

Lot's 'Pesach' and Its Significance

Anyone who has studied Sefer Bereishit with Rashi has come across the verse describing Lot's hospitality towards the angels, in Sedom: "And he prepared a banquet for them, and baked matzot, and they ate" (Bereishit 19:2), and Rashi's laconic comment: "It was Pesach".

Rashi's explanation is most surprising, for several reasons:

1. Does the mere fact that matza was baked and eaten, tell us that it was Pesach? Why does Rashi not deduce that Lot baked matza because it took less time to prepare than bread? (Indeed, this is the explanation offered by Radak, who regards the verse as an important lesson in hospitality: guests should not have to wait long to be offered food.)
2. What significance could there be to a 'Pesach' before there was a nation called Am Yisrael, and before they left Egypt? Does Rashi's explanation not undermine the special character of the festival of Pesach as a commemoration of the miracle of Am Yisrael's departure from Egypt?

In my youth I spent much time pondering the reason for Rashi reaching this conclusion, whose textual basis seemed so weak. Admittedly, the idea that "it was Pesach" has its source in a midrash of Hazal (Bavli, Rosh ha-Shana 11a; Bereishit Rabba parsha 50,22), but Rashi doesn't always interpret a verse in accordance with such midrashim. Why, then, does he choose in this instance to rely on a midrash whose encounter with the literal text gives rise to such serious questions?

At some stage, the realization hit me. I read the chapter as it is written, and was suddenly struck by the depths of the insight possessed by Hazal and by Rashi. It is specifically when one reads the text itself, directly – rather than through the commentaries – that Hazal's view emanates from the words of the verses.

The narrative in Bereishit 19 describes a house that is closed up, in which the family and the guests have just completed a meal with matzot. At the doorway to the house, the angels save the family members, strike the people of the city (Sedom), and then bring Lot's family out of the city, by virtue of the hospitality shown to them.

The following table presents a comparison between the expressions in this chapter and the description of Pesach in Egypt:

Bereishit 19	Shemot 12
	(39) And they baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt to make cakes of matzot , for it was not leavened...
(6) And Lot went out to them at the entrance , and shut the door after him.	(22) And none of you shall go out from the entrance of his house until morning.
(11) And they struck the men that were at the entrance to the house with blindness... and they wearied themselves to find the entrance.	(23) ...God will pass over the entrance and will not allow the destroyer to come into your houses, to smite you.
(3) And he made them a feast, and baked matzot , and they ate .	(8) And they shall eat the meat on that night, roasted with fire, with matzot ; they shall eat it with bitter herbs.
(13) For we will destroy this place, for their cry has grown great before God, and God has sent us to destroy it .	(27) It is the sacrifice of Pesach unto God, Who passed over the houses of Bnei Yisrael in Egypt, when He smote Egypt, and delivered our houses .
	(12) I shall smite all the firstborn in the land of Egypt... (13) ... when I smite the land of Egypt (29) ... God smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt
(14) ... Get up; get out of this place, for God is going to destroy the city...	(31) And he called for Moshe and Aharon by night, and said: Get up; get out from among my nation – you and Bnei Yisrael...
(15) And when the dawn came... (12) ...whatever you have in the city, bring it out of this place.	(51) And it was, on that same day, that God brought Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt by their hosts.
(16) And he lingered ... so they brought him out...	(39) And they could not linger ...
(24) And God rained down upon Sedom and Amora brimstone and fire from God out of the heavens.	And God sent thunder and hail, and the fire ran down to the ground, and God rained hail upon the land of Egypt. (9:23)
(25) And He overthrew those cities, and all of the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and the vegetation on the land.	And there was hail, and fire flaring amidst the hail, very heavy, such as had not been seen throughout the land of Egypt since it became a nation. (9:24)
Duration: All night until the morning	Duration: All night until the morning
Lot's family is saved, producing two nations: Moav and Ammon.	The Exodus from Egypt gives rise to Am Yisrael

The many parallels between the overturning of Sodom and the plagues on Egypt practically shout out, “Pesach!” There is the closed house, the angels of destruction / deliverance, and the events that continue “all night until the morning”, when the day dawns and the sun rises (which is the same timetable followed in the Exodus). Most specifically, there is the command, “Get up, get out”, and the word “linger”: these are expressions that are intrinsically bound up with the Exodus. Bnei Yisrael “could not linger – because they were driven out of Egypt”. Similarly, in leaving Sodom, Lot could not linger because the angels held firmly (perhaps forcibly) onto his hand, and his wife’s hand, and the hands of his two daughters, “and they brought him out and left him outside of the city” (19:16).

Hazal had all these parallels in mind when they drew their conclusion in the midrash. The “literal school” of commentators, on the other hand, did not see all of this. Their approach is (generally) to read a verse within its local context; not to offer a synchronic reading of “biblical parallels”. In this respect, as in certain others, the midrash offers more than the literal interpretation does. In this manner we are able to draw a distinction of depth between the literal text and the midrash.

