

“Who Passed Over the Houses of the Children of Israel”

By Harav Yaakov Medan

I. “It Is the Sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover”

And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say to you, “What do you mean by this service?” that you shall say, “It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s passover (*pesach*), who passed over (*pasach*) the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote Egypt, and delivered our houses”... (*Shemot 12:26-27*)

The Torah explains the term “*pesach*” with the fact that God passed over (*pasach*) the houses of the children of Israel and rescued them. The accepted understanding of this verse is that God Himself came down to smite the firstborn of Egypt, as *Chazal* have expounded:

“For I shall pass through the land of Egypt” – I Myself, and not an angel; “And I shall smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt” – I Myself, and not a seraph; “And against all the gods of Egypt I shall execute judgment” – I myself, and not a messenger; “I am the Lord” – I am He, there is no other. (*Pesach Haggada*)

It was God Himself who saw the paschal blood on the doorposts of the houses of Israel, passed over them, and refrained from smiting them. According to this understanding, God’s “passing over” means that He refrained from taking action. When God smote the firstborn of Egypt, He refrained from harming the firstborn of Israel. This interpretation gave rise to the popular expression “*pose’ach al shetei ha-se’ipim*” in reference to a person who refrains from deciding which path to choose.

I have three difficulties with the accepted explanation.

1) How did the blood on the doorposts cause God to refrain from smiting the firstborn of Israel (unless this was a “royal decree,” without reason, that the houses with blood on their doorways would not suffer harm)?

2) The plain sense of the verses seems to imply just the opposite – God Himself did not strike the firstborn of Egypt, but it was precisely His agent, the “destroyer” (*mashchit*), who did so:

For the Lord will pass through to smite Egypt; and when He sees the blood upon the lintel and on the two sideposts, the Lord will pass over the door, **and will not allow the destroyer (*mashchit*) to come into your houses to smite you.** (*Shemot 12:23*)

And the blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, **and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you (*le-mashchit*),** when I smite the land of Egypt. (*Shemot 12:13*)

3) The source of the expression “*pose’ach al shetei ha-se’ipim*” is found in the words of the prophet Eliyahu on Mount Carmel: “How long will you go hopping between two branches? If the Lord be God, follow Him, but if Ba’al, then follow him” (*Melakhim 18:21*). The original meaning of the expression is not “refraining from taking either path,” but rather following both! The people of Israel in the days of Achav worshipped both God and Ba’al, like a bird who builds its nest on two branches (*se’ipim*), hopping back and forth (*pose’ach*) between them.

II. “And He Said to the Angel That Destroyed, ‘It Is Enough, Now Hold Your Hand’”

The source of the *derasha* in the *Pesach Haggada* seems to be a passage cited in two places in the *Yerushalmi*:

When the Merciful came to redeem Israel, He sent neither an agent, nor an angel, but rather it was He Himself. As it is written: “And I shall pass through the land of Egypt” – He and His entire entourage. (*Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 2:1*; see also *Horayot 3:1*)

In this *derasha*, what is attributed to God is the redemption of Israel, and not the smiting of the firstborn.

It seems, then, that God did not pass over the houses of Israel in the sense that He skipped from one house to the next and refrained from acting upon them. To the contrary, He passed over them in the sense that His *Shekhina* hovered over them. The act of destruction He handed over to an agent, and it was he – the destroying agent – who smote the firstborn of Egypt. But God was not prepared to hand over to an agent the task of protecting His firstborn son, Israel, so that the destroyer should not enter through his doorway. He Himself – as it were – hopped from one Israelite house to another, stood over them and prevented the destroyer from entering and causing harm. The paschal blood placed on the doorposts of the houses was like sacrificial blood, which in later generations would be placed on the corners of the altar. Every Israelite house achieved the status of an altar, and the *Shekhina* rested upon it, in the sense of “I saw the Lord standing beside the altar” (*Amos 9:1*).

We find a similar relationship between God and His angel in another place as well. This is what was said at Mount Moriah, when God revealed Himself to David, His anointed one:

And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it. And as He was about to destroy, the Lord beheld, and He relented of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed, “It is enough, now hold your hand.” And the angel of the Lord stood by the threshing floor of Ornan the Yevusite. And David lifted up his eyes, and saw the angel of the Lord standing between the earth and the heaven, with a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, who were clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces. And David said to God,

“Is it not I who commanded the people to be numbered? So that it is I who have sinned and done very wickedly; but as for these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray You, O Lord, my God, be on me, and on my father’s house, but not on Your people, that they should be plagued.” Then the angel of the Lord commanded Gad to say to David that David should go up, and set up an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Ornan the Yevusite. (I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 21:15-18)

The angel was the destroyer, and God protected His people and did not allow the destroyer to destroy them. His protection of His people came simultaneously with the setting up of the altar on Mount Moriah and with the designation of the place where the *Shekhina* would reveal itself.

III. “He Will Defend It and Deliver It; He Will Pass Over It and Spare It”

God acted in the same manner on Pesach of a later generation, when the armies of Sancheriv, king of Ashur, laid siege to Jerusalem during the days of Chizkiyahu. At that time, the Assyrian king boasted about his strength and mockingly declared:

And my hand has found as a nest the riches of the people, and as one gathers eggs that are left, have I gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved the wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped. (*Yeshayahu* 10:14)

Sancheriv likened the gods of the nations to birds that fled their nests instead of protecting their eggs, and this was also the way he related to the God of Israel. To this, the prophet responded:

As birds hovering, so will the Lord of Hosts defend Jerusalem; He will defend it and deliver it; He will pass over it (*pasoch*) and spare it. (*Yeshayahu* 31:5)

For surely our God is not like their gods, and our God – who is likened to a bird – will protect His nest, Jerusalem, and its residents. He will pass over and hover over Jerusalem, and from the heights of His holy heavens, He will give it protection.

And, indeed, this is what happened, as on the night of Pesach at midnight:

Then the angel of the Lord went forth, and smote in the camp of Ashur a hundred and eighty five thousand. And when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses. (*Yeshayahu* 37:36)

The destroying angel smote the armies of Ashur, and the *Shekhina* hovered, passing over Jerusalem and protecting it so that the destroyer should not enter. There is an important lesson to be learned from this: We are the children of God, and He Himself in all His glory protects us. He who dares cast out his defiled hand at us will not go unpunished.

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