

The Task of the Talmud:
On Talmud as Translation
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*I always knew that I came from
another language*

W. S. Merwin

Discussions of translation stand at the nexus of two theoretical discourses. On the one hand, translation theory as a theory of literature or interpretation, or more simply as a description of the mechanics and possibility of rendering a text from one language to another, dates from at least Late Antiquity. St. Jerome, for example, extensively discussed translation as he was preparing to, and while he was engaged in the translation of the Bible. On the other hand, translation theory partakes of post-colonial theory. Translation itself is seen as a form of displacement in language, a very intimate occasion of exile, loss and alienation.²

In this essay I propose to read the first discourse through the filter of the second. That is, I propose to understand the specific moments of translation and struggles with translation—as found in the Babylonian Talmud—as concrete instances of exile and displacement. This proposal intends an answer to two interrelated questions, one ‘literary’ and one ‘cultural.’ The questions are actually

¹ I would like to thank the editors of this volume for asking me to be part of the International SBL meeting which led to the book. I would especially like to thank Willem Smelik, whose work interestingly intersects with and has now informed mine, and whose comments on the present paper at the conference were extremely helpful. I also want to thank all those who participated in the meetings in Rome for their comments and comradery. Additionally, I want to thank Marc Bregman, David Ellenson, Maera Schreiber, and David Myers for their comments on and discussion of this paper at various stages of its development.

² Cf. recently Jacques Derrida, ‘What is a “Relevant” Translation?’ *Critical Inquiry*. Winter 2001. Volume 27, Number 2.

the same question: What is the relationship between the Mishnah—a text composed in the third century AD in Palestine—and the Babylonian Talmud—a text composed in the sixth-seventh century in Sassanian Persia? Or to simplify the question even more, while complicating it: What is Talmud?

While much of the rhetoric of the Talmud³ presents itself as a commentary to the Mishnah—organizing its own discussions on the order of the successive pericopae of the Mishnah; and even quoting individual lines before commenting upon them—this rhetorical description does not do justice to the extent of what it is the Talmud does. Commentary suggests a subordination to a commented upon text and a given respect for the parameters of a discussion which are dictated by that text. It is obvious to even the casual reader of the Talmud that neither of these characteristics consistently informs the textual interaction between the Talmud and the Mishnah.

Therefore, I will suggest translation, in the complexity of linguistic, geographic, and existential movement which it encompasses, as more suited to encompass the complexity of the relationship between the Mishnah and the Talmud—and as a way of understanding the community which produced this text.

Translation is especially resonant in that it moves exile to the fore. Exile is a

³ Although there are, of course, two Talmuds—the Babylonian and the Palestinian—I will be referring to the Babylonian Talmud unless explicitly noted otherwise. The Palestinian Talmud was composed in the fifth century in Palestine, and its different negotiations of exile and alienation, and its textual strategies are beyond the scope of this essay. For now, see Willem F. Smelik, ‘The Rabbinic Reception of Early Bible Translations of Holy Writings and Oral Torah,’ *JAB* 1 (1999) 249-272.

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central moment in Rabbinic thinking and textuality. I would venture to say that the anxiety of Exile—a phrase I will explain shortly—is the crux of Rabbinic engagement with the Law.

The path I follow in this essay is as follows. First, I problematize our understanding of translation, both contemporary and historical. To this end I explore a classic moment of translation theory, the story of the Septuagint as told in the Greek sources. I then compare that with the ‘same’ story as told in the Hebrew sources in order to then locate the Hebrew/Aramaic community of the Talmud-as-translation in relation to what we might call the Greek speaking Septuagint community. I suggest that the oppositional locations of these two communities are dependent on their respective understandings of translation on both literary and cultural grounds. The Greek speaking Septuagint community celebrates the possibility that the translation is another ‘original,’ and, equally important, celebrates and valorizes their exilic existence. The Hebrew/Aramaic community of the Bavli denies the ultimate possibility of a translation as a stable text. The only possibility is in preserving the instability of the original, or keeping the midrashic possibilities of the original open. This is both a claim for, and the undermining of, the possibility of an authorized translation. It is within this dialectic that the Hebrew/Aramaic community of the Bavli (i.e. the Rabbis) also views exile. This is the exilic anxiety mentioned above. I demonstrate the way this plays out with a reading of a *sugya*—a unit of discourse—from tractate Rosh Hashannah in which translation is at the center of legal and religious concern. Ultimately, the

translations point to the Rabbis being in Exile in/from their mother tongue.⁴

I also locate both the Greek speaking Septuagint community and the Rabbis in terms of certain contemporary debates in translation theory. They are both in the camp of the mystics (as opposed to the mechanics) of translation—two terms I will explain below. In that sense they both have a somewhat soteriological view of translation. It is in the playing out of the soteriological implications that their paths differ. The community in Alexandria marches forward boldly while the Rabbis in Sura and Pumbeditha are shaken by self-doubt. But I have now gotten ahead of myself and I need to return and explain.

The Anxiety of Exile

This essay is part of a larger project whose goal is to think about the Babylonian Talmud as an Exilic text, perhaps even as the grounding text of Exile. In this project I look at Exile rather than Sinai or the Exodus, as the ‘narrative of Origins’ of the Rabbis, and the anxiety of Exile as a defining characteristic of Rabbinic/Talmudic thinking and legislating.⁵

The anxiety of exile here is shorthand for the existential/religious tension

⁴ Cf. Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity : On ‘Japan’ and Cultural Nationalism*, University of Minnesota Press 1997.

⁵ On ‘narratives of origins’ or ‘national narratives’ see Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible*. University of California Press, 2000, 1-15. Aryeh Cohen, ‘Beginning Gittin/Mapping Exile.’ in: Aryeh Cohen and Shaul Magid (eds), *Beginning/Again: Toward a Hermeneutics of Jewish Texts*. Seven Bridges Press, 2001.

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which, for the Rabbis, was signified by the apparently contradictory messages to be gleaned from two prophetic verses: Isa 50:1, in reassuring the people that there was no formal, and therefore irrevocable, break with God, says:

Thus said the Lord: Where is the bill of divorce of your mother whom I dismissed?...

Jer 3:8, threatening Israel, has God saying:

I noted: Because Rebel Israel had committed adultery, I cast her off and handed her a bill of divorce...

The Rabbinic project as a whole stands in the balance. If Exile is Divorce, then there is no purpose to continue the project of a Diasporic Jewish existence, since its authorized agents—i.e. the Rabbis—are not actually authorized. This though, as I said, is the larger project.⁶

Translation

The Oxford English Dictionary gives the primary definition of translation as:

⁶ See, for now, Aryeh Cohen, *Rereading Talmud: Gender, Law and the Poetics of Sugyot*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998. Chapter Six; 'Giddul's Wife and the Power of the Court: On Talmudic Law, Gender, Divorce and Exile.' *RLAWS: Review of Law, Women and Society*, 9.2 (2000) 197-226.

