

KI SAVO (DEUTERONOMY 26:1-29:8)

It's Aramaic to Me!

2008 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

The Torah is divided into 54 weekly Portions. Over the course of the year, from Simchas Torah to Simchas Torah, if we are in the synagogue every Saturday, we hear the entire Torah read. (Actually, only 53 are read on Saturdays, since the last one is read on Simchas Torah, which never comes out on a Saturday [except in Israel]. Since in a non-leap year, the Jewish calendar has 50 or 51 Saturdays, and on Saturdays that come out on holidays, we have a special holiday reading, several of the 53 weekly Torah Portions get doubled up in order to squeeze it all into 40-something Saturdays.)

Hearing the entire Torah in Shul is not sufficient:

“Although one hears the entire Torah every Shabbos with the congregation, he is required to personally read every week from that week’s Portion, twice from the text, and once from Targum. (‘Translation’)” – Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim, 285:1)

The “Targum” mentioned here refers to the Aramaic translation of the Torah that appears to most printed volumes of the the Torah. This translation, which, according to tradition, was given on Mount Sinai along with the rest of the oral explanations of the Torah, is attributed to the Unkelos, the Roman convert, who put the Targum into writing. (See the story of Unkelos, the Roman convert in "Sheepskin or Cheapskin?".)

Every week, people read each verse of the upcoming Torah reading twice, followed by the Aramaic translation. (Some have the custom of reading Rashi’s commentary instead of the Targum. The Shulchan Aruch suggests doing both.)

How about English? Would it be acceptable for us Americans, whose Aramaic skills may be a little rusty, to read it twice in Hebrew, and once in English? Apparently not. You’re supposed to do it in the original Aramaic.

Rabbi Moshe Sofer suggests that the source for this practice is this week’s Torah Portion.

Shortly before his death, Moses told the nation to prepare to enter the Land of Israel. He wanted to make sure that the Nation of Israel appreciated the sanctity of the Land they were about to enter. He didn’t want them to repeat the mistakes of the Canaanites who were expelled from the Land due to their

immoral behavior. (See Leviticus, 18:24-29)

“On the day that you cross the Jordan into the Land that G-d is giving you, set up great stones, and coat them with plaster. Inscribe on the stones all the words of this Torah, when you cross over, so that you may enter the Land that G-d gives you, a Land that flows with milk and honey...” (Deuteronomy, 27:2-3)

These twelve gigantic stones were inscribed miraculously with the text of the entire Torah, translated into the primary languages of the world. (See “Gateway to the Holy Land”.) Rabbi Sofer explains that the entire text of the Torah was written twice in the original Hebrew, and once into the languages of the seventy primary nations of the world.

Why was it written twice in Hebrew and once in translation? The reason, writes Rabbi Sofer, is to teach us that you cannot compare the translation to the original. The text of the Torah is filled with multiple levels of nuanced messages and interpretations that our Sages have expounded upon over the ages. The simple meaning, the translation, was given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Of those seventy simple translations, Targum Unkelus, the Aramaic translation, is all that remains. The others are lost. Rabbi Sofer writes, “Anyone who writes simple explanations of the Torah based upon his own intellect **is lying**. Rather, it must be that which Moses our Teacher, of blessed memory, said, and was inscribed upon the stones. Apparently, it is based upon this that our Sages said that one is obligated to complete, together with the congregation, twice from the text, and once from the Targum.”

Torah philosophy is not a free-for-all. Many sects and break-away religions have been founded based upon how their founders chose to translate the text. For example, all it took was a fraudulent translation, and out-of-context interpretation of the Hebrew word for “*young woman*” (Isaiah, 7:14), to create the myth of the Messiah being born to a virgin.

Charlatans and uneducated or under-educated people have come up with some of the craziest interpretations of Jewish philosophy. I find it sadly pathetic when misguided Jews speak of “Jewish values” like a woman’s “right” to choose. (See “Jewish Women Killing Womb Babies?”)

It is fun to be creative. Political candidates on both sides of the aisle present quotations of their adversaries, offering the most unflattering interpretations, often having little or no relevance to the truth. An artist can paint a picture and embellish it with whatever flourishes he thinks will make the picture prettier.

But Torah philosophy is based upon “Original Intent.”

It is interesting to note that although it is somewhat acceptable to pray in one’s own language, it is preferable to pray in Hebrew and learn the meanings of the words. Some texts, such as the “Shema”, which is recited twice a day, and the Book of Esther, which is read on Purim, must be read in Hebrew

because we don't know the exact translations of some of the words.

The reason that some people read Rashi's commentary instead of (or in addition to) the Aramaic translation is that Rashi gives the explanation of the text, based upon the traditions as passed down in the Talmud. If you don't understand Aramaic, it's as good, or better.

Anyone can read the "Old Testament." (Millions of people throughout the world do.) It is only through the interpretations of the Talmud and traditional commentaries that it becomes TORAH.

Have a great Shabbos.

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