
Sichos in English Classics 47

**Translation of Torah:
Obligation and
Challenge**



An Essay for Rosh Chodesh Shvat



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IN PLACE OF AN INTRODUCTION

At the Shloshim of R' Yonah Avtzon A"H, Director of Sichos in English, a resolution was taken to reprint the original weekly Sichos in English publications.

To fulfill this, a weekly booklet including a translation of a *farbrengen* as it was first published will be distributed. Our intention is to reprint the entire set in the near future.

Following the Sichos we will include an addendum with pictures, notes, and insights into the process of its publication.

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TRANSLATION OF TORAH: OBLIGATION AND CHALLENGE

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An Essay for Rosh Chodesh Shvat

The writings of our sacred literature have been mainly in the holy tongue. But today, there are many Jews who, because of their unfamiliarity with the language, are unable to acquaint themselves with the wisdom of the Torah. To this end the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph I. Schneersohn, initiated and oversaw the translation of countless Torah texts into other languages. Now all Jews could partake of their rightful legacy.

On various occasions (during the early 1980s) the Lubavitcher Rebbe Shlita has elaborated on this subject, demonstrating how, despite the great difficulties involved, this work was of immense value in bringing Jews worldwide closer to their heritage.

A UNIQUE LANGUAGE

Among all the nations of the earth, the Jewish people are unique, singled out for duties and responsibilities far beyond those of the others, a nation totally dedicated to G-d and His Torah. As befits such a status, they have a unique language whose very name expresses its nature — the holy tongue. It is the language in which G-d revealed Himself to our forefathers Avraham, Yitzchok and Ya'akov, the language in which G-d spoke to the prophets, and the language in which G-d delivered the Ten Commandments and the rest of the Torah to His people.

And yet, Moshe Rabbeinu, the Law-giver himself, translated the Torah into *other* languages. On the verse (Devorim 1:5) "Beyond the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moshe began to expound this Torah," Rashi, the commentator par excellence, comments that "He explained it to them in seventy languages." [These are the main languages in the world, the others being variants, hybrids, or dialects of these seventy.] The value of this action might appear questionable at any time, but in the time of Moshe when all the Jews were

together and *all* spoke the holy tongue, the translation was surely not for their benefit.

Moshe's translation served a different purpose. His intent was not merely to express the laws of the Torah in different languages, for language in itself is nothing, being but a vehicle for thought, a means of communication. There are of course differences between tongues. The more precise the language, the clearer thoughts may be expressed. Language may be emotive or coldly factual, make people laugh or move them to tears. Some are primitive, others are more advanced. But these are all external variations, dependent upon man's ingenuity and sophistication. Language *itself* — letters, words, phrases, has no intrinsic value, but is merely the tool with which man builds and expresses his thoughts.

All languages that is, save one. The holy tongue is not just another language, albeit peculiar to the Chosen People. It is the vehicle for the word of G-d precisely because it comes directly from G-d. If letters are the bricks with which man builds, then those of the holy tongue are stones. Bricks are man-made; stones are created by G-d. Indeed, before men sinned at the tower of Babel and were dispersed to the four corners of the earth, speaking a variety of tongues, the holy tongue was the only language in existence. Its singular existence at that time reflected the Oneness of G-d in this world.

FACADE REMOVAL

But the world as we see it consists of many disparate elements, each seemingly an independent entity. G-d's presence in this world is not obviously manifest. The multifariousness of the universe bespeaks against absolute Unity, and the spatial-temporal nature of our surroundings conceals the existence of the spiritual. The truth however is much different. The world and all therein are creations of G-d, and His glory fills the whole earth. As a member of the Chosen People, the Jew's mission in life is to reveal that unity, to tear away the veils that obscure G-d's immanence in the world. The world is not a separate entity, independent of G-d. Its multifariousness is a facade, and its independence a delusion. And it is the Jew who carries the responsibility of removing the appearance and revealing the reality.

