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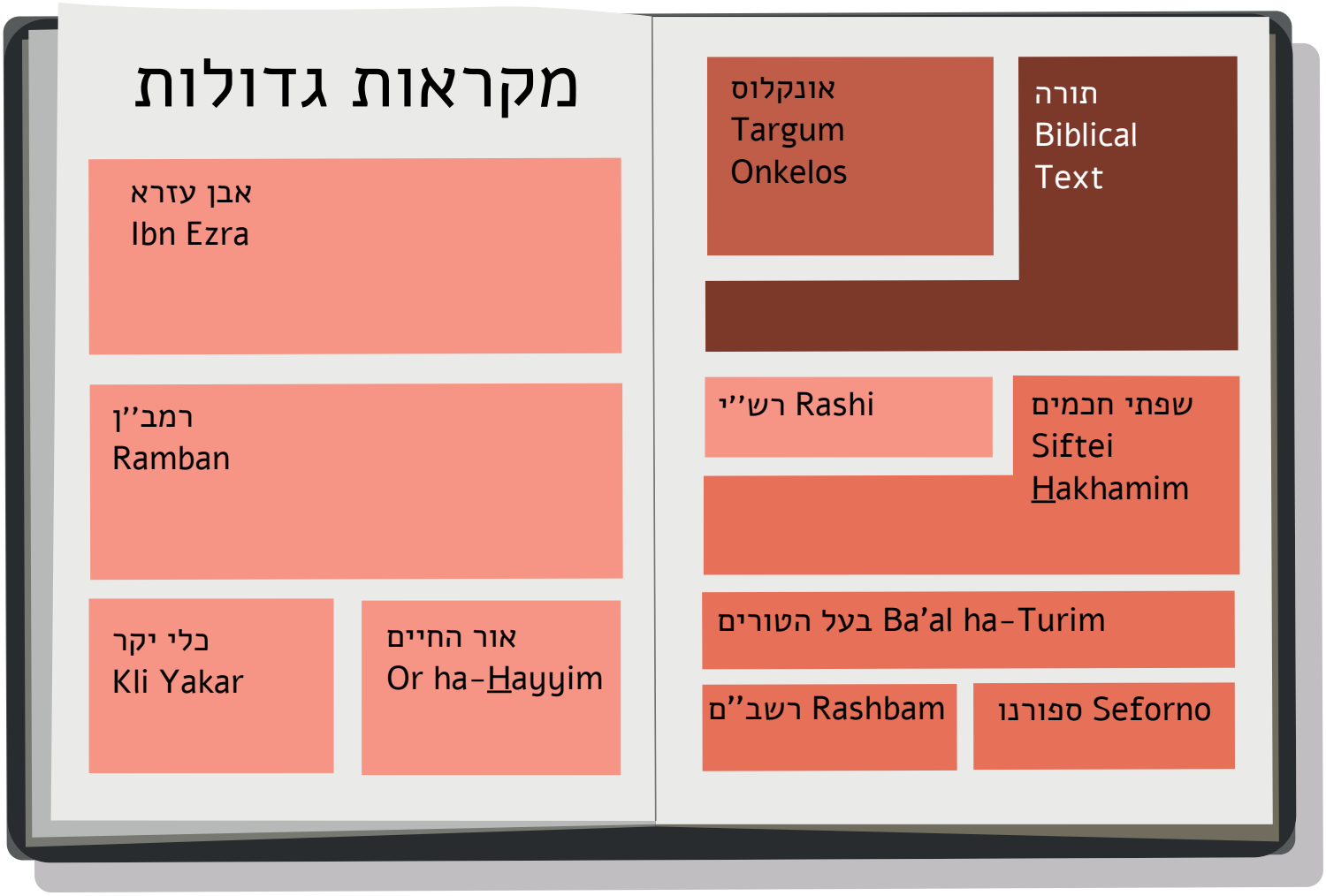
Mikra'ot Gedolot:
An Introduction to the Classical Torah Commentators

Rabbi David Kasher



Mikra'ot Gedolot comes in many different editions. But on every page, generations of classical commentators gather around the biblical text.

Here is a map of one such layout:



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SESSION 1 The Targumim and the Beginning of *Parashah* Study

◇ **The Talmud**
The Babylonian Talmud or Talmud Bavli is the masterpiece of ancient Babylonian Jewry. It is built upon the Mishnah (but frequently digresses). The work is mostly finished in the 6th century CE.

