

CHAPTER AC: SKILLFUL ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

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VaYaQhel-PeQuDay – Ex36-06a The nation was barred from bringing

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AC.1 – Introduction. In my paper, *Peshat and Derash*, (Tradition 1980), I introduced the idea of *skillful English translation* as a means of showing that Rashi was presenting *Peshat*, the simple straightforward meaning of the text, in contrast to engaging in homily and fanciful readings of the text. This chapter will explore what a *skillful English translation* does and show how it to be an important tool in establishing the natural meaning of the text, the *Peshat*. Although we use examples from this week's parshah, we start with the example presented in that article.

AC.2 – Ach: We use the following example.

Lv23-27 *Ach:* On the tenth of this 7th month there will be Yom Kippur (a day of atonement)

Rashi: [The Biblical word] *ach* implies limitation. We infer that Yom Kippur only effectuates atonement on sins between man and God but not on sins between man and man [God can't forgive you for a sin to a fellow person until you ask that person for forgiveness]

Notice that the Rashi does not appear *natural and straightforward, Peshat*. Rather Rashi appears to be using an ad-hoc rule, *if you see ach then create a limitation*. This is very unsatisfying. We will show how to remedy this unsatisfying feeling with *skillful English translation*.

AC3 – English Translations: First however, let us see how various English translators approached this verse. Remember, the Bible was revealed prophetically to Moses at Sinai, but the English translation was not revealed; any English translation is the work of man. Here are some common English translations.

- King James Version, KJV – *also* on the 10th of the 7th month there will be a day of atonement
- English Standard Version, ESV – *now* on the 10th of the 7th month, there will be a day of atonement
- New Living Translation, NLT – *Be careful*, on the 10th of the 7th month, there will be a day of atonement
- New American Standard, NAS – *Exactly*, on the 10th of the 7th month there will be a day of atonement
- Common English Bible, CEB – *Note*, on the 10th of the 7th month there will be a day of atonement
- New International Translation – NIT - on the 10th of the 7th month there will be a day of atonement [The NIT ignores the word!]

Quite a remarkable list: *also, now, be careful, exactly, note*. None of them make sense and none of these translations help us with Rashi. I will just mention that the translations *now, be careful,*

exactly, note, reflect a translation of *ach* as an interjection, a statement of emphasis. Another possible translation is *indeed*. These translators decided that *ach* had no meaning function in this verse and used words which capture the idea of an interjection, an attention getter, *now, be careful, exactly, note*. As Aviva Zornberg, a noted Biblical scholar and writer told me when I shared with her one of my articles on *ach*, “It is amazing what you can do with such a well-known and common word.”

AC4 – Usually: In the article in Tradition as well as in a follow up article in the Jewish Bible Quartely, [33(2), pp 100-109, 2005] I suggest that:

Ach means *most of* and can be translated as any word which captures a nuance of *most of* such as *usually* or *probably* which mean most of the time. Using this translation let us reexamine the biblical text and Rashi

Biblical text: *Usually* on the 10th of the 7th month there will be a day of atonement

Rashi (paraphrased): *Usually?* This seems to say sometimes there is no atonement. Yes: When the sin is between two people.

Notice what has happened. The *skillful English translation* enables us to hear Rashi as the natural, straightforward and spontaneous meaning of the biblical text, the *peshat*.

But how could such a Rashi comment, obscure without a skillful translation, suddenly become a natural, straightforward, spontaneous comment? It became so through the *skillful English translation*.

We can now define what we mean by a *skillful English translation*. A *skillful English translation* is a translation that *spontaneously* captures the grammatical rules governing a Rashi or Midrashic comment.

In this case, Rashi enunciated a grammatical rule: *The Biblical word ach connotes limitation*. What the *skillful English translation* does is concretize this abstract rule by a term familiar to a native speaker that fully captures the rule. In fact, the idea of finding *skillful English translations* for all Midrashic comments was the platform and project stated in the Tradition article cited above.

The reader may ask whether this translation of *most of, usually, probably*, is consistent with all other occurrences of *ach*. The two articles cited above do exactly that: They look at a variety of other biblical examples and show that this is the case.

AC5 – Ex36-06a. The biblical text is as follows

Moses sent a message throughout the camp: “Each man and woman: They should not do further work for the holy project [the construction of the Temple], and the nation was barred from bringing.

The Hebrew word which we have translated with an underline, barred, is *Vayiqalay*. The English translations cited above translated this as *were restrained, stopped*, or are silent. Rashi simply says on this biblical word, *it has connotations of prevention*. Certainly, the translations *stop* and *restrained* fit with this.

In finding the best skillful English translation, the root of the word was studied, **Caph-Lamed-Aleph**, which can mean *prison, to imprison*. Note that *prison* has a much stronger connotation than *stop* or *restrain*. The best English translation I could find is *barred*, which has more of a connotation of force than *stop* or *restrain*.

AC6 – Create Midrashim: But we can go a step further. We review some of the activity going on now in March 2020 regarding the COVID-19 virus for which we all pray for a speedy recovery throughout the world. Various nations, states and countries have issued advice: Some call this advice *guidance*, others emphasize *it has the force of law*, while others emphasize *police are preparing for enforcement*.

Considering that the underlying root of *vayicalay* means *to imprison* it would be natural, spontaneous, and straightforward to create our own Midrashic comment

Vayicalay – This shows that the message Moses sent was not enough. He had to threaten violators (those who wished to bring more work to the holy project) of his message with imprisonment.

One can ask: Did some commentator actually say this? Is there some Midrash which says this? Such a question misses the entire point: It is natural to say it; it is consistent with the tensions in communication going on with COVID-19; it is therefore totally irrelevant if someone else said it first; the point is that it is the natural, straightforward, spontaneous meaning of the verse, the *peshat* and that is all that is important.

I have deliberately left open the question whether someone else said it; but as the Lubavitcher Rebbe once reprimanded someone who asked him, “You can look that up in the Torah Shlaymah.” The job of this email list is to not be encyclopedic but rather to show basic and broad principles from which our traditions of midrashim can be derived logically.