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‘Transference; removal or conveyance from one person, place or condition to another. Specifically the removal of a bishop from one see to another; in the Church of Scotland, the removal of a minister from one charge to another; also, the removal of the body or relics of a saint to another place of interment.’ The OED also gives as ‘figurative’ the translation of non-material things such as the ‘translation of a feast’ from the usual date to another; then the Removal from earth to heaven without death such as the translation of Enoch. The earliest citations are from the fourteenth century.

The second definition is the expected or common one: ‘The action or process of turning from one language into another; also, the product of this; a version in a different language.’ The earliest citations are also from the fourteenth century.

It is in the first place the locomotive sense of translation that suggests it as an appropriate sign under which to analyze the relation of Mishnah to Talmud. It is ‘the removal from one place or condition to another’ which results in the Talmud and which authorizes the Talmud’s claim to authorship of Mishnah.

Second, as the title of my talk suggests, this analysis proceeds under the influence of Walter Benjamin’s understanding that ‘the task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original.’⁷ I will be arguing that, to a large extent, this is an appropriate way to characterize the ‘translation’ that is

⁷ Benjamin, Walter. ‘The Task of the Translator,’ in: Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Schocken Books, 1968, 76.

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Talmud.⁸

Translation Theory

There are two basic positions amongst translation theorists: the mystics and the mechanics. The mechanics understand translation as a task. The task is rendering, or, in Benjamin's disparaging phrase, 'transmitting information.' It is the basic assumption of the mechanics that language conveys information in a relatively straightforward manner; that that information is not dependent on the specific words of the language in which it was expressed or—to put this in the manner more commonly employed when speaking of translation theory—one can separate between form and content or sense, without inflicting real harm on the translated work. Finally, the mechanics hold that anything that can be said in one language can equally easily be said in another. The relationship then, according to these theorists, between translation and original is one of total subordination. The best translation is merely the original 'said again.' The logical endpoint of this position is machine translation.

The mystics are divided into two categories. One category we might call the language mystics. The second category we will refer to as mystics of authorship or

⁸ On the other hand, the other premise upon which Benjamin bases his understanding of translation—that is the kinship of all languages, the central reciprocal relationship between languages, or the relatedness of languages which is based in 'the intention underlying each language as a whole' which Benjamin calls 'pure language'—is foreign to the Talmudic understanding of itself.

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mystics of person. The language mystics (Benjamin, Rosenzweig⁹, Borges¹⁰) believe or claim that at some level of originary substratum there is only One (Rosenzweig) Pure (Benjamin) Language. The act of translation is, then, transferring the manner in which one language works—the way in which it *intends* meaning—to another language. A good translation will, ultimately, have a lasting effect upon the language into which a work is translated. The pre-eminent language mystics—Rosenzweig and Benjamin—understood the translation of the Bible as a redemptive process (Rosenzweig speaks of it as ‘that Day’¹¹). Since, ultimately, there is only One Language, the translation of the Bible into different languages ‘biblicizes’ those languages bringing them closer together—closer to the One Pure Language.

The mystics of person (Dryden¹², Ozick¹³) claim that translation is at its best when, in effect, the translator *becomes* the author of the original. It is only at that moment that the translator can make choices out of a deep and abiding confidence

⁹ Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*. Trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox, Indiana University Press, 1994, 67.

¹⁰ Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby (eds), preface by Andrè Maurois. New York: New Directions Pub. Corp., 1964.

¹¹ Barbara Ellen Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig and Jehuda Halevi: Translating, Translations and Translators*, McGill-Queens University Press, 1995, 173.

¹² John Dryden, ‘Preface to Ovid’s Epistles,’ in W. P. Ker (ed.), *Essays of John Dryden* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900), quoted in Buber and Rosenzweig *Scripture and Translation* (xxx-xxxii).

¹³ Ozick, Cynthia. ‘Prayer Leader,’ in *Prooftexts* vol. 3, 1983, 1-8.

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of a creator and not a scribe or dependent. The translation then stands on its own as a work of art based on the premise that if the author had been writing in English, say, and not Yiddish, (or German, and not Hebrew) this is the way s/he would have said it. I will claim that this is, in part, the relationship of Talmud to Mishnah. The Talmud claims, at times, to be writing Mishnah. This claim will be the focus of my reading of the text from Bavli Rosh Hashannah in the last section of the essay.

The translation of the mystics of language, on the other hand, always points to the original. The translation is a bridge between the two languages. It does not acquire the status of an original work of art since, although it is a work of art, its aesthetic choices are grounded in the original language rather than in the search for ‘handsome equivalents’ in the target language.

The translation of the mechanics stands on its own, though not as an independent work of art, but as the original work (of art).

All this gets far more complicated when the text to be translated is the Bible. Jerome who argues for a sense for sense translation, claims that in translating the Bible one must opt for a *verba pro verba* translation, ‘where even the order of the words is a mystery’.¹⁴ On the other hand Benjamin says that the Bible is unconditionally translatable since in Scripture ‘language and revelation are one without any tension.’¹⁵

¹⁴ St. Jerome, ‘Letter XVI: To Pammachius on the Best Method of Translating,’ in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers : Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds), The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885-96, 113.

¹⁵ Benjamin, 82.

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None of these positions, however, cross the line between interpretation and translation. While it has become almost a commonplace to say that translation is the first interpretation, this in itself reinforces the two as different regimes.

If, however, we look at what might be called the archetypal scene of translation in Late Antiquity—at least for the histories of Judaism and Christianity—the translation of the Bible into Greek, this neat picture is muddied.

The Greek Speaking Community of the Septuagint

There are three major sources produced by Greek speaking Jewish communities which narrate the story of the translation. The first, and the one whose only ostensible purpose is to tell the story of the translation is the Letter of Aristeas.¹⁶ This letter which is attributed to Aristeas, a non-Jewish Hellene, is supposed by scholars to have been written by a Jew sometime in the second century BCE. The letter relates the story of the translation of the Bible which was initiated by Ptolemy II Philadelphus. The letter starts with the suggestion of the need for the translation by the Alexandrian librarian, goes on to relate the freeing of Jewish slaves and the appreciation of his Jewish subjects' by Ptolemy, continues with Ptolemy's letter to the High Priest in Jerusalem requesting that he send wise men to translate the Law. The story then covers the elaborate philosophical table talk of the King and the wise men from Jerusalem and ends with the recounting of the process of the translation and its universal acceptance by both Ptolemy and the

¹⁶ Moses Hadas (trans. and ed.), *Aristeas to Philocrates (Letter to Aristeas)*, Harper Brothers, 1951. All references will be by line number to this edition.

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Jewish community.

