

# IS PESAH PASSOVER?

RAYMOND APPLE

## INTRODUCTION

Although there is a scholarly dispute about the etymology of the verb *p-s-h*, this root is conventionally translated *pass over*: hence the English name Passover for the Hebrew term *Pesah*. This paper rejects this translation, which it believes is neither a good rendering of the Hebrew *p-s-h* nor an accurate reflection of the way in which *to pass over* is used in modern English.

## PESAH AND HAG HA-MATZOT

In Jewish practice, the Biblical names *Pesah* and *Hag Ha-Matzot* (festival of unleavened bread) go together and seem interchangeable. The two terms are viewed as one festival marking the Exodus through two interconnected rituals.<sup>1</sup> Each ritual is articulated in a Pentateuchal text. The first, Exodus 12:2-3, commands each family group to choose and watch over a lamb *until the fourteenth day of this month* (Aviv, i.e. Nisan), when *all the aggregate community of the Israelites shall slaughter it at twilight* and then (verse 10) eat it as a *passover offering to the Lord*. The second, verse 14, adds, *this day shall be celebrated as a festival to the Lord; seven days you shall eat unleavened bread*. The ritual has two stages – first the slaughter of the commemorative lamb, then its consumption with *matzah*. The sacrifice was late on 14 Nisan. *Hag Ha-Matzot*, the seven-day festival of unleavened bread, began the next day on the eve of 15 Nisan (Ex. 13:6-7). Deuteronomy 16:1-8 also interweaves the two rituals.

Leviticus 23:4-6 lists the events independently: *In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month, at twilight, there shall be a passover offering to the Lord* (verse 4); *and on the fifteenth day of that month, the Lord's Feast of Unleavened Bread* (verse 6). Generally (with the possible exception of Ezekiel 45:21) the word *pesah* (Passover) is not called a festival but a sacrifice. The etymology of *p-s-h* is examined *infra*. Even if it were called a *hag*, this word can have the meaning of a sacrifice (e.g. Ex. 23:18, Ps. 118:27). On the

*Dr. Raymond Apple is emeritus rabbi of the Great Synagogue, Sydney, and a former president of the Australian and New Zealand orthodox rabbinate*

other hand, the festival of unleavened bread is usually called *hag*, which in this context is a recurring celebration (from the root *h-g-g* or *h-u-g*).

The popularity of the paschal sacrifice in the Temple attended by a large number of pilgrims with their lambs is attested by many sources (e.g. TB *Pesaḥim* 64b). After the destruction of the Second Temple the sacrificial event probably lapsed<sup>2</sup> but unleavened bread, which was an independent observance, persisted. The name Passover was retained for the overall occasion because it had entered popular consciousness. Post-Destruction authors evidence the use of this name. Josephus says, "The feast of unleavened bread... is by the Jews called the Passover" (*Jewish Wars*, II:1:3). The Gospel of Luke speaks of "the feast of unleavened bread, which is called the Passover" (22:1).

Critical scholarship posits that early versions of both the paschal lamb and the eating of unleavened bread existed before the Exodus. The paschal ('protective') sacrifice entailed daubing animal blood on doorposts to protect a home from evil forces. The unleavened bread marked the end of the old crops and the beginning of the new. At some stage these rites were revamped and harmonized to mark the Exodus. Julian Morgenstern argued that the change took place when the Hebrews ceased being nomadic shepherds and settled into agricultural life, though later scholars argued that the Hebrew economy was always mixed. The revamped festival, says Morgenstern, was known by both names, *Pesaḥ* and *Hag Ha-Matzot*, with the former predominating.<sup>3</sup> The subject was analyzed and critiqued by Tamara Prosic in various articles and especially in her 2005 work, 'The Development and Symbolism of Passover'.<sup>4</sup>

