

## **TXting the Text: Collapsing the Gap between Teens and Torah**

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*The Torah* should be banned from post-b'nai mitzvah classrooms. So should *Etz Hayim*. And, yes, so should the *JPS Tanakh*. These versions of the Torah are all scholarly translations and commentaries of the most sacred volume in our Jewish tradition. Yet, educators and clergy too often rely on these texts instead of creating, or providing the tools and resources for their students to create, their own translations into modern, colloquial language.

Formal translations of Torah present unnecessary barriers to learners. Instead of engaging learners with familiar language, students are forced to trudge through translations with elevated, unfamiliar language just in order to gain a beginner's comprehension of the material. This not only becomes an issue for the student, but the teacher's higher level instruction becomes obstructed and minimized. Rabbi Harry M. Orlinsky, a scholar who advised the processes of the Revised Standard Version and was the editor-in-chief of the New Jewish Publication Society (JPS) translation of the Bible, argued that the "Bible [in translation] frequently enough does not lend itself to 'do-it-yourself' comprehension, and the modern would-be reader found himself doubly frustrated in his attempt to understand what he was reading." (Orlinsky, 1963, p. 250) What Benjamin Franklin wrote of the King James Bible also rings true: "The language in that time is so much changed and the style, being obsolete and thence less agreeable, is perhaps one reason why the reading of that excellent book is of late so much neglected." (ibid.) Indeed, when we teach Torah in translation with words such as "shall" and grammatical constructs like "let this be for you," not to mention the

infamous “thee,” “thy,” and “thou,” we are doing a disservice to our learners and to the Jewish people at large. It is not hard to imagine a post b’nai mitzvah student unnecessarily struggling through, “For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not too hard for thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven...But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it.” (Deut 30:11-12a, 14 Old Jewish Publication Society) It is also not hard to imagine that student’s parent having the same struggle.

Comprehension is not just a base-line tool from educational theory; comprehension and understanding the Torah is foundational to, and leads to, strengthening Jewish identity formation. Typically, the goal of text study has been to immerse students in identity formation and growth. The best educators agree with this. The problem is that the various resources are not supporting this goal, but rather hindering it. How can our students “sh’ma Yisrael - listen, Israel” if the text presented causes them to tune-out? In reading, writing, and studying these translations, the teens’ Jewish identities will strengthen. This follows the constructivist model of education, which argues that students attribute meaning to a topic by acting on, manipulating, and transforming the material. (Meece, 1998, p. 117) Taken seriously, this means educators should not only provide a translation but encourage students to come up with their own, putting their sacred text in their own voice.

Indeed, putting the Torah in a modern voice, with dynamic linguistic variation is a very substantial part of our tradition. Around 2,500 years ago, storytellers would retell biblical stories in the vernacular, bringing an ancient story understandable to a

contemporary audience. (Voloj, 2006) Today, we are experiencing “a social climate that has created a more fluid American Jewish identity, [where] self-definition takes on greater importance, and language use becomes a crucial means of straddling the realms of modernity and religiosity.” (Nove, 2011, p. 27) The Jewish community does not need just one, universally accepted translation, but teens need the tools that help them grapple with and deepen their connection to our shared tradition. That same tradition has told us for centuries that process positively impacts Jewish identities.

It is time to do something new. It is time to grant Jewish educators both the permission and the ability to help students develop the necessary tools. It is time for a new translation of the Torah into colloquial teen English for Jewish teens by, when possible, Jewish teens.

This translation does not need to be the definitive translation for all Jews everywhere for all time. By design, translation is meant, to paraphrase 2nd century Rabbi Ben Bag Bag in Pirkei Avot, to be redone and redone again and again so each generation can find meaning through their own words. (Pirkei Avot 5:26) Thus, students will come to talk about the text of the Torah as “*our* book” by understanding Torah in familiar words, granting them an entry point to their shared tradition. The New JPS version, which is one of today’s gold standards of translation, participated in this chain of tradition, retranslating the Deuteronomy passage above with all its thee’s and mayest’s, as, “Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens...No, the thing is very

close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.” (Deut. 30:11-12a, 14 New Jewish Publication Society)

In fact, today’s Jewish educators already have the resources to make valuable, meaningful, and relatable Jewish translations. They bear the three characteristics that scholars determine are required for the production of a distinctly Jewish translation: 1) attachment to the Hebrew original; 2) a commitment to Jewish tradition; 3) intent to prepare the translation by Jews, for Jews, or for specific Jewish communities.

(Schulman, 2000, p. 8)

At the same time, these new translations should not minimize or change the Torah’s teachings. Translators should work to strike a balance between the meaning of the text and its presentation. For example, there are colloquial *Christian* bible translations, such as *The Message* and *The Common English Bible*. *The Message* translates our Deuteronomy selection as

“This commandment that I’m commanding you today isn’t too much for you, it’s not out of your reach. It’s not on a high mountain – you don’t have to get mountaineers to climb the peak and bring it down to your level and explain it before you can live it. And it’s not across the ocean – you don’t have to send sailors out to get it, bring it back, and then explain it before you can live it. No. The word is right here and now – as near as the tongue in your mouth, as near as the heart in your chest. Just do it!” (Deut. 30:11-14 *The Message*)

One problem with this translation and ones like it is that they are not Jewish translations. They do not always connect to the Hebrew original, sometimes rely on Christian tradition, and are primarily intended for Christian readers. Additionally, there should be limits to a translation’s accuracy. A readable, usable translation does not imply that the stories or laws should be changed. Students should still grapple with

the text of ancient tradition, and all the conflicts it presents for us today. Further, the translators engaging in this task must be aware not to caricature the text. A Jewish, colloquial translation will resonate with its readers without losing the valuable content.

I do believe there is a time and a place for using more scholarly translations such as *The Torah, Etz Hayim* and other translations. Using culturally familiar language builds tribes. (Benor, 2009) Most can recite from memory a translation of the Sh'ma: "Hear, O Israel, Adonai, our God, Adonai is one." And in a prayer service, that language is very appropriate. For its gendered, archaic language, I cannot imagine reciting Psalm 23 at a funeral with any other words than the good 'ole King James language. But our cups have not runneth over with linguistically appropriate translations for our students to learn from in the classroom.

Because the Torah is central to Jewish text study, the time has come for educators and their students to put the Torah into modern, even post-modern, familiar language. A more colloquial translation fulfills the "real demand" of our learners: "Not the best literal equivalent for a part of a foreign system, but the most equivalent unit in our own." (Hoffman, 1986, p. 160) If students are to own the Torah, if they are to make it *my* Book as well as *our* book, educators should meet the learners where they are by making the language used in Torah study more current and relevant. As Moses taught: "Look, this *mitzvah* which I am commanding you today isn't too tough for you, and it's not too far away either. It's not all up in the sky!...Dude, this idea is super close to you; it's in your mouth and on your mind, so make it happen!" (Deut. 30:11-12a, 14 Author original)

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