THE REAL MEANING OF PASSOVER
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Yair Rosenberg writing for The Atlantic shared an insightful teaching this week about how many English speaking Jews translate the word Pesach.

For as long as I can remember, and certainly since well before I became a rabbi, our family always referred to the holiday we began last night and celebrate this morning as “Passover”. I can’t remember exactly when as a young teen we started calling it by its proper Hebrew name, “pesach” but I do know that to this day the name has not stuck in my family. The evite invitations my sister sent for seder this year, like every year clearly invited us to her home at 6p sharp for Passover. We were there but like most seders in the Jewish world, we certainly didn’t start on time.

But back to Yair Rosenberg's wonderful article from the other day, he raises the question, "what if translating the word "*pesach"* as "Passover" is a mistake?

Crediting Joe Septimus, a member of his New York synagogue, and Joe's brother Bernard Septimus, Yair's teacher at Harvard, he discovered that according to the original Jewish sources, "Passover" is far from the most intuitive translation of the holiday's name.

This debate has more than academic implications. As it turns out, recovering a lost earlier understanding of the festival's title also helps us better grasp its meaning. With his encouragement I want to share his teaching with you this morning and then add a little bit of my own at the end.

First from Yair: Parsing Passover

So, where does the name of Pesach—what we call "Passover"—come from? It appears in the Bible in Exodus 12, where Moses tells the Israelite slaves to sacrifice a lamb and mark their homes with its blood so that they will not be harmed by a plague that kills Egypt's first-born males:

וַיִּקְרָא מֹשֶׁה לְכָל־זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מְשְׁכוּ וּקְחוּ לָכֶם צֹאן לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתֵיכֶם וְשַׁחֲטוּ הַפָּסַח׃

Moses then summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go, pick out lambs for your families, and slaughter the Pesach offering.”

וּלְקַחְתֶּם אֲגֻדַּת אֵזוֹב וּטְבַלְתֶּם בַּדָּם אֲשֶׁר־
בַּסַּף וְהִגַּעְתֶּם אֶל־הַמַּשְׁקוֹף וְאֶל־שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזֹת
מִן־הַדָּם אֲשֶׁר בַּסָּף וְאַתֶּם לֹא תֵצְאוּ אִישׁ
מִפֶּתַח־בֵּיתוֹ עַד־בֹּקֶר׃

“Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and apply some of the blood that is in the basin to the lintel and to the two doorposts. None of you shall go outside the door of his house until morning.”

וְעָבַר יְהוָה֙ לִנְגֹּף אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וְרָאָה אֶת־הַדָּם֮ עַל־הַמַּשְׁקוֹף וְעַל שְׁתֵּי הַמְּזוּזֹת וּפָסַח יְהוָה֒ עַל־הַפֶּתַח וְלֹא יִתֵּן הַמַּשְׁחִית לָבֹא אֶל־בָּתֵּיכֶם לִנְגֹּף׃

“For when the Lord goes through to smite the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the lintel and the two doorposts, and the Lord will pasach on the door and not let the Destroyer enter and smite your home.”

The Bible goes on to direct the Israelites to commemorate this moment by making a regular sacrifice, thus establishing the holiday that Jews now observe:

וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְחָק־לְךָ וּלְבָנֶיךָ עַד־עוֹלָם׃

“You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants.”

וְהָיָה כִּי־תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת׃

“And when you enter the land that the Lord will give you, as He has promised, you shall observe this rite.”

וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם׃

“And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’”

וַאֲמַרְתֶּם זֶבַח־פֶּסַח הוּא לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל־
בָּתֵּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנָגְפּוֹ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־
בָּתֵּינוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקֹּד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ׃

“You shall say, ‘It is the Pesach sacrifice to the Lord, because He pasach on the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses.’” The people then bowed low in homage.

Now, you can see how “pass over” would be an easy way to translate the words pesach and pasach in the verses above. And in fact, that is how Saint Jerome, the

Christian author of the Vulgate, the fifth-century Latin translation of the Bible, rendered the words. And he was not alone.

But it is not how many traditional Jewish translators and commentators rendered them.

One of the most ancient and foundational Jewish translations of the Hebrew Bible is the Aramaic Targum Onkelos, which dates to approximately the third century. For many Jews of that era, it was the only way they could access the Bible, as they did not speak Hebrew. Indeed, after the destruction of the Second Jewish Temple in Jerusalem around 70 C.E., it became common practice for synagogues to read the Torah in both Hebrew (the language of the learned) and Aramaic (the language of the masses). Targum Onkelos was the most influential of

the latter translations, and to this day it is printed alongside the Hebrew text in many traditional Jewish Bibles.

Simply put, Onkelos reflects how ancient Jews understood the Bible. And Onkelos did not think Pesach meant “Passover.” Here’s how he translates Exodus 12:23, which we cited above:

וְיִתְגְּלֵי יְיָ לְמִמְחֵי יָת מִצְרָיִם וְיֶחֱזֵי יָת דְּמָא עַל שַׁקְפָּא וְעַל תְּרֵין סְפַיָּא וְיֵיחוֹס יְיָ עַל תַּרְעָא וְלָא יִשְׁבּוֹק לְחַבָּלָא לְמֵיעַל לְבָתֵּיכוֹן לְמִמְחֵי׃

God will appear to strike the Egyptians, and He will see the blood upon the lintel and upon the door posts, and

God **will be compassionate** on your threshold and not permit the destruction to enter your houses to smite.

