “to perform a hobbling dance.” Note the following examples all of which employ words derived from the root *pasach*:

For no one who has a defect shall approach: a blind man, or a lame man (פִּסֵּיחַ, *piseich*), or he who has a disfigured face, or any deformed limb... (Lev. 21:18).

Now Jonathan, Saul's son, had a son crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the report of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, and his nurse took him up and fled. And it happened that in her hurry to flee, he fell and became lame (וַיִּפְסֵיחַ, *vayipaseiach*). And his name was Mephibosheth. (2Sam 4:4)

Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, “O Baal, answer us.” But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped (וַיִּפְסְחוּ, *vayephas'chu*) about the altar which they made. (1Kings 18:26)

Indeed, throughout the Tanach, the Hebrew word that most often stands behind our English word “lame” is פִּסֵּיחַ (*piseiach*), based upon the verb פָּסַח (*pasach*) from which the noun פֶּסַח (*pesach*) is derived.

Given these data, one wonders why the verb *pasach* and the derived noun *pesach* would have been used in connection with the Exodus and the subsequent festival that commemorates it. The fact that the early English translators coined the word “Passover” tells us how they understood the Hebrew word: God “passed by” or “skipped” the Israelites homes as He went about enacting the final plague against the first born of Egypt. But it seems strange that a Hebrew word so often associated with lameness, stumbling, or an uneven gait would be used in this way. Perhaps there is another explanation.

When we look at the Exodus text that describes the events of Israel's redemption from Egypt, we discover that two different verbs are used: עָבַר (*'avar*), “to pass by, cross over” and פָּסַח (*pasach*), the verb we are studying.

For I will go through (עָבַרְתִּי, *'avarti*) the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments—I am the LORD. (Ex 12:12)

For the LORD will pass through (עָבַר, *'avar*) to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over (פָּסַח, *pasach*) the door and will not allow the destroyer to come in to your houses to smite you. (Ex 12:23)

Here we find very interesting language! Adonai is the One Who is going throughout the land of Egypt to strike down the firstborn, yet when He sees the blood upon the doorposts of the Israelite homes, He “passes over the door,” the result of which is that He “will not allow the destroyer” to come into the house.

There are two other texts which utilize the verb פָּסַח (*pasach*) which may shed light on the meaning of *pasach* as it is used in connection with the exodus from Egypt and the Passover festival that commemorates that momentous event. These are 1Kings 18:21 and Isaiah 31:5. In 1Kings 18:21, Elijah is admonishing the people of Israel to put their complete faith in Adonai. He commands them to stop “wavering” between two options (trusting Adonai or trusting Ba’al):

Elijah came near to all the people and said, “How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.” But the people did not answer him a word. (1Kings 18:21)

Of interest to us is the phrase “How long will you hesitate between two opinions?” The Hebrew is עַד-מָתַי אֶתֵּם פֹּסְחִים עַל-שְׁתֵּי הַסְּעָפִים. The Hebrew word translated “hesitate” is our word *pasach*. We could say it this way: “How long will you keep on *pasaching* between two opinions?” Since the Hebrew lexicons suggest that the meaning “to limp / to wobble” is the most often the basic sense of the verb, the English translators took it to mean “How long will you stumble around without making up your mind?” Note the KJV: “How long halt ye between two opinions?” and the JPS: “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions?” But there are other factors that raise questions about how to translate this verse. First, the word translated “opinions” is from a cluster of Hebrew nouns (all based on the root פָּסַח, *sa’aph*) which most likely means “branches” or even the “Y” of a branch. Note the following: Is 17:6; 27:10, “branch” (פָּסַח); Is 10:33, “trim branches” (מְפָּח); Ezek 31:6, 8, “slender branch” (פָּסַח). Second, the preposition translated “between” is actually עַל (*al*, usually meaning “upon” or “against”) which does not really convey the sense of “between.” If that had been the meaning intended, we would expect the preposition בֵּין (*bein*, “between,” “among”) to be used. Given these facts, we have good cause to seek a better translation.