Though the Masoretic texts do not always (with the possible exception of Deuteronomy 16) smoothly integrate the lamb and *matzah* motifs, there is no firm evidence that old rituals took on new life in a different context. This does not preclude the possibility that prior to the Exodus there could have been a sacrifice of a spring lamb, or that unleavened bread was a regular food amongst the slave and lower-class populations, but the critical theories seem rather hypothetical. The Masoretic text intertwines *Pesaḥ* and *Hag Ha-Matzot* so closely with the Exodus events that it is hard to accept that the lamb and *matzah* were re-vamped for the purposes of the Bible. The text intrinsically links the Exodus with a paschal lamb and unleavened bread. The

sacrifice of the lamb was the preparatory stage to the evening celebration where the meat was eaten *al matzot u-m'rorim* (with unleavened bread and bitter herbs: Ex. 12:8). Baruch Bokser argues that when the paschal sacrifice was no longer possible it was symbolized by a bone placed on the Seder dish and the upgrading of *matzah* as the top item on the list of Seder requisites.<sup>5</sup> However, the name *Pesah* was retained even without a paschal lamb. Christianity held that a paschal lamb was still available, i.e. Jesus, who is claimed to have willingly sacrificed himself as 'the lamb of God' (John 1:29). Bokser acknowledges<sup>6</sup> the view of A. Guttmann and other scholars that some Jews still had a paschal offering (the Samaritans still do at Nablus) but insists that even so, the sacrifice lapsed at some stage in the second century.<sup>7</sup>

#### PESAH AND PASSOVER

The English name *Passover* was not used for the Jewish festival until William Tyndale's English translation of the Pentateuch in 1530, followed by the King James Version. Translating the New Testament from Greek (1525-6), Tyndale distinguished between the Jewish *Pesah*, which he rendered *Passover*, and the Christian festival called in Greek *Pas'ha*, which marked Jesus' resurrection. He rendered the Christian *Pas'ha* as *Easter*, based on the name of an Anglo-Saxon goddess of fertility called *Eostre* or *Eastre*, whose festivities were in April. The name *Easter* is associated with *east*, the location of sunrise, and indicates a new beginning. In Christianity it celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. Due to Tyndale's rendering, English translations use the name *Passover* for *Pesah*.

To judge whether *Passover* is a valid translation of *Pesah* we now examine Biblical instances of the verb *p-s-h*.

#### THE VERB *P-S-H*

There are three main Biblical variants of *p-s-h* found in the Exodus story – *zevalh pesah*, the *Pesah sacrifice*; *pesah l-Ado-nai*, *The Lord's Pesah*; and *pesah* on its own. The verb that lies behind them all has the purpose of denoting an act of Divine concern that saved the Israelite escapees from destruction at the hands of their Egyptian pursuers. This salvation is articulated in Exodus 12:27, which (in the traditional understanding) speaks of God "pass-

ing over" the dwellings of the Hebrews, utilizing the root *p-s-ḥ* upon which the word *Pesaḥ* is constructed.

What we now address is whether this verb really possesses the meaning traditionally attached to it. The etymology of the verb is widely disputed. Cognate languages use the word in more than one sense. It might be linked to an Akkadian root meaning to smooth or placate (the Deity), an Egyptian root meaning to commemorate (a historic moment), or an Arabic root meaning to separate (the people from their enemies). In Biblical Hebrew the verb comes in two main senses. It can mean to move disjointedly, skip, pass over, move from one foot to another, limp, hesitate or waver. This is supported by the Septuagint on Exodus 12:23. Alternatively it is derived from a root meaning to hover, protect or spare. This is supported by the use of the verb *ḥ-u-s* in Onkelos to Exodus 12:23 and Rashi (ibid.), who says, possibly ambivalently, "*p-s-ḥ* means *to spare*; one can also explain it as *leap over*" (cf. Rashi on Isaiah 31:5).

The best known instance of the first Hebrew root is in I Kings 18:21, where Elijah asks, *How long will you keep hopping (pos'ḥim, in the qal or pa'al) between two opinions?* Other translations render *pos'ḥim* as *limping*, *hesitating* or *wavering*. Despite the range of interpretations of these Hebrew words, there is consensus that the verb used here means to move about. Radak compares it to a person who doesn't know or can't decide where to place his foot. Another possibility is that this is a mocking description of Baal-worshippers who continued with their ritual dancing (*va-yefass'ḥu* in the *pi'el*, indicating a dance which entailed a limping movement beside the altar) without facing the theological problem of whether Baal had any real power.

If *p-s-ḥ* indicates disjointed movement, who or what performed the movement? If *zeval pesaḥ* is taken as denoting an offering of a paschal lamb, the name "paschal" probably indicates springtime because that is when the young lambs gambol and frolic. The verb *p-s-ḥ* may be one way of describing their springing, jumping movements (Psalm 114:4). If the emphasis is on the lambs, *Pesaḥ* has derived its name from the animals offered as the springtime sacrifice.

