

Parashah Fifty-Three

Exodus 12:13-28; Jeremiah 46:13-28; Colossians 1:13-14

notes by Tim Hegg

Lessons from Pesach

What Does the Verb פָּסַח mean?

1. Two words for “pass over” in Exodus 12:

a. אָבַר - *avar*, “to cross over, pass over” This term is found in vv. 12 and 23. In both instances, יהוה is the subject of the verb: יהוה is the one who “passes through” or “passes over” the land.

b. פָּסַח - *pasach*. The definition of this verb, however, is not universally agreed upon. The verb and corresponding noun are found 73 times in the Tanach, but only 20 times outside of the Torah.

The early Christian interpretation of the Exodus text has influenced the definition of the verb to a great extent. This interpretation considered יהוה to be the One who either destroyed (Egyptians) or *spared* (Israelites). In other words, He either destroyed or *skipped*, i.e., “passed over.”

One other text seems to support this definition of “skip over”: 1 Ki 18:21, “How long will you waver between two opinions?” These words, in the mouth of Eliyahu, encourage the people to put their complete faith in God and Him alone, and not to give any allegiance to Baal. The Lexicons consider the possibility that the verb *pasach* may have a base meaning of “limp,” or “be lame.” From this comes the idea of “waver” or “wobble,” and thus the current translation of 1 Ki 18:21. But the word translated “opinions” is from a cluster of Hebrew nouns all based on the root סָעַף, which most likely means “branches” or even the “Y” of a branch. Note the following: Is 17:6; 27:10, “branch” (סָעִיף); Is 10:33, “trim branches” (מְסַעֵף); Ezek 31:6, 8, “slender branch” (סַעֲפָה). Add to this the fact that the preposition translated “between” is עַל when we would expect בֵּין, and we have good cause to seek a better translation.

The use of the verb *pasach* in Is. 31:5 gives every indication that the base meaning is “to hover over,” “to protect.” Note the poetic lines:

Like flying birds so Adonai of hosts will protect Jerusalem
He will protect and deliver;
He will *pasach* and rescue

Here, the term obviously means to “hover over,” “to protect.” This is what a mother-bird does for her young, cp. Deut. 32:11.

Now we may retranslate 1 Ki 18:21 like this: “why do you hover over two branches,” that is, “How long will you go on hovering like a bird fluttering over two branches? Land already!”

In fact, the verb *pasach* fits every context in which it is used if the meaning given is “to hover over, to protect.”

2. *Who is the destroyer?*

In vv. 12 and 23 Adonai is clearly the One who does the destroying of the Egyptian’s first born. But in v. 23 there appears to be two individuals. Adonai both destroys and does

not allow the destroyer to come into the houses marked by blood. Here, as often in the Tanach, Adonai is seen in a plurality. Who is the destroyer? Most certainly the Angel of the Lord, (cp. 2 Sam 24:16-17; 2 Kgs 19:35; Is 37:36; 1 Chr. 21:12ff; 2 Chr 32:21; Ps 35:5-6) and possibly the pre-incarnate Messiah. (Note that in Rev. 1:18 Yeshua owns the keys to death and Hades.)

The clear indication of Ex 12:23 is that Adonai “hovers over” the house marked by blood, and protects its occupants from the death sentence of the destroyer. In this the picture of redemption is made known. God is both the destroyer and the protector of those He has chosen not to be destroyed.

3. *In What Way is the Blood a Sign (v. 13)?*

Verse 13 is specific: the blood on the doorpost is a sign to the Israelite family. וְהָיָה הַדָּם לְכֶם לְאֹת עַל הַבְּתִימִים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם שָׁם וְרָאִיתִי אֶת-הַדָּם וּפָסַחְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם וְלֹא-יְהִיָּה בְכֶם נֶגֶף לְמַשְׁחִית בְּהַלְכִי בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם “The blood shall be a sign for you upon the houses where you are; I shall see the blood and I shall pass over you; there shall not be a plague of destruction upon you when I strike in the land of Egypt.” But how is it a sign for the Israelite? It appears to function more as a sign for the Almighty. The Hebrew could just as well be understood to mean that the blood as a sign *belonged* to the Israelites—it was a sign that belonged to them and not to the Egyptians. It was not so much that the blood was for them to see as it was that the blood “belonged to them” or was a sign that they were to be spared.