This shift also affects how Onkelos understands the purpose of regularly commemorating Pesach with the paschal sacrifice. Thus, he translates Exodus 23:27 like so:

וְתֵימְרוּן דַּבַּח חֲיָס הוּא קֳדָם יְיָ דִּי חָס עַל בָּתֵּי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם כַּד הֲוָה מָחֵי יָת מִצְרָאֵי וְיָת בָּתָּנָא שֵׁזִיב וּכְרַע עַמָּא וּסְגִידוּ׃

[When your children ask you, “What do you mean by this rite?”] You shall say, “It is **the sacrifice of compassion before God, who had compassion upon the houses and**

children of Israel in Egypt, when He struck the Egyptians and spared our houses."

In other words, in this traditional Jewish understanding, the holiday of Pesach is a celebration of divine compassion. The same idea is reflected in the commentary of Rashi, the most influential Jewish biblical commentator, who translates God's conduct in Exodus 12:23 of "u'Pasach" as "will have compassion." Only then does he add, "one can also say, 'He skipped.'"

The implications of this alternative understanding are significant. For one, it gives greater moral meaning to the observance of Pesach. Rather than marking a morally antiseptic act of **omission**—the "passing over" of Jewish homes—the holiday celebrates a deliberate act of **compassion** toward an enslaved people, and calls on us

to emulate that divine conduct ourselves. “Passing over” is an almost incidental act; a “sacrifice of compassion” is not. When we commemorate Pesach, we commemorate compassion, and remind ourselves that without it, none of us would be here.

So that was Yair’s insightful teaching – but I want to add a n’chemat, a little something extra to think about on top of his torah. I was thinking about this last night as we were pouring out drops of wine for each of the 10 plagues that befell the Egyptians.

It wasn’t just the Egyptians who suffered the plagues, the Hebrew slaves suffered some of them too.

Firstly, a quick reminder. God sent 10 plagues to teach Pharoah and the Egyptians lessons and ultimately as a

means to rescue the children of Israel from slavery. The first 9 plagues came in three cycles of three:

1 – River Nile turns to Blood, 2 – Frogs, 3 – Lice
4 – Flies, 5 – Death of Livestock, 6 – Boils
7 – Hail, 8 – Locusts, 9 – Darkness

Finally, there is the 10th plague, the most terrible of all, the death of the firstborn, that's the one where the angel of death either passes over the homes of the Hebrews or shows them compassion as our better translation would put it.

In this first cycle of plagues, God is clearly demonstrating God's supremacy, over Pharoah, over the Egyptian magicians and over their false gods. Before the first plague God's message to Pharoah is 'In this thou shalt

know that I am the LORD‘ (Exodus 7:17), and there is a similar message with plagues 2 and 3 (see Exodus 8:10, 19).

From reading the descriptions of these plagues, and also comparing them with some of the later plagues it seems clear that these must have affected the Israelites as well. Indeed, given the significance of the Nile to the Egyptian economy and way of life, when it turned to blood, this would have had an impact on everyone in Egypt.

The simple teaching for Pharoah and for us in these first three plagues is that God is the Creator and Ruler of the universe and can quite justly do whatever God pleases to whoever God pleases.

In this second cycle of plagues God again shows God's supremacy, but also makes it clear that God will separate between the Egyptians and the Israelites. 'And I will sever in that day the land of Goshen, in which my people dwell, that no swarms of flies shall be there; to the end thou mayest know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth.' (Exodus 8:22). Exodus 9:4 states a similar thing regarding the cattle (Plague 5) and the implication of Exodus 9:11 is the same for the boils (Plague 6). Having shown Pharoah God's power in plagues 1-3, God then takes it to another level – and demonstrates, if there was any doubt, that these plagues were not random natural events, but were acts of God. So good is God at plague that God can be surgical in their application.

The third cycle is a bit of a mixed bag.

7 – Hail, 8 – Locusts, 9 – Darkness

The hail we read was ‘very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.’ (Exodus 9:25). However, the hail did not affect the children of Israel (Exodus 9:26).

The ‘locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the coasts of Egypt:… they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt.‘ (Exodus 10:14-15). It would seem that the impact of the locusts was felt by all the inhabitants of the land, Hebrew and Egyptian alike.

Of the 9th plague, Darkness, the text is quite clear “the Egyptians ‘saw not one another, neither rose any from his place for three days: but all the children of Israel had light in their dwellings.‘

So if you’re keeping score that’s 4 plagues against everyone and 5 plagues against only the Egyptians.

So here comes 10, the most brutal of them all the killing of the first born and the origin of the name Passover. My Passover wine induced epiphany last night was that since God had already established that God could meet out God plagues upon all or upon some; the fact that God showed compassion to the Israelites in this tenth instance is not merely the passive act of passing over their homes, but the very intentional act of sparing them the horror and trauma of the death of their first born. If

all around you, is the unimaginable image of first born children dying in Egyptian homes I do not think our reaction would be simply that God's wrath has skipped us, but rather that God has spared us and our children out of deep compassion.

However you call it, Chag Samayach