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Meaning of the name Pesach

Jenin during the first intifada was a nasty place to be, especially for a month of reserve duty, but we were all trying to make the best of it. One evening at dusk, we got an urgent call over the radio that terrorists were throwing Molotov cocktails (incendiary bottles) at civilian cars on the road, not far from where we were on patrol. The driver hit the gas even before I had a chance to respond on the radio and a moment later, as we came around a curve in the road we could see two masked Arab men about a hundred yards down the road; one was holding a bottle filled with flammable liquid and a rag sticking out the top while the second lit it up, and we could see an Israeli civilian car headed in our direction about to become a target.

At the time orders allowed us to open fire under such circumstances, which we did, causing the terrorists to hurl their bottles which ended up exploding harmlessly on the road. They took off, and as we gave chase two more jeeps including one of the area Company Commander's jeep closed in and helped us corner the two terrorists who escaped inside a house which we quickly surrounded.

The conventional wisdom in such circumstances is that the first men on the scene should immediately break in, before the terrorists have a chance to think; most terrorist incidents are over in 3 minutes or less, so waiting for someone better-trained can often get people killed.

So the C.O. took charge, we quickly surrounded the house and were ready for orders to break in through the door, when suddenly we heard from inside the house, the unmistakable sound of a baby crying, and everyone froze. To this day, I have no idea if the baby just started crying, or one of the terrorists somehow caused the baby to cry, knowing full well that would cause any Israeli commander to hesitate.

As it was still daylight and there was no possibility of surprise there was no reason for radio silence, and we could hear the battalion commander on the radio demanding to know why he was not hearing the order to breach the house... For what seemed an eternity but was probably only

a couple of moments we all waited in total silence, listening to that baby cry, and I could see on the Commander's face the dilemma he was struggling with.

After a couple of minutes the Battalion Commander arrived, took in the situation and immediately gave the order to breach the house which they did (I personally did not end up inside the house; I was commanding the men surrounding the house and making sure the perimeter was secure...) One of the terrorists was killed and the second apprehended, and I remember how good the sound of that baby still crying sounded after the house was taken.

But there was one act left to this story: when all was secure, in full view (and listening distance) of us all, the battalion commander took this commander to task and basically ripped him to shreds, demanding to know why he waited for two whole minutes, an eternity in a situation like that.

And I can still recall his words: "Ein Tov ve'Ein ra; ve ein zman; yesh rak hachlata; tzarich le'hachlit!"

"There is no good, or bad and there is no time; there are just decisions which need to happen immediately! "

Too often, when decisions need to be made, people cannot seem to commit, which often means disastrous results ...

There is a fascinating idea that relates to Pesach (Passover) which would seem to illustrate this point.

Why do we call this holiday Pesach (Passover); it's such a strange name for a holiday.

The Torah tells us:

*"I will see the blood on your doorposts and **pass over** you..." (Shemot 12:13).*

Indeed, this seems to be the basis, in the famous verse (ibid. v. 27) quoted in the Haggadah, for the Paschal lamb being so called:

*"And you shall say it is a Pesach feast offering to Hashem (**Ve'amartem Zevach Pesach...**) who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt..."*

What sort of a name is this for a holiday? We are commemorating the day G-d did not slaughter us because we offered up the Paschal sacrifice?

Even stranger, a closer look suggests there is something else at play here.

The first use of the word Pesach (Passover) is actually (ibid v.11) in describing the lamb-sacrifice; *before* describing G-d's passing over the houses of the Jewish people.

“And thus shall you eat it: your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; you shall eat it in haste: it is a Pesach offering to G-d.”

Only in the next verse (ibid v. 12) does describe how he will **pass over** the Jewish homes, which is strange; shouldn't the Torah first tell us G-d will pass over our homes and *then* explain we thus will offer the Paschal lamb?

Indeed, we are enjoined to finish eating the paschal lamb by midnight, which was the exact time (ibid. v. 29) G-d visited the plague of the first born on the Egyptians and passed over the Jewish homes. But if the Paschal lamb is so named because G-d passed over our homes, shouldn't we be eating it after the plague occurs?

There is another well-known story where we find use of the term Pesach and that is in the story of Eliahu on the Mountain of Carmel. (Melachim (kings) I; chap. 18)

Eliahu (Elijah) has challenged the prophets of Baal to a duel and in the course of the story, when it is clear there will be no miraculous fire from the heavens to support the priests of Baal who have been beseeching their false god all day, Eliahu finally has his moment. But instead of exhorting the Jewish people to believe or thundering against their worship of idols, he castigates them for straddling the fence:

*“Ad matai atem **poschim** al sh'nei ha'se'ifim? “*

“How long will you straddle the fence? If it is G-d who (you believe) is G-d, then follow Him! And if the Baal, then follow him!” (Melachim I 18:21)

Here too the Bible uses the word Pesach and the issue Eliahu has with the Jewish people is not that they worship idolatry, it is that despite

knowing G-d to be the true G-d, they cannot let go of their idols; Eliahu tells them it is time to take a stand.

At least a person who worships the Baal believes in something; he has a truth; it's just the wrong truth. But show a person that truth is mistaken and he yet may find the real truth. But a person who already knows G-d to be true yet cannot let go of the Baal, does not really believe in anything; he is really only in it for himself. He is missing the most important thing in life: a higher purpose; a sense of mission.

And this, indeed, may be the reason we celebrate our upcoming festival as Passover; because on this night, the Jewish people had to take a stand.

And that is why the first time we find the name Pesach is when we are enjoined to eat the sacrifice with our shoes on, and with walking stick in hand. Because this means we are ready to go.

Deep in the darkest night of Egypt, the Jewish people take the lamb, the god of the Egyptians and paint their doors with its blood as if to say: 'in this home Egyptian idolatry is no longer welcome.' They take a stand and choose to identify as Jews, rather than as Egyptians, and in so doing, begin the long journey of forging the identity of the new Jewish nation.

And that is why this festival is called Passover, because on this night we took a pass on Egypt and elected to join Hashem (G-d) in creating a people that would change the world. We ceased to be slaves because we re-acquired the ability to choose, and to make our own decisions. And when we passed on Egypt, G-d passed on viewing us as Egyptians...

Today, more than ever, the world needs us to remind them of the choices and decisions we should all be making, in ensuring a better future...

Best wishes for a Chag Sameach: a wonderful Passover, from
Jerusalem,

Rabbi Binny Freedman