The second source is Philo who in the first century BCE narrates the translation as part of his *Life of Moses*¹⁷, as a way of showing Moses as lawgiver to the world and not merely to the Jews. The third source is Josephus's *Antiquities*.

In all three sources, the word for 'translate' or 'translation' in the Greek is *hermeneia* or some conjugation thereof. The Liddel-Scott-Jones Greek lexicon, gives as its primary definition of *hermeneia* 'interpretation, explanation.' The third definition is 'translation.' However, the attestations given for the definition 'translation' are the Letter of Aristeas and Philo's *Life of Moses* in the story of the 'translation' of the Bible. Moreover, the only occurrence of *hermeneia* in the LXX is as the translation of a word which must mean interpret. The translation is of the following verse from Ezra 4:7:

katuv aramit umeturgam aramit

(JPS 1914) And in the days of Artaxerxes wrote Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel, and the rest of his companions, unto Artaxerxes king of Persia; and the writing of the letter was written in the Aramaic character, and set forth in the Aramaic tongue.
(KJV) and the writing of the letter was written in the Syrian tongue, and interpreted in the Syrian tongue.

In this verse, *meturgam*—which most probably¹⁸ does not mean translate in the

¹⁷ Philo, *Life of Moses*, in: F. H. Colson (ed. and trans.), *Philo With an English Translation*, Vol. VI, The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1935, 274-595.

¹⁸ The RSV and the NJPS have 'translated' and both leave the second 'Aramaic.' The NJPS points the reader to v. 18 in which the letter was *mefarash kerit kadamai*.

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common contemporary sense since the missive is already written in Aramaic—is translated with the verb *hermeneuein*.

Furthermore, the scene of the translation itself in the Letter is described thus:

When they had washed their hands in the sea, as is the custom of all Jews, and had offered prayer to God, they addressed themselves to the interpretation and clarification (*diasaphesin*) of each passage. (305)

The Greek word used here for ‘clarification’ is rare. It occurs in the Septuagint (Gen 40:8) for the interpretation of a dream. More importantly, though, it occurs in the next line in the Letter introducing an allegorical interpretation.

I questioned them on this point too, why it was that they washed their hands before praying. And they **explained** (*diesaphoun*) that it was in witness that they had done no wrong, since the hands are the organs of all activity... (emphasis added) (306)

This passage then, seems to suggest that wise and righteous men who were brought to Alexandria were engaged in an interpretation into Greek of the Torah. It is not the *language* which is important but the sense, the allegorical possibility, the Greekness rather than the Greek. The ‘interpretation’ story then makes sense as the end of a long narrative of philosophical table talk, and allegorical interpretation of the Law. It is the *targum* of the Torah into Greek which was accomplished.

Erich Gruen in his study of Jewish Hellenism, says that the Letter accomplishes two things. First, in the letter, all authority is the King’s. Ultimately, the Greek Torah itself is a prize for Ptolemy paid for by the release of Jewish slaves and the loyalty of Jewish subjects. The Jewish Law is another of the prizes of Empire, and the Jews interpret from their position of subjects.

On the other hand, another narrative is also being played out, a somewhat

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more subversive narrative. It is Ptolemy himself who offers the judgement that the God of the Jews is the most righteous and the Law of the Jews the most Just.¹⁹ Rather than being an internal polemic, the Letter is both a statement of loyalty to the Hellenic world, clearly showing that the Jews are at home in that world, and an equally strong statement that the values of the Jewish Law and heritage are the superior values.

Philo's account is much more explicitly apologetic introduced as it is by the following remark:

That the sanctity of our legislation has been a source of wonder not only to the Jews but also to all other nations, is clear both from the facts already mentioned and those which I proceed to state. (II:25)

Philo proceeds to state the story of the 'interpretation' commissioned by Ptolemy. The commission is introduced with the following:

This great man having conceived an ardent affection for our laws, determined to have the Chaldean translated into Greek... (II:31)

The Greek for the word given as 'translation' in the Colson translation is *metharmozesthai* which means 'adopt' as with new habits or 'adapt' as with new ways. The sentence continues with Philo narrating the King's immediate dispatch of 'envoys to the high priest and king of Judaea, both offices being held by the same person, explaining his wishes and urging him to choose by merit persons to make a full rendering of the Law into Greek.' 'Rendering' here is the same

¹⁹ Eric Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism : The Reinvention Of Jewish Tradition*, University of California Press, 1998, 219-222.

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hermeneia as in Aristeas.

As Philo ascribes to Ptolemy the desire to adopt the Jewish law into Greek, Philo also ascribes to the sages from Jerusalem the title of prophets and oracles who have achieved the spirit of Moses, and to the Greek version of the Torah the status of the original. The two versions of the Torah are, Philo says through the voice of the proficient bilingual reader of the Greek version, ‘one and the same.’ (II:40)

While Philo explicitly ascribes divine inspiration to the sages who author the Greek version, Aristeas also constructs the translation as religiously significant. Each day’s work is preceded by ritual, and the finished product is received with pronouncement of anathema on anyone who would change it.

The Rabbinic Reception of the Septuagint

On the other end of the spectrum is the Rabbinic reception of the Greek version which appears variously in Rabbinic literature. Its full articulation comes in Soferim 1:7,8, one of the minor tractates.

7. It happened with five elders who wrote for King Ptolemy the Torah in Greek, and that day was as harsh for Israel as the day that the [golden] calf was made, for it was impossible for the Torah to be explained [*lehitargem*] fully.

8. Again it happened that King Ptolemy gathered seventy two Elders and sat them in seventy two houses and did not reveal to them the matter about which he had gathered them. He came to each one of them and said to them: ‘Write for me the Torah of Moses your teacher.’ God put counsel in each one’s heart, and their minds came to concordance as one, and they wrote for him a Torah by its own.²⁰

Much ink has been spilled in an attempt to discern the sources and historical

setting of each of these apparently different sources. Debate rages over whether we have here one positive appraisal of the Septuagint versus a negative appraisal, or are both consistently negative.

A number of things need be noted. First, the whole project is consistently referred to as ‘writing the Torah in Greek.’ Not interpreting, not translating, but writing. The previous paragraphs in *Soferim* deal with the manner of writing instruments and inks.

The second point that is worthy of note is that the day was as difficult or harsh as the day of the golden calf because ‘it was impossible for the Torah to be explained [*lehitargem*] fully.’ This is the word that we saw earlier in *Ezra*, and this word is used to describe the Aramaic version of the Torah which is an interpretation, and *tirgema* is also used to introduce Halakhic explication. This is also the crux of the difference between the Hebrew/Aramaic speaking Jewish communities represented by/in Rabbinic texts and the Greek speaking Jewish communities. Can the Torah be interpreted/explicated fully?

There is then no necessity to distinguish radically between the first and second stories. In the second version the Elders (in a manner as miraculous as that described by Philo) end up writing Ptolemy his own Torah. A Torah that is essentially different from the Torah of Moses.