Unfortunately, there are people in our times who are so protective of the honor of Rashi and Chazal that they are not willing to read a chapter of the Torah in a simple, fluent, straightforward manner, lest they find themselves encountering questions and difficulties. Furthermore, they seem to fear that a person who starts off ignoring Rashi and Hazal and their interpretations or midrashim, may (heaven forefend) come to scorn their moral teachings and halakhic instruction, too... and this, in turn, may lead to skepticism and perhaps - heaven forbid - even heresy... And for this reason they issue a sweeping, all-inclusive directive (which no intelligent, thinking person can abide by): that none of us should imagine himself capable of a fluent, straightforward reading of the text, and therefore none of us is worthy of raising serious questions.

In this manner we lose out on the treasures of the biblical text, which fill a person with supreme joy, with the love of God. We lose out on the joy of the simple, plain reading (no less inspiring than the “secret” readings based on codes and the counting of intervals between letters) as well as on an understanding of the Midrash, since we receive it through “faith in the Sages”, an acceptance brimming with anxiety and denial of the intellect.

The proof of this is that I have presented above the treasures that I discovered through a simple reading, through which I exposed the source of the Midrash and its greatness. The Midrash recognizes expressions characteristic of the Exodus from Egypt, within the story of Lot’s exodus from Sodom.

Indeed, “it was Pesach”.

Does this mean that the scene took place in the “month of spring”, the season of Pesach? A study of the chapter from all angles offers no reason to assume this, and therefore we must conclude that the Midrash, too, comprises two levels. The “literal level of the

Midrash” is the idea, or concept, of “Pesach”: the salvation of one lone family from the chaos, by virtue of their hospitality, which is the characteristic of the household of Avraham. This idea or concept preceded the Exodus from Egypt, and it produced two nations, descendants of Lot: Amon and Moav. These two nations are prohibited from joining Bnei Yisrael for all time, because they did not observe and maintain the custom set down by Lot, their father, by virtue of which he had been saved from Sedom. They did not welcome Bnei Yisrael “with bread and with water, on your way as you came out of Egypt, and they hired Bilam... to curse you” (Devarim 23:4-7)

The deeper level, the “midrash of the midrash”, introduces into the story the date of “Pesach”, not only the idea of it. This is the source of the midrash recorded in the Gemara: “Yitzchak was born on Pesach” (Rosh ha-Shana 11a. On the basis of the “literal level of the Midrash”, all of the difficulties recorded in the *sugya* there, fall away.)

This obligates us to go back and re-examine the “Pesach of Egypt” experienced by Bnei Yisrael, which had been preceded by the “Pesach” experienced by Lot (together with his wife, daughters and sons-in-law). It becomes immediately clear that the unique character of the “Pesach of Egypt” lies not in the fact that it was the first such occasion, but rather in that it was a “Pesach” of salvation and redemption for an entire nation. The entire nation was “at home” – each family in its own home with its own Pesach sacrifice, and all of Israel was saved, family by family, and continues to celebrate, family by family, to this day.

Even though “Pesach for all generations” is the commemoration of the deliverance and redemption of all of Israel for all generations, it retains its fundamentally family-orientated foundation and character from the family of Lot, from the household of Avraham. Even when the “Pesach for all generations” was established as a “communal sacrifice”, such that it is offered even on Shabbat (Yerushalmi, Pesachim chapter 6, halakha 1), it never for a moment ceased being a “family offering” – albeit of all the families together. The Talmud Yerushalmi (ad loc) regards the Pesach as a “communal sacrifice) (as does the Tosefta, Pesachim chapter 4), while the Bavli (Pesachim 66a) omits the deduction by Hillel the Elder concerning the “communal sacrifice.” (A careful review shows that this was precisely the reason for the Yerushalmi omitting Hillel’s argument that the Pesach sacrifice should be offered on Shabbat just as the daily sacrifice is, since both are “communal sacrifices”: the counter-argument is that the comparison is invalid, since the “daily sacrifice” was specified: two lambs, with another two for the additional sacrifice on Shabbat, while the Pesach sacrifice – involving masses of people and tens of thousands of sacrifices – has no specified number).

Pesach is a unique sacrifice in that it is offered by all of Am Yisrael – by its families.

Finally, the “hospitality” of the Seder night, which is formulated in the Haggada in Aramaic (with its source in the Talmud Bavli – “*ha lachma anya*”) has its true source in the very first Pesach in the Torah – the Pesach of Lot, whose essence was the hospitality of Avraham’s household. It was by virtue of this quality of hospitality that Sara received

the news that her son Yitzchak would be born, and by virtue of this same quality Lot was saved from Sedom.

Therefore, we learn that hospitality (both monetary and physical) is one of the central elements of Pesach, and the secret of the deliverance and salvation.