It is not an easy task. The corporeality of the material strongly influences the human mind and body; and the soul, which alone

perceives the truth, is stifled by the grossness of its surroundings. The Jew needs help, a manual by which he can maneuver through the layers of distortion. This is the Torah, the “blueprint” of the world, the word of G-d. Jews, the inheritors of the Torah, guide their lives and their relationship to their environment by the instructions and dictates of the Torah. It is only through the Torah that man can discard the appearance and reach out to the Divine.

The existence of many disparate languages is a reflection of the disparity of the world, the illusory independence from the Al-mighty. The holy tongue, the language of the Torah, is the symbol of His unity, and all languages are contained within it. The translation of the Torah — which is the tool wherewith the unity of G-d is established — from the holy tongue into other languages, establishes that unity among the other seventy languages of the world. The disparity of the other languages, which mirrors the seeming independence of the world, was, through the translation of the Torah, shown to be illusory. G-d is indeed One.

Of course, the language in which Jews learned the Torah was the holy tongue. While the translation by Moshe into other languages served to restore the unity of G-d in the world, the language in which Torah continued to be learned was that in which it was given.

SPECIAL TIMES, SPECIAL LEADERS

But times changed, and Jews became less conversant with the holy tongue. No longer could they all study the sacred writings in the language in which it was given and written. In the last few generations especially, multitudes of Jews have grown up utterly estranged from the traditions of their forebears. The reasons for this phenomenon are immaterial. The result is that even those Jews who wanted to acquaint themselves with the Torah, who *wanted* to study the sacred scriptures, were unable to do so. Their heritage was closed to them, for they could not understand its language; the key with which to unlock its wisdom was out of their reach. The translation of the Torah — and by that we mean not only the Written Law, the five books of Moshe, but the entire Torah in all its ramifications; the legal and the esoteric — into other languages, no longer served only to effect a mystical concept of reasserting G-d's unity. It became an urgent necessity, thereby allowing Jews to study Torah in the language they could comprehend.

In every generation there are many great Jews - Torah scholars, Halachic experts, mystics, etc. But there is only one leader. In every generation there is one who so towers over his contemporaries — great as they may be in their individual right — that he is *the* head of his generation. He is not limited to any one sphere of activity; nor is he concerned with the welfare of only his disciples. He is the leader of *all* Jewry, and his love and concern encompasses them all. He is the Moshe Rabbeinu of his generation.

In the past generation that person was the previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Joseph I. Schneersohn. Seeing the heartbreaking ignorance and estrangement of so many of his fellow Jews, he was determined to correct the situation. And his efforts have borne an abundance of fruit. The availability today of Torah literature in other languages is the direct crop of the seeds planted then. His then startling innovation is today's commonplace. The previous Rebbe initiated and oversaw the translation of countless Torah texts into Russian, French, English, German and many other languages, not only elementary texts, but the most profound ideas in both the legal and mystical areas of Torah. Now for the first time, Jews who knew no other language save that determined by geography, could study and observe the sacred traditions of their people, be full fledged adherents to their heritage as members of the People of the Book.

LAYERS IN TRANSLATION

But there is a cardinal difference between the translations of Moshe Rabbeinu and those of the previous Rebbe. As explained above, Moshe's translation into the seventy languages was the concrete implementation of G-d's unity, valuable only insofar as it related to the degree to which these other languages were incorporated into the holy tongue and its symbol of unity. It expressed the mystical bond of Jew and Torah, G-d and His world.

The previous Rebbe's work was of a different nature. It served to bring the wisdom of the Torah specifically to the *outside*, to those whose knowledge of it was nonexistent, to those Jews who could not study it in its original tongue. While the first served a totally spiritual purpose, the second was for the practical benefit of Jews in the world. The contrast is distinct.