Some of the Sages disagree. Rashi notes that the blood on the doorpost was considered as a sign “for you” (the Israelites) which meant that the blood should be placed on the inside of the doorpost so it could be seen by those in the house, and not on the outside for the Egyptians to see. His point is that the Jewish firstborn were saved from the plague because the blood signified that those inside the house had involved themselves in doing God’s will. The blood was proof of obedience, and it was this obedience that saved the Israelites. In the same vein, Rashi points out that an Egyptian firstborn staying in the house of an Israelite would not have been spared. For Rashi, it was devotion to the commandment, not the mere presence of a “safe house” that protected the Jews. (*Mechilta* takes a similar view by suggesting the blood was that of the Pesach sacrifice co-mingled with the blood of circumcision.)

This all sounds very pious. The problem with this interpretation, however, is what we are to do when Israel is entirely disobedient—like at Sinai and the building of the golden calf. If obedience is the basis of one’s redemption, should not idolatry be the cause of one’s destruction? Yet Israel is not destroyed over the well-known incident. The reality of the matter is clear: redemption is not based upon Israel’s obedience, but upon God’s willingness to accept the blood of the sacrificial lamb in the place of their firstborn sons. And since Israel is God’s firstborn (Exodus 4:22) she is spared as a whole because of the blood on the *mezuzot*. “It will be a sign belonging to you ... and when I see the blood” The blood is a sign that belongs to Israel because it is the sign of her redemption. Redemption belongs to those HaShem chooses—it is not the possession of all peoples.

The exodus from Egypt would thus become the paradigm of redemption for all time. Forever, throughout the history of Israel, the redemption from Egypt would stand as the ultimate illustration of the eternal redemption God would accomplish in Messiah. So central and key is the exodus picture that it would form the first Mo’ed of the year, celebrated for seven days throughout the generations of Israel. What does Pesach teach us about redemption as God sees it?

In Exodus 6:6 the whole exodus experience is summed up in four verbs (which become the basis for the four cups in the Pesach seder). גָּאַל, “to redeem” is one of those key terms. גָּאַל and פָּדָה are somewhat synonymous, conveying the concept of “redemption,” but גָּאַל always has a family orientation—used for redeeming a family member. This idea is never lost in its use and informs us of an essential aspect of Israel’s redemption by God’s outstretched arm. God is seen as the Father Who redeems His children.

But a second aspect that cannot be lost sight of is that גָּאַל always has “payment of the necessary price” connected with it. Consider how the term is used for the redemption of property:

If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative has sold. Or in case a man has no kinsman, but so recovers his means as to find sufficient for its redemption, then he shall calculate the years since its sale and refund the balance to the man to whom he sold it, and so return to his property. But if he has not found sufficient means to get it back for himself, then what he has sold shall remain in the hands of its purchaser until the year of jubilee; but at the jubilee it shall revert, that he may return to his property. (Lev 25:25–28)

This and many other examples show that redemption is affected by payment of the necessary price. This has wide ramifications for the term as it is used with regard to eternal redemption—the payment for sins in order that God may dwell among His people. No matter how much we may want to think that somehow, someway we have contributed to our own redemption price, the fact of the matter is that the price required for our redemption was entirely out of our reach—beyond our means. For the payment necessary for our redemption (as clearly demonstrated in the Pesach lamb) was the death of an innocent substitute. Try as we might, we could never affect our redemption (the salvation of our life) because it could only be gained through death. “The soul that sins shall die.” (Ezek 18:4)

The picture of leaven illustrates this same thing. Interestingly, two words are found in our text translated leaven: the common term, חֻמֵץ, *chametz* and שָׂאֵר, *s’or*, found only 5 times and only in the Torah (Ex 12:15, 19; 13:7; Lev 2:11; Dt 16:4). שָׂאֵר most likely denotes yeast itself, while חֻמֵץ means any food in which yeast is found. Our text becomes the basis for the ruling that leaven must be cleaned out of the house by the 14th of Nisan, for Ex 34:25 states clearly that the leaven must be removed before the Pesach offering may be offered, which was done the afternoon of the 14th (Ex 12:6, where בֵּין הָעֶרְבַיִם, *bein ha-arbaim*, means “between the evenings,” i.e., at the closing of the day before the sunset and the beginning of the next day. This is the end of the 14th not the beginning of the 14th). Thus the Stone Chumash (following Rashi) renders בְּיוֹם הָרֵאשִׁוֹן (*b’yom harishon*) of Ex 12:15 not as “on the first day” but “on the previous day” (cf. Job 15:7 where Rashi contends that הָרֵאשִׁוֹן should be understood as “previous.”)