Soferim then lists thirteen differences between Ptolemy’s Torah and Moses’ Torah. In each instance the Elders have made the fluid text static so as to interrupt the midrashic possibilities of the text.²¹ They have inscribed in Greek the Torah that

²¹ Cf. *Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ismael*, H. S. Horowitz, and I. A. Rabin (eds), Wahrman Books, 1970, 50.

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could not be, and actually was not, fully interpreted.²²

Taking Positions

The difference, then, between the response of the Greek speaking Jewish cultural formations and the Aramaic/Hebrew speaking Jewish cultural formations to the interpretation of the Torah into Greek is the difference between the allegorical imagination (writ widely) and the midrashic imagination. The allegorical imagination is universal, premised as it is on the existence of one truth in many garments. The one truth is essential while the garments are contingent. For the midrashic imagination truth is particular and concrete, not given to easy

²² Compare the following understanding of the Septuagint by Hilary of Poitiers (316-367/8 CE): ‘Accordingly, the seventy elders, when translating these books, had acquired the higher knowledge of these hidden teachings in conformity with the Mosaic tradition, and were able to translate words and expressions which in Hebrew are ambiguous and indicate different realities with an unambiguous and non-metaphorical use of words, so as to indicate the [true] nature of the things signified. They were able to “control” the polysemous aspect of the [Hebrew] words by their knowledge of the [oral] tradition.’ (*Tractatus super Psalmos* 2.2-3. The translation, by Prof. Adam Kamesar, is quoted in Marc Bregman, ‘Mishnah and LXX as Mystery: An example of Jewish-Christian Polemic in the Byzantine Period.’ My thanks to Prof. Bergman for sharing this unpublished article with me.)

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universalization.²³

For the Greek speaking Jewish community then, it is both possible and desirable to interpret Torah into Greek. The interpretation of the Torah for the wider Greek world is another revelation, even, perhaps, a redemptive act. Therefore for Philo those who interpreted the Torah into Greek were prophets as was Moses. For Aristeas it was also a revelatory act, testified to by the way the community receives the translation as authoritative.

For the Hebrew/Aramaic speaking community it is not possible to fully interpret Torah into Greek. One *could not* fully interpret Torah into Greek since not only the ‘essence’ of Torah needs be interpreted, but the materiality of the writing—the shapes of the letters and even the crowns on top of the letters as the Talmud records in Men 29b. The midrashic imagination is dependent upon the carnality of the Word—the order of words, the way in which words play off each other in Hebrew, the possibility for different interpretations based merely on changing the pointing of letters without changing the spelling of words. The resistance to interpretation into Greek—the resistance to colonization by the Greek speaking cultural hegemony—is represented as a subversion of the midrashic process—concretizing one set of meanings so as to block the possibility of the inexhaustible interpretability of the words of Torah.

Sherira Gaon, therefore, accords Judah the Prince—the compiler of the Mishnah—and Rav Ashi, the compiler of Talmud with divine appellations similar to

²³ Cf. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

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those accorded to the sages of Jerusalem by Aristeas and Philo.²⁴ Judah the Prince, and Rav Ashi and Ravina²⁵ wrote in a way that kept the textual process in its fluidity—by having their interpretations constantly point to the ‘original.’

This, possibly, is why the writing of Torah into Greek is represented in Soferim as equivalent to the making of the Golden Calf. One interpretation—Greek—is concretized and deified: ‘This is your God O Israel.’

This then sets the stage for our discussion of the Talmud as *targum*; as a translation/interpretation which moves—*translates*—the Mishnah as Scripture to Babylonia. We are going to study one text, one unit of discourse or *sugya*, which hopefully will serve as the detail which helps to illuminate the whole. The *sugya* is about translation, and how displacement affects the ability to translate and therefore the ability to interpret.

The Sugya

The *sugya*, RH 26a-b, is generated by a dispute in MRH 3:2. The central ritual moment of the Rosh Hashannah service is the sounding of the *shofar*. The dispute concerns what type of *shofar* is permitted for use in this ritual. The question seems to be whether a *shofar* is a generic term for an animal horn, or whether *shofar* only

²⁴ Rabbi Nosson David Rabinowich (trans.), *The Iggeres of Rav Sherira Gaon*, Moznaim, 1988, 20.

²⁵ I am here paraphrasing R. Sherira’s remarks, not, of course, making a claim about the authorship of the Mishnah or the Bavli.

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designates certain types of animal horns to the exclusion of others. The debate is complicated by the fact that both sides use *shofar also* as a generic term for horns.

All *shofars* [*shofarot*] are worthy [for ritual sounding] except [the *shofar*] of a cow for it is a horn [*keren*].

Said R. Yosi, Are not all *shofars* called horn [*keren*]?

For it is stated, ‘And it shall be, that when they make a long blast with the ram's [*yovel*] horn [*keren*], and when ye hear the sound of the horn [*shofar*]...’ (Josh 6:5)

The first opinion in the Mishnah excludes the horns of a cow from use since they are apparently mere horns—designated as such by use of the term *keren*—and not ritually worthy *shofars*. R. Yosi does not accept this argument since all *shofars* are referred to also as horns [*keren*].

The exact basis of this dispute is unclear. Some of the medieval commentators²⁶ suggest that the debate is based on the reading of Deuteronomy 37:13: ‘His firstling bullock, majesty is his; and his horns [*karnav*] are the horns [*karnei*] of the wild-ox....’ The first opinion in the Mishnah, understands this verse as stating that the horns of the bullock *are keren*, and not *like*, or *called*, *keren*. R. Yosi, as his statement suggests, does not want to read that much into the connective *vav*. He, therefore, says that *all shofars* are *called keren*.²⁷

Whether or not this is the explanation of the dispute in the Mishnah, it is this ambiguity over what exactly is in dispute that generates the *sugya* or talmudic

²⁶ e.g. Nachamanides. See the sources collected in Y. Shilat, *Zichron Tru'ah*. (Heb.) n.p., 1975, 9-11.

²⁷ But see Menachem HaMe'iri, *Bet Habe'ahirah 'al Masechet Rosh Hashannah*. (Heb.). Kedem Publishing, 1978, 72, who explains the dispute without making this distinction between that which is *called keren* and that which *is keren*.

discussion.

The Talmud extends the discussion of the Mishnah. R. Yosi had seemingly refuted the *tanna kama's* objection to the use of the horn of a bullock. What might the first opinion in the Mishnah—referred to as ‘Sages’ in the Talmud—reply? This is the point at which the *sugya*, or discussion, opens.