It goes further. While Moshe's translation dealt with "niglah", the exoteric, legal aspect of the Torah, the previous Rebbe also translated the esoteric, the mystical aspect. He sought to also make

Chassidic texts comprehensible to those who did not speak its language.

This contribution followed the direct tradition of all the Chabad (Lubavitch) leaders, and indeed of the founder of Chassidus, the Baal Shem Tov. The aim of the Chassidic movement is to "spread the wellspring of Chassidus outward." The Baal Shem Tov originated the goal, and the school of Chabad carried it a step further, elaborating on the tenets of the Baal Shem Tov to form a cohesive systematic school of thought, making it comprehensible to *all* Jews. A unique dimension was introduced with the previous Rebbe's contribution. The "wellsprings," the deepest mystical secrets of the Torah, were made available not only to those steeped in the Jewish way of life, but were disseminated "outward" — to the outermost fringes of Jewry.

And here we see yet another contribution of Chabad, and specifically the previous Rebbe. The esoteric contains the most profound and sublime concepts. It is a discipline all its own, with its own terminology and thought patterns. It is not easy to grasp all its ideas, and harder still to define them clearly and unambiguously. And yet, it was exactly this which the previous Rebbe succeeded in doing. In terms found within the framework of people's own experiences and understanding, he explained, clarified and expanded on the ideas of Chassidus to all. And, an even more astounding accomplishment, he was able to have these concepts translated into other languages with their clarity and precision intact.

With the translation of Torah into other languages, the previous Rebbe simultaneously guided his wandering people back onto the path of Torah. In the times of the founder of Chabad, R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (the Alter Rebbe, author of the Tanya and Shulchan Aruch HaRav), Jews possessed a strong consciousness of their Jewish identity, and their lives revolved around the Torah. Not so in the times of the previous Rebbe. The grip of exile had tightened, and Jews were assimilating the life-styles and characteristics of the peoples among whom they lived. No longer were they immediately recognizable as a people apart, living a unique life dedicated to G-d. They were floundering in a sea of ignorance — ignorance of their mission, of the ideals of their forebears, of their very meaning as Jews. Not only did they need translations of Torah texts — the vital first step — but guidance in the very core of their essence. The

previous Rebbe patiently led them onto the right path, instructing his flock in the meaning of their very *raison d'être*.

AN UNCERTAIN JOURNEY

But there are problems associated with the translation and dissemination of Chassidus. Chassidus is the study of the esoteric, the Torah's deepest secrets. A translation will lose its purity, leave it open to misinterpretation. The sublimity of its teachings may not be appreciated by those whose very lives are not immersed in it, and it is too precious to thus almost be defiled by letting it descend to the outer fringes. Can Chassidus be properly appreciated in such a form?

Without doubt, the translation and wide dissemination of Chassidus posed formidable problems. Left alone there would have been no threat to its pure character, not open to misinterpretation or abuse. But then it would have been the preserve of only an elite, those individuals who through strenuous effort and saintliness of character could rise to the heights demanded. Chassidus would not have been able to shed its light of knowledge and instructions to *all* Jews. And Jewry, and the world at large, would have been the poorer.

But this is theoretical, a discussion of pros and cons, equally valid arguments. Experience is the decisive factor. Since the beginning of the previous Rebbe's work, tens of *thousands* of Jews have become acquainted with the Chassidic way of life — and have clearly been the better for it. So many have become enriched from even an accidental contact with a Chassidic thought, so many lives have become radically more Jewish. The time for theoretical debate has ended. The facts are too overwhelming for any to doubt the wisdom of the previous Rebbe in disseminating *all* aspects of Torah in *all* languages to *all* types of Jews.

We can go even further. The ultimate criterion for any action is the Torah, and the innovation of the previous Rebbe is strikingly paralleled by an incident related in the Talmud (Megillah 9a. Sofrim 1:8). King Ptolemy ordered seventy-two sages of Israel to separately translate the Torah into Greek; and through Divine inspiration each of them made the exact same translation. The Talmud comments that “the day of the translation was as grievous for Israel as the day on which the golden calf was made, since the Torah could not be accurately translated.”