But what is the picture here? Why is the redemption illustrated by the exodus coupled with the removal of leaven? It is difficult (if not impossible) to show that leaven pictured “sin” in the early Tanach. The parallel between leaven and sin began to be used in the later post-exilic and even rabbinic eras (cf. *Yalkut*, Ex. 201 as noted in Jastrow’s *Lexicon*). Paul’s use of the concept in 1Cor 5:6f of leaven as a symbol of sin fits this later metaphoric usage, but it does not appear that leaven is viewed symbolically as sin in the passover narrative.

So if leaven is not a picture *per se* of “sin” in the Torah, what is the meaning in its connection with Pesach? The obvious emphasis is one of *haste*. Israel could not wait for bread

to rise because she was being taken out of Egypt in haste.

Now you shall eat it in this manner: with your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste—it is the Passover. (Ex 12:11, cf. 12:34)

This is why leaven is specifically added to the *minchah* of Shavuot:

You shall bring in from your dwelling places two loaves of bread for a wave offering, made of two-tenths of an ephah; they shall be of a fine flour, baked with leaven as first fruits to the LORD. (Lev. 23:17)

Here, at Shavuot, there is no more need for haste—as the redeemed of the Lord, Israel is no longer a nation of slaves but of freemen. They may therefore eat at their leisure without the restraints of taskmasters setting their schedules.

This sets the agenda, then, for Pesach. Leaving in haste emphasizes that *the redemption was happening to Israel, not something she was doing herself*. If Israel was to be redeemed, it was because she was taken out of Egypt by the mighty hand of God, not because she was effecting her own salvation. In the subsequent Festival, the house free of leaven was a picture of leaving Egypt in haste—of being snatched out of Egypt by God’s omnipotence, not by the efforts (planning, time schedule, etc.) of Israel. If Israel was to be redeemed, she would have to do it on God’s schedule, not her own. And it is easy to see how leaven could thus become a picture of sin—of self-reliance, of “doing it my way” as opposed to “doing it God’s way.” Since this picture is so central to God’s unfolding picture of redemption, retained leaven during the week of Pesach would result in *כָּרַת*, *karat*, being cut off. The two (God’s way and man’s way) cannot co-exist.

Thus the *haftarah* (of the triennial cycle) chosen by the Sages to accompany this *parashah* emphasizes God’s sovereign hand in the redemption of Israel. God is the One who redeems Israel—she cannot affect her own redemption. And it is this very core and central truth that the Apostle Paul emphasizes in the selected Apostolic Scripture:

For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:13-14)

The redemption of the soul, to which the ancient exodus offered the divine paradigm, is accomplished not by one’s own efforts, but by the final and eternal sacrifice of the Lamb. This is our hope and our salvation.

לְדוֹר וָדוֹר - *L'dor v'dor: From Generation to Generation*

“And when your children say to you, ‘What does this rite mean to you?’ (Ex 12:26).

The purpose of the Pesach seder, and the observing of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (חַג הַמִּצֻוֹת) is that of memorial—of remembering the pivotal event in the life of Israel, and thus in the lives of all who are part of the covenant people. It is therefore of foundational importance that the story and message of the exodus, and its revelation of God’s way of redemption, be passed on to our children.

We do this, in an initial sense, by following the commandment to make the festival of Pesach and Unleavened Bread a part of our lives as family and community. But simply observing the Festival is not sufficient, in and of itself. For if the redemption from Egypt is a central revelation of how God has redeemed us, then our lives must be changed in light of that redemption. Ultimately, the exodus points to a greater and eternal reality—our redemption in Yeshua. If we observe the Festival, but our lives remain laden with the leaven of slavery to the world, our observance rings hollow. What will be a lasting testimony to our children is when they observe us walking in righteousness, and humbly seeking forgiveness from God and others when we sin. Thus, passing this grand message of freedom in Yeshua to the next generation is a daily process, one in which they observe the life of Yeshua in us, not only in the major decisions of life, but even more importantly, in our everyday actions and manner of life.