PESAH, Passed-over or protected?

ופסח ה ’ על הפתח ולא יתן המשחית לבא אל בתיכם לנגוף
Exodus 12:23

In order to persuade the Egyptians to let the Jewish people go out of Egypt, the Almighty inflicted upon them ten plagues. The last one, the plague that finally convinced the Egyptian monarch to let the Israelites go, was the death of the first-born. The Tora describes the plague or sickness that affected the first-born as mash-hit, literally , “a destroyer” (Ex. 12:23). Obviously, we, the Jewish people, do not believe in powers independent from God. However, in order to fit our limited understanding, the Biblical text often attributes certain actions to God’s shelihim or proxies. The “destroyer” (The rabbis nicknamed it elsewhere the angel of death), describes one of God’s action, death, thru a linguistic proxy. We say angel of death, or mash-hit but we are referring ultimately to God’s actions. Illustration: In the South African courtroom, when Oscar Pistorius talks to the prosecutor (a man) he says: “My Lady”. Why? Because although the accuser is talking to the prosecutor, he has to address always the Judge, which in this case, is a woman. Similarly, althought the Tora describes the actions as done by a mash-hit/ destroyer, or a wind that God used to split the sea, etc. these actions referred and should always be ascribed to God.

Back to Pesah. In America, Pesah is known as “Passover”. It is thought that at the time of the death of the first born, while God was inflicting the blow of death to the Egyptians, He “passed over” (skipped) the house of the Jews sparing their lives. Allow me to present a slightly different reading of the same verse, based on the Targum Onqelos, the official Jewish translation of the Bible. Onqelos does not translate

“Pesah” or “Pasah” as passed-over but us protected (in Aramaic, hais, like, adam has al mamono, “a person cares and protects his assets”). Thus, the verse Ex. 12:23 should be translated in this way “When the Lord goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, He will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and He will PROTECT that doorway, and He will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down” (see also Ex. 11:27). Accordingly, God (linguistically) acted thru His destroyer to inflict death, but He Himself (so to speak) cared for and protected His chosen People. That is why Pesah, particularly the first night of Pesah, is also called in the Tora “lel shimurim”, the night of Protection.

I prefer this translation because when Pesah is understood as “Divine Protection” it gives a clearer meaning to this beautiful Holiday: Pesah celebrates God’s Protection to the Jewish people, from the eve of the exodus of Egypt until our own days.