It may be that the use of the verb *pasach* in Isaiah 31:5 offers an important clue, not only to the proper understanding of 1Kings 18:21, but also to the use of the verb *pasach* in the exodus narrative:

Like the birds that fly, even so will the LORD of Hosts shield Jerusalem, shielding and saving, protecting (פָּסַח, *pasoch*) and rescuing. (Is 31:5)

In this text Isaiah is describing the saving work of Adonai in regard to Jerusalem, and he does so by using the metaphor of a bird. When a mother bird is protecting her young in the nest, she may flutter above them to warn off predators. What is striking in the Is 31:5 text is that our verb *pasach* is used together with the verbs נָגַן, *nagan*, “to defend,” נָצַל, *natzal*, “to save, deliver,” and מָלַט, *malat*, “to rescue.” Isaiah pictures Adonai as a bird hovering over her nest to defend, save, protect, and rescue Jerusalem. Here, our verb *pasach* clearly means “to protect,” not “to pass by” or “to skip over.”

Could this same metaphor, of a fluttering bird, be at work in 1Ki 18:21 and help explain the use of the verb *pasach* there? It seems quite likely that it is. When we remember that the Hebrew word translated “opinions” could well mean “branches,” the picture comes into focus. This is what Elijah is telling the people of Israel: “Stop being like a bird fluttering over two branches, unable to decide upon which one to perch. Land already!”

Thus, from the basic sense of “limp” or “wobble,” the verb also was used to mean “go back and forth” and could describe the actions of a bird hovering or fluttering over branches or over the nest. Given this extended semantic range, Isaiah chooses *pasach* to describe how a bird might protect its young within the nest and applies this to the purpose of God to shield, save, protect, and rescue Jerusalem.

Now this meaning of the verb fits the context of Exodus 12:28 perfectly. Adonai Himself “*pasachs*” over the door of the Israelite homes *to protect* them from the destroyer. But this raises another question: is Adonai the destroyer in the 10th plague or is it someone else? As I noted above, Ex 12:12 makes it clear that it was Adonai Who was going throughout the land of Egypt to smite the firstborn of the Egyptians, but in v. 23 Adonai is the One who “hovers over” the door to protect the Israelite house from “the destroyer.” What is going on here? There appears to be two individuals at work in this verse, Adonai and “the destroyer.”

In the traditional Pesach *haggadah*, it is emphasized that Adonai, not an angel, was the One Who smote the firstborn of Egypt. Introducing the enumeration of the 10 plagues, the *haggadah* recites Ex 12:12 with added commentary:

‘And the LORD brought us out of Egypt’ — not through an angel, and not through a seraph, and not through an intermediary, but the Holy One, blessed be He, in His glory and with His own Being, as it is said, “I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and will kill every firstborn of man and beast, and I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt: I am the LORD.” (Ex 12:12)

“I will pass through the land of Egypt...” — I and no angel; “I will kill every firstborn...” — I and no seraph; “I will execute judgments...” — I and no intermediary; “I am the LORD” — it is I and no other.

Yet how are we to explain the fact that Adonai is both the One Who destroys and the One Who protects the Israelite homes from “the destroyer?” Once again, we see clear evidence of multiplicity in the Godhead. “The Destroyer” takes the lives of the firstborn of Egypt, yet Adonai is the One Who protects, Who “hovers over” the doors marked by the blood and protects the Israelite homes from “The Destroyer.”

Does it not seem quite evident that it was Yeshua Himself Who protected the home from the very wrath of the Almighty as it was poured out upon the Egyptians? Yes, and in precisely the same way as the homes marked by the blood were protected by Adonai Himself, so the sinner who has come to faith in Messiah is protected from the wrath of God by the very One Who was slain for their sins.

Thus, when Exodus 12:12 states that “Adonai will *pass over* (*pasach*) the door,” it means that Adonai Himself will (as it were) “hover” over the door to protect all who are within. He did not “skip” the house or “pass over” the house. Instead, He actively protected the house with His very presence. This Pesach, as you celebrate the great deliverance Israel was given through the mighty hand of God, consider that “Pesach” means “to protect” and rejoice! For in the same way that the Israelites were protected from the wrath of “The Destroyer,” so we who are “in Yeshua” are protected by His “hovering over us,” having applied His own blood to the “door posts” of our lives so that we are saved, redeemed, delivered, and protected from the wrath of God. Indeed, because of what Yeshua our Messiah has accomplished for us, it is truly “the time of our freedom!”