[It was a] fine [statement] he said to them, R. Yosi to Sages.
And Sages? ‘All *shofars* are called *shofar* and called horn [*keren*].’
[That] of a cow is called horn [*keren*], it is not called *shofar*.
For it is written, ‘His firstling bullock, majesty is his; and his horns [*karnav*] are the horns [*karnei*] of the wild-ox...’ (Deut. 33:17).
And R. Yossi says to you ‘[That] of a cow is also called *shofar*.’
For it is written, ‘And it shall please the LORD better than [*mi-*] a bullock [*-shor par*] that hath horns [*makrin*] and hoofs.’ (Psalms 69:32) If *shor* [ox] why then *par*[bullock]? If *par*, why then *shor*?
Rather what [is the meaning of the phrase *mi-*] *shor par*? ‘Better than a *shofar*.’

The *sugya* exploits the somewhat surprising notion that a central element of the Rosh Hashannah ritual, the sounding of the *shofar*, is beset by an elementary problem: what counts as a *shofar*? In the Torah, the word *shofar* is not associated with Rosh Hashannah but, rather, with the Jubilee declaration on Yom Kippur (Leviticus 25).²⁸ Sages deduce the laws of *shofar* blowing on Rosh Hashannah from the laws of *shofar* blowing at the Jubilee by way of a *gezerah shava*—a midrashic reading which is generated by the occurrence of similar words in two different verses and situations. What qualifies as a horn to be sounded on the day that is referred to Biblically as *yom tru'ah*—‘a day when the horn is sounded?’

This by itself is not that surprising. A major part of the Mishnaic project is

²⁸ and cf. Rashi, RH 26a s.v. *kol hashofarot*.

concretizing somewhat abstract Biblical notions.²⁹ It is also not completely unusual for the Mishnah to create a distinction between terms that, at first sight seem to be interchangeable. What is interesting about this Mishnah is that R. Yossi's statement seems irrefutable. That is, all *shofars* are referred to as *keren*. Despite this fact, the anonymous editorial voice of the *sugya*—usually referred to as the *stam*—extends the dispute by constructing an artificial dialogue. The *stam* grants the dispute its afterlife by teasing out the implications of the positions taken in the Mishnah.

The constructed dialogue starts with Sages granting R. Yossi's basic point. All *shofars* are called *keren*. However, a bull's horns are *only* called *keren* and *not* called *shofar*. The proof for this is a strong reading of Deut 33:17 ('His firstling bullock, majesty is his; and his horns [*karnav*] are the horns [*karnei*] of the wild-ox...') which yields an identification of the bullock's horns as *karnayim*. This leaves the horns of a bull as singularly identified as *keren* and not as *shofar*. The problematics of this statement is pointed out by various medieval commentators.³⁰ There are actually other animals which are referred to as *keren* and not as *shofar*. The specific ways in which the commentators harmonize this difficulty is beyond the scope of the present discussion. The important point is that the attempts at harmonization point toward the ungrammaticality of the answer.

'R. Yossi's' response to this is a midrashic reading of Ps 69:32. The midrashic reading is based on the punctuation of the verse. If the verse is divided as in the NJPS, the seeming redundancy (*shor* and *par* which both can mean bullock) is not

²⁹ E.g. the exact dimensions of a Succah; the exact dimensions of domains on Shabbat; the substance of what 'forbidden labor' on Shabbat is and many more.

³⁰ HaMe'iri (ibid. note) and Tosafot to RH 26a s.v. *æchutz mishel parah*.

actually a redundancy.

That will please the Lord more than oxen,
than bulls with horns and hooves.

If however the verse is divided as in the older JPS (1914) There is a problematic redundancy:

And it shall please the LORD better than a bullock that hath horns and hoofs.

Shor and *Par* are translated here as synonyms, repeated for stylistic reasons. The midrash, as is well known, abhors a stylistic redundancy. The question is therefore raised: ‘If *shor* [ox] why then would the verse state *par*[bull(ock)]? If *par*, why then *shor*?’ This question generates the midrashic reading of *mishofar* [than a *shofar*] by way of merely dropping the last letter of the word *shor*. R. Yossi then has his proof that the horns of a bull are also called *shofar*.

It is significant to note that the verse which is now attributed to R. Yossi as proof that the horns of a bull are also called *shofar*, is a verse which offers prayer as an alternative to the bulls and oxen of the sacrifices. When read midrashically, as R. Yossi does, this verse extols prayer as an alternative to the very issue that Sages and R. Yossi are debating. At the least this verse from Psalms lays the conceptual groundwork for a post-Temple ritual practice.

One other important aspect of this conversation penned by the *stam*, is that it is a case of the *stam*—the anonymous 6-7th century editorial voice of the Talmud—writing a third century Mishnah. The extension of the dispute between R. Yossi and Sages from the Mishnah follows along the lines of the mystics of person

“The Task of the Talmud: On Talmud as Translation,” in A.A. den Hollander, Ulrich Schmid, Willem Smelik, eds. *Text and Paratext*, E.J. Brill, 2002.

theory of translation that we mentioned above. The Talmud continues the dialogue, putting thoughts in the mouths of the participants, in the implicit assumption that had the participants been living and writing now, this is what they would have said. Thus the Mishnah is effectively *translated*—textually and geographically—to the Babylonian setting.

In the next part of the *sugya*, a theological reason is proffered for the exclusion of the *shofar* of a ram. ‘Ulla, a late third century Babylonian Amora suggests that Sages’ exclusion is the same as the reasoning offered by R. Hisda in another case. The high priest on Yom Kippur, changes from the garments of gold to pure white garments when he enters the sanctum. R. Hisda states that the reason for this is that ‘an accuser [*katègoros*] does not become an advocate [*sunègoros*].’ The intention being that, as Rashi explains,³¹ the gold of the High Priest’s garments are reminiscent of the gold of the Golden Calf. It would be counterproductive on the day on which the people of Israel are begging for forgiveness to remind God of their great sin. The same logic would apply to the *shofar* of a bull. The bull is reminiscent of the calf and therefore equally counterproductive.

The *sugya* then continues the constructed exchange between R. Yossi and the Sages within the parameters of the question of whether the *shofar* is actually an accuser become advocate, or whether, perhaps this principle does not apply since there are many objects in the Yom Kippur Temple service which seem to not adhere to this rule. Finally R. Yossi once again delivers a decisive blow to the accuser/advocate challenge by distinguishing between the garments of the High Priest, which enter the sanctum, and the *shofar*, which is never brought into the

³¹ RH 26a s.v. *ein kategor*.

sanctum.

The significant point of this part of the *sugya* comes about half way through. After an initial series of challenges to the very notion that the *shofar* does serve as an accuser, moreso than other elements of the service, a different sort of challenge is offered. The anonymous voice of the *sugya*, the *stam* exclaims: ‘But behold the Tanna stated “for it is a horn [*keren*]!”’ That is, ‘how is it that you are trying to explain the exclusionary motive of R. Yossi by recourse to the accuser/advocate principle, when R. Yossi clearly stated in the Mishnah that he had excluded the *shofar* of a bull because it is called *keren*!’

