

Kiddushin 49a

ר' יהודה אומר: המתרגם פסוק כצורתו - הרי זה בדאי, והמוסיף עליו - הרי זה מהרף ומגדף
Rabbi Yehudah said: One who translates a verse in its form – he is a fabulator; but the one who adds to it – he is a denier and blasphemer.

Translating the above statement seems inherently ironic, and the irony is increased when, as here, it is cited as the introduction to a new translation. Nonetheless, I find translating a highly useful way into texts, and try to translate in advance every text that I teach. I have attached my revised translation of Ruth, and will spend a few paragraphs examining the above statement, move to a brief discussion of translation as such, and finally raise one issue from Ruth as illustration.

Rashi reads Rabbi Yehudah in a way that removes the irony – he reads this statement as opposing translations that deviate from the official translation of Onkelos. Thus “in its form” means “in its form when Onkelos adds to it”. Onkelos’ own additions are based on a Tradition from Sinai, and thus not seen as deforming the text.

Rashi’s comments are also reflexive, in that he is clearly “adding to” Rabbi Yehudah, and his interpretation is compelling only if we assume that he had a tradition as to its meaning.

Apparently lacking such a tradition, Rabbeinu Chananel reads this statement “in its form”. He cites as an example of the rejected “in its form” one who translates Exodus 24:10 as “they saw the Divinity of Israel”; this is literal but false, as it contradicts Exodus 33:20, “For no man can see me and live”. Contrarily, translating it as “they saw the angel of the Divinity of Israel” is blasphemy, as it conflates Him with His angels. But Rabbeinu Chananel is constrained to say that translation is possible, and thus Onkelos’ “they saw the Honor (*yikara*) of the G-d of Israel” is not seen as an unjustified addition.

Both Rashi and Rabbeinu Chananel, *laaniyut daati*, miss the humor in Rabbi Yehudah’s statement. They read him as opposing two extremes, and advocating a middle path; I would rather read him as saying that translations must inevitably fail because there is no middle ground. To develop this I am pleased to make use of a metaphor drawn from my father’s work in communications engineering.

When we seek to communicate, or to transmit information from one place to another, the medium of transmission always distorts; the signal is corrupted by static, or “noise”. The engineer’s task is to design a receiver that can distinguish the signal from the noise, so that the volume of the static can be lowered without affecting the song.

Language is a medium of transmission, and language too generates “noise”. Each phoneme we speak, each syllable we write, raises resonances in our auditor’s and reader’s minds. Most of these are noise – for example, in the previous sentence the word “minds” does not in any way refer to whether someone is bothered. Syntax is the tool our minds use to filter the noise and decipher meaning correctly.

But some of the resonances are deliberate and enhance meaning. Thus puns, for example, require us to think of homonyms. In *Megillat Rut*, we must recognize that Naomi is both a proper name and a description (pleasant), so that when Naomi says “rather call me Marah (bitterness)”, we can understand that she is being darkly humorous rather than whiney. It is the impossibility of replicating these resonances that makes all translations lies.

But translations can nonetheless be useful if they make us aware of resonances we would otherwise have missed. So there is value, at least for audiences who don't think in Hebrew, in translating Naomi as "Pleasant" rather than transliterating it

Now midrash on the whole assumes that the Divine author produced a text in which all resonances are signal rather than noise, and the reader's task is to find out how everything suggested to our minds by the text is truly meaningful. I'm not sure how strongly this assumption applies to Nakh. But certainly once we know that one name in the book is a pun, we should ask whether others, perhaps all others, are puns as well.

Some clearly are – Orpah as "Back of the Neck", for instance. But perhaps the most interesting example, for which I credit Deborah Klapper, is when Naomi says "rather call me Bitterness". Naomi apparently adds "For Sha-dai has caused me much bitterness", but perhaps we should also read "for my breasts have caused me much bitterness", which may mean that the following statement "I went full, but Hashem returned me empty" should be understood literally as well as metaphorically. This in turn raises the possibility that Machlon and Kilyon were still nursing when Naomi left Israel, which would mean that their betrothal to Rut and Orpah must have occurred while they were children. This in turn suggests that Rut was a child as well, which would enable us to solve the conversion problem (she must have converted before her first marriage, else Boaz would not be related to her and the issue of geulah should not arise, but if she had converted earlier, how can Naomi seek to send her away?) by suggesting that she was converted and married at age 2, and then given the halakhically mandated option of refusal ten years later. (This also explains why Boaz is grateful to her for not marrying the young men; if she were older and not a virgin, why would they have been interested in her?). And this in turn affects our translation of "naarah" in the text.

One general issue in translating Hebrew is how to render the connective "vav". Here Deborah and I argued about the end of Chapter 2 – where does Ruth live during the gleaning season, in the fields or with Naomi? It depends on whether we translate the verse "She stuck to the lasses of Arriving Strength, gleaning until the end of the barley harvest and the wheat harvest, but she lived with her mother in-law", or rather, as Deborah preferred "and then she lived with her mother in law". I leave it to you to decide whether and how these options affect the relational dynamics of the narrative generally.

I hope the attached translation stimulates many such conversations, and welcome your reports and comments.

Zman Mattan Torateinu Sameiach!

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