

## ***The Past and Future of American Jewish Bible Translation and Commentary***

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In the beginning was the word. And the word became book.

Amos and Fania Oz write in “Jews and Words”: “What kept the Jews going were the books. After the destruction of the Second Temple, only books remained sacrosanct.”

The famous Israeli writer and his daughter continue, “We nonbelievers remain Jews by reading, too. [Our] scriptures and their textual progeny are a legacy of collective human greatness. The texts are palatial. Genesis, Isaiah, and Proverbs are our pyramids, our Great Wall, our Gothic cathedrals. Our inheritance is compiled of a few modest geographical markers and a great bookshelf.”

The authors conclude with this provocative thesis: The Jews, they say, are “a text-line, not a bloodline.”

We have indeed been called “The People of the Book”. It was Muhammad who first coined the term, but we have taken it as our own. Historically it refers to “The Book”; the “Book of Books”; the Good Book; The Holy Scriptures; The Torah; The TANAKH; The Hebrew Bible; The Jewish Bible.

*“It is a tree of life to them that hold fast to it,”* says the siddur, our traditional prayer book, quoting Proverbs.

*“It is the portable homeland of the Jews”* said Heine.

*“It is a Jew’s sense of self, the beginning of it, and the foundation stone of it”* opined Chaim Potok.

*“It is, effectively, our genetic code,”* writes David Lerman, immediate past president of the Jewish Publication Society. *“[Torah] explains who Jews are, why we behave as we do, and why we are perceived by others as we are. Whether we embrace Torah and live it, reframe it and live informed by its values, we always react to it- and that is a defining element of our experience on this planet.”*

But long ago the people of the Book could no longer understand the Book because they did not know Hebrew well enough. Already in the Bible itself there is a hint of the problem. When Ezra the scribe returns to the land of Israel under the edict from Cyrus, he convokes the people in a public reading of the Torah. The Book

of Nehemiah tellingly relates that “They read from the scroll of the Teaching of God, translating it and giving the sense; so they understood the reading.” (Neh. 8:8)

And remember, the marvelous mandate of the Jewish people is that they must understand the Torah in order to live the Torah. Sacred scripture is not the privilege of the few, but the birthright of the masses. In the stirring words of Deuteronomy, *“Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to heaven and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it.?” Neither is beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it. No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.”* (Deut.30:11-14)

From that first oral translation of the Torah into Aramaic in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, to the famed written translation of the Torah into Greek by the Jews of Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE- known as the Septuagint – to the pioneering literary translation of the Torah into German by Moses Mendelssohn in the 18<sup>th</sup> century... the history of Jewish Bible translation is long and rich. This paper will offer a few remarks on the past, and future, of American Jewish Bible translation and commentary. What have we accomplished and where are we going?

For the first 200 years of their history, the small Jewish community in America seems to have gotten by without a Bible translation of its own. That is a long time to go without a translation. But keep in mind that the community was tiny, and comprised of immigrants, Sephardic and Ashkenazic, whose mother tongue was not English. It is entirely possible that the children of these immigrants, if not the parents, read the ubiquitous King James Bible. Their parents may have brought with them German and Yiddish translations. The first Jewish versions of the Bible appear in English in England in the 1780s; they are limited to the first five books of the Torah and amount to the KJV with notes from Rashi and other traditional sources. These first works were in part a response to Protestant missionary activity in England. By the mid-1800s such proselytizing was well under way in America as well.

The remarkable Philadelphia communal leader Isaac Leeser decided to take action. In 1845 he did two things: founding a Jewish publication society, and publishing his own translation of the Torah. In 1853 he completed his translation of the entire TANAKH. It became known as the “Leeser Bible” and, for better or for worse, became the standard English Bible of 19<sup>th</sup> century American Jewish Community. I say “for better or for worse” because in the words of historian Leonard Greenspoon, “Leeser’s English was rather wooden and at many points devoid of literary distinction. It is perhaps the existence of Leeser’s work rather than its merits that marks it as a noteworthy achievement.”

In 1888 a successor to Leeser’s original society was officially incorporated, also known as The Jewish Publication Society (JPS). In the late 1890’s JPS convened a committee of six men, two each from the three major Jewish Institutions of higher learning: Hebrew Union College (Reform), Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative) and Dropsie College (non-denominational), to begin a new translation of the Bible. Biblical scholar Max Margolies, who had taught at both HUC and Dropsie was appointed editor-in-chief. The work was finally finished in 1917. The Holy Scriptures (OJPS) became the translation of record for the American Jewish community and beyond for the next half century. Considerably influenced by the British Revised Version of 1885, which in turn owes a great debt to the King James Version, the JPS Holy Scriptures was a refined and handsomely produced work that, as Greenspoon puts it could make one “a better Jew and a good citizen through one and the same process.”

In early May of 1953 noted biblical scholar Harry Orlinsky delivered an address at the annual meeting of JPS entitled “Wanted: A New Translation of the Bible for the

Jewish People.” Orlinsky theorized that the shelf life of translations for English-speaking Jews averaged half a century. That was more or less the case from Leeser to OJPS, and he hoped to what would become known as NJPS. At 45, Orlinsky already had the distinction of having been the only Jewish editor of the acclaimed NRSV, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible circulating throughout the Protestant world. He wanted to go even further with his project. Orlinsky was aware of all the advances in biblical scholarship-in linguistics , archeology, paleography, and comparative religion. But there was more. As much as he admired Margolis and the 1917 translation, he wanted a Bible that spoke in contemporary, not antiquated English. He wanted a Bible that was inspiring yet intelligible. He wanted to capture the spirit of the original in the idiom of the times.