This objection seems to have an unassailable logic to it. By what right would the extended constructed dialogue between R. Yossi and Sages ignore the explicit statements of the original participants?

This challenge is answered by the following statement: ‘He stated one [teaching] and [implied] another.’ That is, R. Yossi said that the reason for the exclusion was because the *shofar* of a bull is called *keren*. However, he also implied or intended another reason: that an accuser could not become an advocate.

‘R. Yossi,’ as we said, refutes the second ‘implied’ reason by distinguishing between those ritual objects that are outside the sanctum and those that enter the sanctum. It is worthwhile, however, to tarry a moment to analyze the significance of the hermeneutic principle ‘He stated one [teaching] and [implied] another.’

At its most radical—which is also its most straightforward reading—the hermeneutic claim of this principle is that the anonymous seventh century editors of the Talmud are authoring this third century Mishnah. They are not saying that R. Yossi only said one reason and they are adding another reason. The anonymous

voice has R. Yossi himself as author of the second reason. It is R. Yossi who stated two reasons, only one of which is written down.³²

This is the logic of authorship which is at work in our *sugya* in b Rosh Hashannah. The *stam*, the anonymous editorial voice of the Talmud, writes the Mishnah anew. In the rubric of the theories of translation, our *stammaim* are mystics of person. They are writing what the author of the Mishnah would have written had the author of the Mishnah lived in their midst. The translation is not from one language to another, it is from Hebrew to Hebrew. It is though a translation from one communicative situation to another, and from one geographic

³² This is one of a number of hermeneutic principles for reading Mishnah which, essentially, allow the Amoraim or even the *stammaim* to write the Mishnah which was edited centuries before them. Perhaps the most famous of these principles is *æhasorei meæhasra vehachi katani*, '[the text] is deficient and such is how it was/should have been taught.' This principle often is deployed in a *sugya* in order to facilitate distinguishing between two laws, or between a law and a story in a given Mishnah. Cf. Nachmanides' interpretation of our *sugya* quoted in Rabbi Shlomo ben Adret, *æHidushei Harashba*, (Heb.) Chaim Dimitrovsky (ed.), 164. The classic discussion of *æhasorei meæhasra* is J. N. Epstein, *Mavo Lenusach Hamishnah*. (Heb.) Jerusalem, 1948, 595-672.

"The Task of the Talmud: On Talmud as Translation," in A.A. den Hollander, Ulrich Schmid, Willem Smelik, eds. *Text and Paratext*, E.J. Brill, 2002.

and cultural situation to another.³³

The principle that ‘He stated one [teaching] and [implied] another,’ returns in the next part of the *sugya* as, again, there is an attempt to understand the dispute between Sages and R. Yossi. In a statement attributed to the early fourth century Babylonian Amora Abbaye, the dispute about the *shofar* of the bull is understood in terms of the physical make up of the horn of a bull. Abbaye explains Sages’ position as being that a bull’s horn is layered, and therefore it is as if it is not one *shofar* (as mandated in the Torah), but two or three *shofars*. This statement is once again met by the objection that despite its validity, this reason is not stated by Sages in the Mishnah. They only said that a bull’s horn is called *keren*. Once again, the answer that is given is that ‘He stated one [teaching] and [implied] another.’ It is both the fact that a bull’s horn is called *keren*, and the fact that its physical makeup disqualifies it since it seems to be more than one *shofar*.

R. Yossi is then assumed to answer as follows.

R. Yosi would say to you, That which you say ‘The Torah stated one *shofar* and not two or three *shofars*’—since they are attached to each other it is one [*shofar*].
And that which you say ‘for it is a horn’—all *shofars* are also called horn.

³³ Cf. Willis Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation: History, Theory, Practice*, Yale University Press, 1993, 8. ‘In literary translation the source author and the translator commonly set up a dialogical relationship, instigated for chronological reasons by the translator, and then parent and child struggle for primacy. In his essay on Franz Kafka and his precursors, Jorge Luis Borges points out that a later author may alter the text of the precursor as decisively as he or she is influenced by the precursor.’

“The Task of the Talmud: On Talmud as Translation,” in A.A. den Hollander, Ulrich Schmid, Willem Smelik, eds. *Text and Paratext*, E.J. Brill, 2002.

‘R. Yossi’ refutes both challenges. The word *shofar* as used in Torah, that is, used in the singular, means only one *shofar*. The various layers of the *shofar* are actually only one. Furthermore, the original objection still stands. ‘All *shofars* are also called horn [*keren*].’

The *sugya*, to this point, ends where it began—with a standoff between R. Yossi and Sages. This is somewhat misleading, however. The rhetorical work that the *sugya* has done is twofold. First, the *sugya* translated the dialogue of R. Yossi and Sages to Babylonia and gave it an afterlife. This translated dialogue introduced important theological/religious/legal notions about Rosh Hashannah. Sin and punishment (‘an accuser [*katègoros*] does not become an advocate [*sunègoros*]’) and the definition of what one *shofar* is. Second, the argument is then made, at least by implication, that translation is possible. If this is so, if translation is possible, then exile might be deferred.

However, the *sugya* to this point is merely introduction for the work that is to be done in the rest of the discussion. The constructed dialogue translating the Mishnah to the authorship in Babylonia, opens the space for a wider discussion of cultural and geographical translation, for a discussion of the cultural mechanics of exile, and for problematizing the very possibility of translation itself. The segue to this discussion is the next line in the *sugya*.

What does this imply? That this *yovel* [in Joshua 6:5] means³⁴ ram.
 For it is taught [in a Tannaitic text]:
 Said Rabbi Akiba, ‘When I went to Arabia, they would call a ram *yuvla*.’
 And said Rabbi Akiba, ‘When I went to Gallia they would call a menstruant *galmudah* (desolate one).
 That is to say, this one [*da*] is weaned [*gemulah*] from her husband.
 And said Rabbi Akiba, ‘When I went to Africa³⁵ they would call a *ma’ah* a *kesitah*.’
 To what end? In order to explain ‘One hundred *qesitah*’ of the Torah (Gen. 33:19) [equals] one hundred Danka.

The *stam* follows up the last constructed response of ‘R. Yossi’ with an explanation of the basis for his statement. R. Yossi is deriving from the verse in Josh 6:5 quoted in the Mishnah (‘And it shall be, that when they make a long blast with the ram's [*yovel*] horn [*keren*], and when ye hear the sound of the horn [*shofar*]...’) that there is an equivalence between *keren hayovel* and *shofar*, and that this equivalence is drawn because *yovel* means ram.

