

A column devoted to researching commonly held beliefs

What's the Truth about... the Meaning of "Pesach"? By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: The only meaning of "Pesach," the Hebrew name for the holiday of Passover, is "to pass over."

Fact: While that is a correct translation, an equally valid, and possibly older, translation is "to have compassion for."¹

Background: The name of the spring holiday, and its associated temple animal offering, is based on a description first found in Exodus 12:12-13, where God declares, "And I shall pass through the land of Egypt on that night [of Passover], and I shall smite every firstborn in the land of Egypt from human to animal...and I will see the blood [on the doorposts], *ufasachti* you..." The root *peh-samach-chet* is commonly translated as "and I will pass over." In this verse, the word *fasachti* indicates that God will "pass over" the Jewish houses in Egypt. However, it is a rare word in the Bible, and its translation is uncertain.

In his Aramaic translation of that verse, Onkelos (circa first century CE) uses the word "*ve'eychos*," which means "I will have compassion." Another early translator, Targum (pseudo-) Yonatan, also translates the word in a number of

places as "having mercy" (Exodus 12:13; 12:17). But in 12:23 he translates *ufasach* as *veyagin*—to protect.

The Septuagint offers both definitions. In Exodus 12:23 it uses the classical translation of "to pass over," while in Exodus 12:13 and 12:27, it uses the word for shelter/protection.

The Mechilta records a dispute between Rabbi Yoshiya and Rabbi Yonatan over the word *pasachti*. Rabbi Yoshiya links it to "*pasaiti*,"² I stepped over, and explains that it means that God "skipped or passed over" the Jewish homes.³ (This notion of God "skipping along" to expedite redemption,⁴ he tells us, is found in a verse in Song of Songs (2:8): "The voice of my beloved, it comes suddenly to redeem me, as if skipping over the hills.") Rabbi Yonatan disagrees and explains that *pasachti* means that God had mercy on the Jews. Mechilta d'Rebbi Yishmael expresses this thought as well that "*Ein pischa ela chayis*"—"There is no [translation of] *pesach* other than mercy."

Rav Saadya Gaon⁵ explains "*pasach*" (Exodus 12:23) as *veyerachem*, to have mercy, and "*zevach pesach*" (Exodus 12:27) as "*zevach chamalah*," the sacrifice of mercy. Similarly, the Hebrew grammarian Ibn Janach,⁶ in his *Sefer HaShorashim*, understands the word *pasach* as "to derive from mercy or grace."

Rashi quotes both opinions. Com-

menting on Exodus 12:13, he first compares *ufasachti* to a word with the same root⁷ in Isaiah 31:5 and defines it as "to have compassion." He then compares it to I Kings 18:21 and says that it means "to skip over."⁸ Rashi prefers the second alternative, and on Exodus 12:11 cites only that translation. Interestingly, Rashi's biological and spiritual descendant, Rashbam, drops the other definition and offers only to "skip over" and to "pass by."

Those who reject "pass over" as the translation may be motivated by an aversion to ascribing physical characteristics to God, and, in particular, what Rambam calls "*po'alei tenu'ah*," action verbs. Onkelos consistently reinterprets anything that even resembles anthropomorphizing God. He would rather ascribe an emotion, such as mercy, to God than suggest that God physically skipped over houses.

There is, however, an intriguing suggestion⁹ concerning this enigmatic word. If, as stated emphatically in the Haggadah and in Exodus 12:13, God himself killed all the Egyptian firstborn sons, then *pasachti* refers to God, so to speak, skipping over the Jewish houses. However, according to another verse in Exodus (12:23), it appears that the Angel of Death, not God, carried out the killing of the firstborns. In 12:23, the Bible states that God "*ufasach* the

entrance and He will not permit the destroyer to enter your homes..."¹⁰ Based on the literal reading of this verse, *ufasach* cannot mean God "passed over" the houses, since He wasn't doing the destroying; it must mean that God had mercy and protected the Jews from the Angel of Death.

The common notion that *pesach* means "pass over" is probably because the commentator par excellence, Rashi, inclined towards that approach. It is also possible that our conception of the word was influenced by non-Jewish society. St. Jerome, in his fourth-century Vulgate, translated Exodus 12:13 as, "I will see the blood and I will pass over (*ac transibo*) you," and this passed into the overwhelming majority of Christian translations, including the English King James Bible.

There are a number of ramifications to the debate over the translation of the root *peh-samach-chet*. The discussion in the Mechilta, as explained by Malbim, is more than just a debate over translation; it is a debate over who was killed during the Plague of the Firstborn. Rav Yoshiya maintained that God, as the destroyer, "passed" or "skipped" over the Jewish homes and did not enter them at all. If an Egyptian was resourceful enough to hide out with a Jew, Rav Yoshiya believes that he was spared. Rav Yonatan, however, believes that God had mercy on the Jews, wherever they were, and only on the Jews. Thus, an Egyptian in a Jewish house was killed, and a Jew in an Egyptian house was spared.