The grammarian Menahem ibn Saruk prefers the second of the two Hebrew versions, *to spare* or *save* (he sees it akin to an act of *ḥemlah*, *compassion*). In this sense, *Pesaḥ* is God's care for His people. When there are instances

where the verb means *to leap* or *to limp*, Menahem is silent as to the possibility of a different root.<sup>8</sup>

Rashi appears to be non-committal by quoting both *to spare* and *to leap over*, but it could be that the two versions of the Hebrew are not actually in conflict. *Being protective* can involve *hovering* or *moving around*, which can accommodate the traditional translation of *passing over* or *reserving for special attention*.

Carol Meyers says in *Exodus*, a volume in the New Cambridge Bible Commentary: ‘Although the English translation (“pass over”)... provides the etymology and source of the English designation, Passover, the Hebrew term *pesah*, as a verb, probably means “to protect”.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in a footnote to its translation of Exodus 12:11, the JPSA version offers *protective offering* as a translation of *pesah*.

An alternative interpretation focuses on God’s involvement. It sees *pesah l-Ado-nai*, the Lord’s *paschal offering*, as an action carried out by God or in His presence. As explained below, Targum Onkelos, fearful of anything that seems anthropomorphic, calls it a *Passover sacrifice before the Lord*. The literalist view suggests that it is not so much the lambs that skip, but God or his angels. The verse says of God, *He passed (pasah) over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses* (Ex. 12: 27). In this verse, JPSA does render *pasah* as *passed over*, but this gives the sense of *passing by* or *omitting from consideration*. It is better to understand the verb as meaning *hovering above* and *watching over*.

Rashbam sees the verse as a prophecy of the future. When God, through His destroying angel, goes through Egypt, He will leap over (*p-s-h al*) the Israelite houses and not strike them, and the spared and relieved Israelites will celebrate their deliverance by offering Him a sacrifice.

Ibn Ezra thinks that *passing over* has two connotations, action and attitude. The action involved is indicated by the use of the root *p-s-h* in the sense of moving in a lame fashion (I Kgs. 18:21). Someone who is lame favors his good leg. Similarly, the destroying angel, acting on behalf of God, behaves as if he were lame, so he hops, as if on his good leg, over the Israelite houses.

With the action, however, comes an attitude. The hopping or leaping action is not morally neutral. Ibn Ezra notices that Isaiah 31:5 reads, *passo’ah v-himlit*, *He will rescue it (Jerusalem) as He passes over it*. In this verse, *pass-*

ing over is more than a mere movement but an expression of wondrous, boundless protection, care and compassion. God watches over the Israelites like a hovering mother bird. The lamb whose blood is smeared on the doors of the Israelite houses is thus more than a frolicsome young animal but is specially designated as an indicator of Divine love and pity and has a God-given privilege as a symbol of a Divine miracle.

*P-s-h* as an attitude, not just an action, is seen in Targum Onkelos, which renders *zevah pesah* as *dabbah hayyas*, a protective (or merciful) sacrifice. Further, following his normal practice, Onkelos does not say *of the Lord* but *before the Lord*. Rather than *a sacrifice of (by, or even to) God*, it is *a sacrifice before Him*. Instead of an active verb, “God did (something)”, Onkelos tends to use a passive: “it was done before God”. This removes the hint of physicality from God. As a result He is not so much the chief actor but the presiding Presence of the universe. It should be noted that on Exodus 12:12, Onkelos avoids the traditional wording, *I will pass over (or through) the land of Egypt* and says instead *I will be revealed*, once again fearful of a possible anthropomorphism.

Rashi’s comments on Exodus 12:11 and 13 list a series of cases of *p-s-h* where God is the actor: He (or His agent/s) *skipped over* the Israelite houses, He *moved* to protect the Israelites, He *jumped* between the Egyptian houses to let the Israelites escape.