Keren hayovel, the phrase that I translated as ‘ram’s horn,’ is actually a somewhat contested phrase. The Septuagint, in the second century BC, and the third century AC Vulgate translates *keren hayovel* as war trumpet (*salpingx, tubae*).³⁶ The King James Version has ‘ram’s horn’ and the New JPS has ‘horn’ for both *keren hayovel* and *shofar*.

The *stam*, the anonymous editorial voice, then, is saying that R. Yossi’s reading here is somewhat innovative. The *yovel* which in Mishnaic Hebrew means

³⁴ The Aramaic term here *lishna* is difficult to translate in its complexity directly to English. While the semantic field of *lishna* includes the physical tongue, the Aramaic also means ‘has the meaning of’ and ‘signifies.’ As an aside, it is interesting that in Aramaic (and apparently Arabic and Farsi) the word that denotes the physical tongue (and ‘language’) also denotes the abstract or technical ‘meaning.’ On the other hand, the Greek separates *glôssa* (physical ‘tongue’ and ‘language’) and, inter alia, *sêmeia* (‘meaning’ ‘significance’).

³⁵ Or perhaps Phrygia in Asia Minor.

³⁶ The Vulgate does, however, distinguish between the *tubae* of this verse and the *bucinae* of the previous verse’s *shofrot hayovlim*.

[*dikhra*].³⁷ This translation of *yovel* is supported by a Tannaitic text in which Rabbi Akiva relates a somewhat Herodotean list of linguistic discoveries. In his travels, he has apparently found that in Arabia, people refer to a ram as *yuvla*, the Aramaic form of *yovel*.

He has additionally found that in Gaul a menstruant woman or *niddah* is called *galmudah*, ‘lonely one,’ by an interesting play on the situation of the *niddah*. The menstruant woman is separated from her husband for the duration of her cycle, in that time she is called *niddah* which also has the meaning of ‘outcast.’ *Galmudah*, similarly means ‘desolate’ or ‘solitary’ (as in Isa 49:21 or Job 3:7). The editorial comment on the word *galmudah* is an acrostic play on the word, which stresses another side of the menstrual separation. *Gemulah da* in Aramaic means ‘this one (fem.) is weaned.’ That is, the period of *niddah* is a period in which the woman is not dependent on, nor tied to her husband.³⁸

There are, however, significant intertextual associations to both *galmudah* and *niddah*. These intertexts intersect at the idea of exile. The only verse in the Bible in which *galmudah* appears in feminine form is the following from Isa 49:21:

³⁷ While it is posited that the original Biblical sense of *yovel* was trumpet, and it only secondarily came to mean ‘jubilee’ (as the ‘year of the ram’s horn’) the evidence is split down the middle, and it could be the opposite—that its original meaning could have been Jubilee, and the horns which were blown to announce the Jubilee came to be known as Jubilee horns. Cf. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 385, s.v. עֹלָה.

³⁸ Rashi *ad locum* s.v. *gemulah* translates ‘separated’ *muvdelet*. This seems to me a stretch, and I have not located a Biblical precedent. It seems that Rashi has a problem with the notion of weaning here.

and solitary [*galmudah*], exiled, and wandering to and fro.³⁹

In the same manner, Jerusalem is spoken of as a *niddah*, as in this verse from Lam 1:8, the great lament for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Exile:

Jerusalem has grievously sinned, therefore she is become as one unclean [*niddah*].⁴⁰

We note that Exile comes fast on the heels of translation. That is, the second word that R. Akiva picked up in his wanderings (perhaps his own exile) is prominently and uniquely found in a text of Exile. This connection comes back through the rest of the *sugya* here.

In Africa, R. Akiva found that a *ma'ah* is called a *qesita*. This helps explain the verse that tells of Jacob's purchase from Shechem of the parcel of land where he pitched his tent. The *qesita*⁴¹ that Jacob paid is translated as the Persian *danka* coin.⁴² The cost of the parcel was one hundred *danka*. This, of course, not only translates an obscure word, but translates the whole statement into the cultural

³⁹ In a somewhat parallel text in the PT (Ber 63b) this verse is quoted in the statement. 'In Africa they call a *niddah* a *galmudah* [as Scripture states] 'when I was bereaved, and solitary.' It should be noted that the set of translations there (*yuvla*, *galmudah*, *sechvi*) are a) set in different countries; and b) attributed to R. Levi. In our text, it is R. Akiva who supplies the translations of the first two, and R. Shimon ben Laqish who translates the last one, saying he heard it in **Kennesrin**.

⁴⁰ NJPS: ...Therefore she is become a mockery [*niddah*].

⁴¹ JPS 1914: 'one hundred units of money'
NJPS notes: 'qesitah, a unit of unknown value'

⁴² According to Jastrow, the *danka* was one sixth of a *dinar*.

language of the Babylonian Talmud.

I refer to this above as a Herodotean list since at first glance it follows Herodotus' pattern of gathering knowledge from different countries in the Greek orbit. The three countries mentioned are prominent parts of the Roman Empire. It would seem at first as if there were some move of a projection of Akiva as legate, or at least an expansive, imperial move outwards from the Land of Israel. This is, of course, complicated and undermined by the fact that there was no Empire that paralleled the Greek or Roman for Akiva to to be projected as mimicking. If Akiva went out, he went from destruction to diaspora. We leave this thought here to pick it up later.

The *sugya* continues with a collection of translations that are gleaned from various places by various Sages.

It is taught [in a Tannaitic text], Said Rabbi, 'When I went to the towns on the sea they would call a sale [*mekhirah*] a *kirah*.

To what end? In order to explain '[My father made me swear, saying: Lo, I die; in my grave] which *kariti* (JPS: I have digged/NJPS: I have made ready) for myself [in the land of Canaan, there shalt thou bury me.]' Gen. 50:5.

Said R. Shimon ben Laqish, 'When I went to the area of Kennesrin⁴³ they would call a bride *ninphei* [*numphei*?⁴⁴] and a rooster *sechvi*.

[They would call] a bride *ninphei*.

Said R. Yehudah said Rab, or if you will R. Yehoshua ben Levi, 'What is its verse? 'Fair in situation [*yephei noph*], the joy of the whole earth; [even mount Zion, the uttermost parts of the north, the city of the great King].'" (Psalms 48:3)

And a rooster *sechvi*,

Said R. Yehudah said Rab, or if you will R. Elazar, and if you wish I will say R. Yehoshua ben Levi, 'What is its verse? 'Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts? Or who hath given understanding to the *sechvi*?' (Job

⁴³ Apparently a city south of Aleppo. [Obermeyer and Jastrow]

⁴⁴ The Socino translation suggests the Greek *numphos*. While this is rather suggestive (there was apparently an important school of Aristotelean philosophers at Kennesrin), it doesn't explain why one 'neologism' † would be Greek and one Hebrew. Whereas there are some midrashim based on phonetic similarities between Greek and Hebrew words (e.g. Hebrew *b'yah* and Greek *bios*), and whereas the Greek *nymphos* does, actually fit the current midrashic need, one should still be careful in assuming such leaps.