This debate also has ramifications for every Jew at the Seder table. The Haggadah cites a Talmudic statement of Rabban Gamliel (*Pesachim* 116a-b) that whoever neglects to mention [*Korban*] *Pesach*, *matzah* and *marror* and fails to explain¹¹ the reason for their appearance at the Seder has not fulfilled his obligation.¹² He also states that one is required to explain to the assembled that the [*Korban*] *Pesach* is because God *pasach* over our ancestors' homes in Egypt as the verse (Exodus 12:27) states: "And you shall say, 'It is a *Pesach* sacrifice to Hashem who *pasach* the houses of the Israelites.'" It

thus seems that in order to fulfill one's obligation, one is required to properly translate the word "*pasach*." (In this vein, some of the Haggadah commentators try to help out. For example, the *Perush Kadmon*, an anonymous, early commentary, written around the twelfth century, explains, based on I Kings 18:21 and Isaiah 31:5, that it means to pass over and not dwell on a spot.¹³ The Shiblei Haleket¹⁴ similarly endorses the "skip over" translation based on the verse in I Kings. Rashbatz,¹⁵ while also explaining it to mean "pass over," rejects the notion that *pasach* means "to rest," an explanation that must have been current in his time but is not readily found in other sources.)

Irrespective of what the root *peh-samach-chet* means, that night in Egypt revealed both God's mercy and the bypassing of Jews from destruction. How to precisely translate the Biblical term "*pasach*" is unclear and was already subject to debate more than 2,000 years ago. It seems that towards the medieval period the translation of "pass over" gained in prominence. That, however, does not negate the alternative possibility; and an opinion found in the Mechilta, Onkelos, Rav Saadya Gaon and other important sources should be accorded appropriate respect. At the Seder, both options should be raised, and Biblical verses with this root should be explored. **JA**

Notes

1. Two sources that discuss some of this material are Raphael Weiss, "Pesach-chamal, Chos" [Hebrew], *Lshonainu* (5723-5724): 27-28, 127-130 and S.P. Brock, "An Early Interpretation of Pasah: 'Aggen in the Palestinian Targum," *Interpreting the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honour of EIJ Rosenthal*, ed. JA Emerton and Stefan C. Reif (Cambridge, 1982), 27-34.

2. Interchanging a *chet* and an *ayin* is not uncommon, as noted by Ramban to Deuteronomy 2:23, where he posits that "*eivim*" and "*cheivim*" are the same.

3. Both Josephus (*Antiquities* 2:313) and Philo also understood it to mean "pass over." See Louis H. Feldman, *Translation of Josephus, Antiquities*, Book 2, p. 222, note 823.

4. See also *Oznayim LaTorah* to Exodus 12:11.

5. Lived 882-942. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 14:543-555.

6. Lived in the first half of the eleventh century. See *EJ* 8:1181-1186.

7. It is worth noting that the root *peh-samach-chet* has another meaning in Arabic, and possibly did in Aramaic as well. It means, "to clear an area." Thus, the statement in *Ha Lachma Anya: kol ditzrich yaitay v'yifasach*—is usually understood to mean that all should partake of the *Korban Pesach*. This presents a problem because the *Korban* is supposed to be eaten only *limnuyav*—to those pre-registered. With the alternate meaning the phrase can be understood as, "Come, clear a space, sit and eat," with no mention of the *Korban Pesach*.

8. On this verse Radak and Metzudat Tzion say it means alternating or skipping between possibilities, as a cripple hobbles from side to side. Commenting on I Kings 18:26 (the verse that Chizkuni to Exodus 12:13 uses as his proof text that it means to step over), Metzudat Tzion, Metzudat David and Rashi all offer only one possibility, that it means to skip or to step over.

9. Offered by my friend Shimon Gesundheit in his Ph.D. dissertation (Hebrew University).

10. Note the use of the word *pesach* ("pass over" or "had mercy") in conjunction with *pesach* (entrance way). The words, of course, sound the same, assuming one uses the Ashkenazic pronunciation. A humorous example where Ashkenazic pronunciation has led to a comic error occurs in *Zevachim* 115a, Rashi s.v. *yachol she'ani*, where the word *pesach* in the verse "to the entrance (*petach/pesach*) of the *Ohel Moed*" is written with a *samach* instead of a *taf*.

11. See for example Rashbam, *Pesachim* 116b; Meiri, *Pesachim* 116a; Tosafot Yom Tov on the *mishnah*; the Abudraham on the Haggadah and *Chayei Adam* 129:11 that it is not sufficient to merely mention the three items. The explanation of their appearance must also be provided.

12. Whether Rabban Gamliel was referring to the obligation to recite the Haggadah or to eat the requisite items is hotly debated by the commentators on the Talmud and the Haggadah. This statement is cited as the *halachah* (Rambam, *Chametz Umatzah* 7:5).

13. Similar to Rabbi Yoshiya in the Mechilta.

14. Born approximately 1220 (4980).

15. Rav Shimon ben Tzemach Duran 1361-1444.

Rabbi Dr. Zivotofsky is on the faculty of the Brain Science Program at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.