While this Talmudic passage seems to condemn the translation of the Torah, a deeper analysis shows otherwise. The Talmud's terminology is precise. Note that it does not state "as grievous as the day of the *worshipping* of the golden calf" but rather "as grievous as the day of the *making* of the golden calf." There is a world of difference between the two. The worshipping of the golden calf was a clear-cut case of idolatry, a sin of the severest magnitude. That day was indeed a sorry one for all Jewry. But the day on which the golden calf was made was not the same day on which it was worshipped. It was worshipped on the 17th of Tammuz, but made on the previous day.

A little background is necessary here. The making of the golden calf by the Jewish people was prompted by their belief that Moshe, who had gone up to Mt. Sinai to receive the two tablets, would not return. They longed for someone like Moshe to be with them, an intermediary to help maintain their connection with G-d. G-d had not brought them out of Egypt *Himself*, but through *Moshe*. Now that Moshe was gone, they feared that unless there was a substitute they would be left leaderless and unable to receive the word of G-d. This was to be the golden calf.

Now we must examine what happened on the day they built the golden calf. Aharon, Moshe's brother, striving to his utmost to prevent the people from committing the sin of idolatry, sought to delay them by pushing it off until the next day, hoping that in the interim Moshe would return. Aharon declared to the people that "Tomorrow will be *a festival unto the L-rd.*" Particularly noteworthy is Rashi's comment that "In his heart he intended it should be for Heaven (G-d); he was certain that Moshe would arrive and they would serve the Omnipresent."

HIGH POTENTIAL, SAD OUTCOME

Thus the "day on which the golden calf was *made*" was not in itself evil. It was not then clear that the golden calf would be worshipped as an idol. Had Moshe returned, or the people repented, the next day would indeed have been a "festival unto the L-rd." [How exactly the golden calf could have been used in the service of G-d to make it a "festival unto the L-rd" is not relevant here. It relates to the supernal spheres and the "chariot" of G-d described in Yechezkel's vision, an ox being one of its four attendant beings.

Suffice it to say that it *could* have been used in service to G-d, and that this was indeed Aharon's hope.]

So we see that the day the golden calf was *made* contained two possibilities; either for evil, idolatry; or for good, a "festival unto the L-rd." It was a challenge, a call to the best in man to master evil. Unfortunately, Aharon could not motivate the Jewish people to master that challenge, and the grievous sin of idolatry was the result.

The comparison of the day of the translation of the Torah into Greek to "the day that the golden calf was *made*" is now clear. It too represented a challenge. Any translation is a difficult task; and to translate the Torah, the Divine Will, into another language is especially fraught with peril. Torah has its own complex terminology, and a unique set of rules and guidelines with which to interpret it. A straight translation can easily lead to distortion, misunderstanding, and even denial of G-d's unity. Without emendations in the translation of possibly misleading words and phrases, grievous damage could result. This was the challenge to the seventy-two sages. With Divine inspiration, the sages *all* translated the Torah with the exact same emendations; the challenge had been successfully met. The result? Instead of a possibly distorted translation, non-Jews could now benefit from the wisdom of Torah in all its beauty and glory.

CHASSIDUS FOR EVERYONE

The translation of Chassidic texts also provided a severe challenge. Its lofty concepts and profound ideas demanded the most meticulous care in translating. And it too was successful, with Jews worldwide drinking deeply from the wellsprings of Chassidus. In the thousands they benefited, each to his own understanding, knowledge — and language. The previous Rebbe reached out and touched every Jew on his own individual level, and gently, lovingly, raised him to the heights.

No longer would Jews remain ignorant of their legacy through lack of language. No longer would Jews remain ignorant through lack of understanding. Someone cared; someone responded. The challenge had been met and mastered. Truly a "festival unto the L-rd."



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