38:36)

‘Who hath put wisdom in the inward parts?’—These are the kidneys. ‘Or who hath given understanding to the *sechvi*?’—This is the rooster.

The apparent ‘linguistic field research’ goes on. When Rabbi went to the ‘towns of the sea’ they were using one rare Hebrew word for another better known word. This happy coincidence allows Rabbi to translate a verse which is otherwise unintelligible. The word that Rabbi is now able to translate is *kariti* which figures in Joseph’s recounting of his promise to his father that Joseph would bury his father in the land of Canaan. Next, Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish gathers from those in Kennesrin that a bride is called *ninfei* which helps to explain a verse extolling Jerusalem as the center of the world, and the place of God. Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish also finds that a *sechvi* is a rooster, which helps to explain a verse in Job which points to God as the creator of all.

There are a couple of noteworthy moments in this part. First, the connection of the wedding scene with Jerusalem—and the implied characterization of the relationship between God and Israel as one of marriage or divorce—which is a recurrent trope in Talmud.⁴⁵

Second, the movement of Palestinian Sages (Rabbi who is the Patriarch and of the last generation of *tannaim*; Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish of the first generation of Palestinian *amoraim*) outside of the Land of Israel is striking. The fact that the understanding that they gain is directly related to God’s presence in the Land of Israel is even more striking.

The next linguistic encounter continues with a Sage from the Land of Israel

⁴⁵ Cf. Chapter Five in my *Rereading Talmud*; also ‘Beginning Gittin/Mapping Exile’.

who goes to an anonymous place and is baffled by a chance encounter.

Levi happened upon a certain place. A man came before him. He said to him, ‘So and so *kaba’an*.’

He [Levi] did not know what he had said to him.

He went and asked [in] the study hall.

They said to him, “‘So and so is a thief,’ he said to you.’ For it says ‘Will a man rob God? Yet ye rob Me.’ (Malachi 3:8)

Said Raba of Barnish to R. Ashi, ‘If I had been there, I would have said to him: ‘How did he *kaba* you?’ ‘With what did he *kaba* you?’ And ‘Why did he *kaba* you?’ And I would have known it by itself.

He [Levi] reasoned that he spoke to him of a forbidden matter.

In this case Levi does not necessarily leave the Land of Israel (we actually do not know where he went). He goes to an anonymous place—a place whose importance is that Levi crosses the path of an anonymous stranger who apparently has a better grasp of Biblical Hebrew than Levi himself. Here again a verse is clarified for the Rabbi by an encounter outside the Rabbinic precincts (even though it needed to be clarified for him in the study hall).

This tale of a chance encounter is followed by five episodes in which the maidservant of the house of Rabbi (or the maidservant at the Academy) clarifies words for the Sages.

Sages did not know what *sirugin* (in intervals) [meant].

One day they heard the maidservant of the academy who saw Sages who were entering bit by bit.

She said to them, ‘Till when will you come in *sirugin sirugin*?’

Sages did not know what *laglogot* (purslane) [meant].

One day they heard the maidservant of the academy who saw a certain man who was spreading out his purslane.

She said to him, ‘Till when will you spread out your *laglogot*?’

Sages did not know what ‘*salsalehah* (Hug her to you/Exalt her), and she will exalt thee,’ (Prov 4:8) [meant].

One day they heard the maidservant of the academy who was talking to a man who was busying himself with his hair.

She said to him, ‘Till when will you *mesalsel* with your hair?’

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Sages did not know what ‘*veteiteitiha bematatei* (I will sweep it with a broom of) extermination’ (Isa 14:23) [meant].

One day they heard the maidservant of the academy who was saying to her friend, ‘Take a *tatitha* and *tati* the house.’

Sages did not know what ‘Cast *yehavkha* (thy burden) upon the LORD, and He will sustain thee’ (Ps 55:23) [meant].

Said Rabbah bar bar œHannah, ‘One time I was walking alongside a certain caravan merchant. I was carrying a burden and he said to me, ‘Take *yehavaikh* and throw it upon the camel.’

The first thing that I note is that all the words that need to be ‘translated,’ and are actually translated by the maidservant, are words which appear elsewhere in Rabbinic literature and are used with apparent fluency and facility.⁴⁶ I point this out to stress the literary and constructed nature of these accounts.

The central thread of these accounts is the need for the maidservant—a person who is not only not a Sage, but is also not a man, and perhaps not even Jewish—to translate for the Sages. This necessity to move to the margins to gain understanding is repeated twice. Then the section gets more interesting.

The three verses whose translation is dependent on overhearing a maid and a camel driver, are each and together central to the theology and project of the Sages. The first verse is a paean to Torah. Without the marginal figure of the Rabbis, the Rabbis’ sub-altern, they would not themselves have been able to exalt Torah with this verse.

The next verse is in a prophecy of redemption—God will wipe away the enemies of Israel. Without the intervention of the sub-altern, they would not apparently have known of the redeeming hand of God.

Finally, a prophecy of comfort—throw your troubles on God, God will watch

⁴⁶ This is in addition to the conflicting traditions of the accounts themselves. see n. above.

out for you. Taken together, the Rabbis cannot understand Torah, salvation and providence from within the core text of their mother tongue without translation by an outsider.

Conclusion

There is a geographic displacement within one's own language which is evident in this sugya and is of the essence of Exile. It is the effacement of the autochthony in language; the interruption of the 'putative immediacy' of the mother tongue⁴⁷. One's own land—one's own language—is interpreted to one by the Other. The Other is both the colonising Other, and the colonized Other. The one towards whom you are sub-altern and the one who is sub-altern in relation to you.

The *sugya*, in broad sweep, has two moments. In the first moment the Rabbis are confident actors. They translate Mishnah geographically and literarily. They confidently write Mishnaic texts in this move of translation.

In the second moment the Rabbis are objects of their surroundings. They are translated for, and lack the ability to translate for themselves.

As object, the Rabbis in this *sugya* are defined first by the imperial world, and then by the marginal persons of their world. As this circle of interpretation moves closer to home, it moves from Tannaim to Amoraim, from Israel to Babylonia, from 'places' to anonymous people within, from the interpretation of words less central to the Rabbinic world to the interpretation of words that are at the epicenter of the Rabbinic world. The Rabbinic dislocation ultimately threatens to compromise their ability to engage in the Rabbinic project.

⁴⁷ Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity*, 22.

These two moments together inscribe the existential arc which is what I have referred to as the anxiety of Exile. While the texts of the Greek speaking Jewish community argue for an at-homeness in Hellenic culture. The Talmud inscribes the ‘hybridity’ of a community not at home even in its own language. A community that lives under the sign of Exilic anxiety while continuing to create textual culture.

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