

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Is Pesach “Passover” or Something Else?

There is probably no more fundamental ritual and season in Judaism than Passover. It is hard to imagine a more impressive tale of Freedom.

Most rabbis know that “Pesach” is not the name of the holiday at all! Our liturgy has the Biblically correct name – viz. *Hag Hamatzot* - the Festival of Matzot. “Pesach” is really a reference to that afternoon BEFORE the Seder during which the ancient Israelites sacrificed the Paschal lamb or kid.

Let us distinguish between Hag HaPesach and Hag haMatzot. The word Pesach [or its pausal form Pasach] might not mean Passover after all. I wish to bring you two witnesses who testify to a completely different meaning of the word. They are Onqelos, who translated the Torah into Aramaic, and Rashi, the famous commentator.

It appears that Onqelos does not at all translate Pesach or Pasach as Pass Over. Rather, he translates it as *V'yeichos* – in context that God will have compassion or mercy or pity, and not that God will Pass Over the houses of the Israelites. And how about Rashi? He gives the first definition as does Onqelos. Later on he rejects it in favor of “passing over”. But the prime definition is the compassion of Pesach.

There is a Seder ritual that is a play on the word “*v'yeichos*” of Onkelos, namely, the Maror that we use. The Aramaic for this green, bitter herb is *chassah*, which shares a root with the Hebrew “*Chas*” – to have mercy. So, as several Sephardic Haggadot note, the concept of bitter herbs is mitigated by this pun that combines Maror with compassion.

This year may we have a Compassionate Seder, and may God show us Compassion this year and forever more.

Shabbat Shalom!

Rabbi Richard Wolpoe is a member of the faculty of the Institute of Traditional Judaism.

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