What does the word Pesach really mean?

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Mekhilta d’Rabbi Yishmael 12:13

PESACH, MATZA, MAROR

Rabban Gamliel says that there are three words which must be exposed in the Seder to fulfill the minimum obligation of teaching our children the story of our Exodus from Egypt: **Pesach, Matza and Maror**.

Maror represents the taste of slavery.

Matza, the taste of freedom; obtained through Divine intervention.

But what is **Pesach**?

What does “Pesach” mean, and what does it teach us today?

Pesach was a sacrifice, an animal offering. But unlike the sacrifices mentioned in our week’s Parasha, Vayiqra, the *sacrifice of Pesach* had a very unique purpose. A lamb, a young sheep, had to be sacrificed by the Jewish slaves in the 14th Of Nissan and the Jews had to mark the doorposts of their houses with its blood. Jewish houses with the blood in the doorpost will not be affected by the plague sentencing the first-born to death.

MENTAL FREEDOM:

This Pesach sacrifice represents what the Jewish people had to

do to deserve their physical freedom. And this is why. Sociocultural changes usually take many years or decades to occur. In the case of the Jewish people, it all happened in just a few hours. On the 10th of Nissan, God ordered the Jews to take a sheep and sacrifice it on the 14th of Nisan. Remember, that the Egyptians worshiped many animals because they believed animals possessed some supernatural powers given by the gods. Sheep, especially the adult male called "ram", represented virility and the power of procreation. The Israelites were now facing a serious challenge. God told them to take one of the Egyptian "gods" and sacrifice it, roast it and eat it! And by doing so the Israelites would prove to God, but mainly to themselves ,that they were "free" of the idolatrous culture of the Egyptians. On the other hand, bear in mind that we Israelites lived completely integrated into the Egyptian society for 210 years! And there were obviously influenced and exposed to all the kinds of superstitions of the *aboda zara* (idolatry) society. Killing a lamb, therefore, represented an extraordinary difficult choice, an extraordinary act of courage. After all their own masters considered the ram "a god"! And if a slave naturally fears his masters, how much more he would fear his master's god! **In the eve of Pesach, however, the Jewish people overcame their psychological fear, choose to follow HaShem's command, and sacrificed the lamb**. And in that one single act they freed themselves from the culture of idolatry and superstitions. That night, by doing the Pesach sacrifice, we Jews abandoned Egypt mentally, and we showed HaShem that we were ready to follow Him.

PROTECTION:

All the above refers to the Pesach sacrifice. But we still need to understand the meaning of the word "Pesach". In English Pesach is usually translated as "Passover" (i.e., passed over, skipped), meaning that when HaShem was causing the death of the Egyptian firstborn , He passed over the

houses of the Jews and did not affect them. However, according to Rabbi Menashe Ben Israel (1604-1677) and other commentaries, the idea of “Pesach” in the Tora is a little deeper, and at the same time, less known. In his opinion, the word “Pesach”, and its verb “Pasach”, should not be understood as “passed over” but as “protected”. The Targum Onkelos translated “pasach” for *chayis* cared for, watched, protected. Even the septuagint translated “pesach ” as protected. Also the Mekhilta says: en pesicha ela chayis. (see yeshaya’hu 31:5, and Tehilim 61:5). What did really happen in Pesach? Did God “passed over” the houses of the people of Israel while He was killing the first born egyptians, as the English word Passover seems to mean?

Accordingly, this is then what happened: HaShem unleashed the tenth plague, an epidemic that the Tora calls “mashchit”, which caused the death of the firstborn (See Shemot 12:13 and 12:23). HaShem **“Protected”** (*pasach ‘al*) the Israelites’ houses, which were marked with blood on the doorposts, and did not allow this deadly plague to affect the Jewish firsborn. The most important idea of “Pesach”, therefore, is to remind us that God constantly and directly protects the people of Israel. We celebrate this supernatural protection the night of 15th of Nisan, the night of the Seder. This night is also known in the Tora as *lel shimurim*, lit. “The Night of Protection”. The survival of the Jewish People challenges statistics and logical predictions. The most persecuted human group in the history of mankind exists thanks to God’s miraculous and permanent protection. And that is what we celebrate in Pesach.

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