This is a philosophy of translation that we call “functional” rather than “formal”, or “free” rather than “literal”. As Greenspoon explains: “A functional translation tends to be free because the basic questions asked- What meaning were the original authors trying to convey to their audience? How do we say that today? – lead toward renderings that are natural-sounding to the new audience. With a formal translation the reader must move toward the text. With a functional translation the text moves toward the reader.” Orlinsky audaciously argued that in many cases the more free spirited, idiomatic translation was actually more accurate an embodiment of the original than a literal rendition.

The new JPS translation of the Torah was completed in 1962 and in 2012 we held a celebration of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary at HUC-JIR in NY. HUC is my alma mater; Harry Orlinsky, of blessed memory, was my Bible teacher. JPS completed its new translation of the Prophets and Writings in 1982. NJPS once again became the standard bearer in the English speaking world, and was incorporated into The Torah: A Modern Commentary of the Reform movement; Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary of the Conservative movement, the acclaimed JPS Torah and Bible Commentaries, and the widely used Jewish Study Bible of Oxford University Press.

Recent decades have seen a number of other translations . The Art Scroll Tanach, which bases itself on traditional Jewish sources only, is aimed primarily at the Orthodox market, but its design and advertising campaign have rendered it popular well beyond that cohort. Similar but less well known is The Living Torah by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. Two prominent Bible scholars, Everett Fox and Robert Alter have published their own translations of select parts of the Bible with an aim to expressing the true nature of the original Hebrew. Nothing on the scale of JPS has been attempted.

Before concluding with some thoughts of the future, a word is in order about Bible commentary as a corollary to Bible translation. Homiletical commentaries to the *parasha*, the weekly Torah portion, abound, as they have down through the centuries. In fact, the *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, the great collection of medieval commentators is 4/5 of the way completed in a new JPS translation, and already exists in several editions by Orthodox Jewish publishers. The aforementioned Reform and Conservative commentaries can be found in the pews of each of their respective denomination's synagogues. Brilliant new collections in the modern Orthodox world continue to emerge, such as Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and discourses of the Rav, Joseph Soloveitchik.

The same cannot be said of Jewish academic Bible commentary; that which takes into account the classic work of the sages but likewise the best of modern scholarship. Publishing such works is a daunting task. Such commentary takes years of work by qualified Jewish bible scholars, of which there are fewer than you might think. The books are complicated and expensive in their dual language, heavily annotated layout and design. I am not aware of another publisher other than JPS undertaking this endeavor, except the *Mikra L'yisrael* series in Hebrew in Israel. JPS, having completed the Torah, and soon the Five Megillot, is forging ahead with the Early Prophets and Psalms. But to complete the Bible, were we to do so, would take another 50 years.

Which brings us to the question: is it time for another major new translation of the Bible? Many scholars would say yes. The dean of American Jewish historians, Jonathan Sarna, wrote a piece in the *Forward* last year advocating just such an undertaking. He points to the need to take into account the latest scholarship, gender sensitive language, and new philosophies of translations like that of Fox and Alter. Sarna recalls that a 1956 JPS solicitation letter began, "The Catholics have done it; the Protestants have done it, and the now the Jews are going to do it!" He concludes, "The argument that JPS made when it first solicited funds...might well be revisited. With Catholics and Protestants looking to update their Bible translations, should not Jews be doing so, as well?"

Time does not allow me an adequate response to Professor Sarna other than to agree on the one hand, and sigh on the other hand....If anyone has a million dollars and a group of scholars willing to commit to a decade or two...please see me after class!

Finally, the question: what challenges does the digital age pose to the future of American Jewish Bible translation and commentary? As I see it here, the revolution is not so much in content as in form. How will we present the Bible and its commentary in the way that people want to access it?

Rumors of the demise of the printed book are premature. But that is beside the point. The next generation wants its Bible on its desktop, tablet, phablet, I-Phone and whatever other mobile devices are in the offing. Providing a static eBook of the TANAKH is easy. But that too is beside the point. From Shakespeare to Scripture, the future is in searchable text; the dynamic eBook. People want connections; the hyper-text connectivity of English to Hebrew; text to commentary; commentary to social media. They want the vertical conversation of the centuries to extend to the horizontal conversation of the community.

If I want to get my children, or yours, excited about Torah study, this is what we will need to do: On their home screen, the E-TANAKH will flicker to life on a rainbow colored, Talmud style layout. In the center: the daily portion. Around the center, a potpourri of *parshanut*: ancient to modern; traditional to progressive. Enter the medieval portal: Rashi is a click away, not to mention Ibn Ezra, Rambam, Ramban, and S'forono. Enter the modern portal: Plaut is a click away, not to mention Kushner, Leibovitz, Sacks and Soloveitchik. Enter the academic portal: JPS is there, not to mention a Concordance, a timeline, and an art and archeology section.

David logs on from home, during a SKYPE study session. Daniel logs on from his commuter train. Devorah logs on from Masada on her Birthright trip. Dalia logs on from her day school Bible class. And Dafna logs on from her library, where she is pursuing her *“And I declare to [Eli the high priest] that I sentence his house to endless punishment for the iniquity he knew about-how his sons committed sacrilege at will- and he did not rebuke them.”* (I Sam.3:13)

PhD.

Shall we call them “People of the eBook”? Of course.