In at least one case listed by Rashi, the *p-s-h* is carried out by the Israelites themselves, when they *jumped up* out of eagerness to respond to God. Rashi says they sprang or leapt up, though this probably means simply that they acted with haste to perform the “springing offering” (Rashi on verse 11). A well known rabbinic saying is *zerizim makdimim la-mitzvot*: *Those who are eager (or zealous) hasten to perform the commandments early* (TB *Pesahim* 4a). A related rabbinic saying is *mitzvah she-ba’ah le-yad’kha al tah mitzen-nah*: *When a mitzvah comes into your hand, let it not become stale* (Mekhilta to Exodus 12:17). Both sayings derive from discussions about the Exodus and the observance of Passover.

A third interpretation of *p-s-h* is cultic. Prosic notes an Akkadian usage that understands the verb as ‘make soft, supple, soothe, placate’ which would see *the Lord’s sacrifice* as an offering to *soothe or placate the Lord*.<sup>10</sup> In relation to the Exodus, it may be that God’s grace in delivering the Israelites made the

escapees grateful but feeling unworthy. Hoping that the Almighty would not become angry and turn against them, they seek to appease Him and retain His goodwill. There may be a hint here of the *Akedah* (the Binding of Isaac: Genesis 22) in which the human being, saved from being a sacrificial victim, substitutes an animal – a frolicsome lamb.

#### CONCLUSION

Whether all this justifies the popular translation ‘Passover’ is debatable. Whilst the texts suggest that God *watched over* the Israelites, the term *pass over* – at least in modern English usage - seems to indicate something like taking no notice of someone or something. This contradicts the sense in which the Bible uses the root *p-s-h*, which implies showing concern, being compassionate, or protecting. Even if one uses the phrase *to pass by*, there is still a problem with English word usage. If the Bible simply wants to say that God took action or made a physical movement (understood, of course, metaphorically), it is probably better rendered by the verb *a-v-r*, which in fact is used in this sense in the *Pesah* texts (e.g. Ex. 12:23). *A-v-r* suggests purposeful passage where *p-s-h* does not. The choice of the name Passover might perhaps reflect the way the English language was used in the days of Tyndale and the King James Version, but language has moved on and the old name is out of place in modern English.

After reviewing a range of suggestions as to the meaning of the verb *p-s-h* from which the name *Pesah* derives, the view of Menahem ibn Saruk and others that it connotes ‘to spare’ or ‘to have compassion’ seems the most appropriate. The name *Pesah* therefore really means *Festival of Protection* (or *Providence*). In a sense the name might be the partner of the name of the companion festival, Sukkot, which literally indicates *Festival of Coverings*.

Though Menahem gives the verb the secondary meaning of limping, this paper does not accept his view that this secondary meaning requires a separate root. The present author argues for a combination of the two theses (a. *to protect*, and b. *to limp*), suggesting that God *protected* the Israelites by an act of grace which involved *hovering* or *fluttering* over them like a concerned, protective mother bird. This reflects the true intent of the term *Pesah*.

## NOTES

1. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 13, cols. 169-171, summarizes the critical view: cf. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. IX, pp. 553-556.
2. 'The End of the Jewish Sacrificial Cult', *HUCA* 38 (1967), pp.137-148.
3. Julian Morgenstern, 'The Origin of *Massoth* and the *Massoth* Festival', *American Journal of Theology* 21, pp. 279-93; cf. Theodor Herzl Gaster, *Passover: Its History and Traditions* (NY: Henry Schuman, 1949), and John H. Choi, *Traditions at Odds: The Reception of the Pentateuch in Biblical and Second Temple Literature* (T. & T. Clark Library of Biblical Studies, 2010), esp. pp. 75-78; Carol Meyers, *The New Cambridge Bible Commentary: Exodus* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 94-107.
4. Cf. Tamara Prosic, 'Passover in Biblical Narratives', *JSOT* 82 (1999).
5. Baruch M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Pres, 1984). According to Bokser, Christianity retained the paschal sacrifice motif and applied it to Jesus.
6. *Op. cit.*, Appendix A and p. xiv.
7. Rashi on Ex. 12:23; M. Rosenbaum & A.M. Silbermann, *Pentateuch with Rashi's Commentary: Exodus* (London: Shapiro Vallentine, 1945 ed.): see note about *Menaḥem* on p. 239.
8. *Maḥberet Menahem* by Menahem ben Saruk the Spaniard, ed. Zvi (Hirsch) Filipowsky (London/Edinburgh: 1854), p. 143.
9. *Loc. cit.*, p. 97.
10. Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover Until 70 CE* (London/NY: Clark, 2005), pp. 31-32.