I. SESSION INTRODUCTION

At the top of the page of Mikra'ot Gedolot, right next to the biblical text, is an Aramaic translation of the Torah called the Targum Onkelos. What is this Aramaic translation doing there and why is it important to understand the project of *parshanut* (biblical interpretation)?



II. WHERE DOES THE TARGUM COME FROM?

The use of the Targum, a standard Aramaic translation of the Bible, has been an essential component of the study of the weekly *parashah* for over a thousand years. The Talmud◇ speaks of two major translations: one for the Torah, by Onkelos, a famous convert to Judaism; and one for the Books of the Prophets, by Yonatan ben Uziel, a student of Hillel the Elder.

See the contrast in how each of them is described:

SOURCE #1

Babylonian Talmud Megillah 3a

תלמוד בבלי מגילה דף ג עמוד א

R. Yirmiyah—but some say it was R. Hiyya bar Abba—said: The Targum of the Torah was said by Onkelos the convert, under the guidance◇ of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua.◇

וְאָמַר רַבִּי יִרְמְיָה וְאִיתֵּימָא רַבִּי חִיָּיא בַּר אַבָּא: תַּרְגּוּם שֶׁל תּוֹרָה — אוּנְקְלוֹס הַגֵּר אֲמָרוֹ מִפִּי רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר וְרַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ.

The Targum of the Prophets was said by Yonatan ben Uzziel,◇ under the guidance of Haggai, Zekhariah, and Malakhi—and the Land of Israel quaked four hundred *amot* by four hundred *amot*. A Bat Kol (divine voice) came out and said, "Who is this who has revealed My secrets to mortals?!"

תַּרְגּוּם שֶׁל נְבִיאִים — יוֹנָתָן בֶּן עוּזִּיאֵל אֲמָרוֹ מִפִּי חַגַּי וְזַכַרְיָה וּמַלְאָכִי, וְנִזְדַּעְזְעָה אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פַּרְסָה עַל אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת פַּרְסָה. יָצְתָה בַּת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה: מִי הוּא זֶה שֶׁגִּילָּה סְתָרַיי לִבְנֵי אָדָם?

Questions for discussion:

» Why might a translation be composed "under the guidance" of other authorities? What guidance do you think they would have provided?

» What advantages and disadvantages might a convert have in translating a Hebrew sacred text?

» Yonatan ben Uzziel lived many centuries after Haggai, Zekhariah, and Malakhi. What might it mean that he composed his translation "under their guidance"?

» The Bat Kol suggests that the act of translating the text itself "reveals secrets." How might that happen? Is it then a good thing to translate the Torah, or a bad thing?

◇ **Under the guidance** Literally: "from the mouth of," but the phrase can also be used more loosely than a literal dictation. So too below.

◇ **R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua** Another tradition in the earlier Talmud Yerushalmi (Megillah 1:9, 71c) has Onkelos (there Akilas, both forms of the Latin name Aquilas) translate the text **before** these two rabbis, who praised him saying, "You are the most beautiful of men!"

◇ **Yonatan ben Uzziel** In fact, many editions of Mikra'ot Gedolot have two *targumim* on the page: Targum Onkelos and Targum Yonatan. The one labeled Targum Yonatan is not merely a translation, but also inserts a lot of midrashic material along the way. But in fact, this is not the Targum Yonatan that the Talmud is talking about here, which is only on the latter books of Tanakh. This is the Targum Yerushalmi, which was mislabeled in the printing process because it had the same initials (ת"י). Scholars now refer to it as Targum Pseudo-Yonatan.

Another passage in the Talmud speaks of the regular completion of the *parshiyot* (portions) of the Torah. In talmudic times, the public reading of the Torah in synagogue was accompanied by a line-by-line Aramaic translation using the Targumim.

SOURCE **#2**

Babylonian Talmud
Berakhot 8a-b

Rav Huna bar Yehudah said that R. Ami said: A person should always complete their portions with the congregation—

twice through in the text and once in translation (*shnayim mikra v'eḥad targum*),

and even a verse like: "Atarot and Divon [and Yazer and Nimra and Heshbon and Elaleh and Sevam and Nevo and Beon.]" (Numbers 32:3)—

for one who completes their portions with the congregation has their days and years extended.

תלמוד בבלי
ברכות דף ח עמוד א-ב

אָמַר רַב הוּנָא בַּר יְהוּדָה, אָמַר רַבִּי אַמִּי:
לְעוֹלָם יַשְׁלִים אָדָם פָּרָשִׁיּוֹתָיו עִם הַצִּבּוּר.

שְׁנַיִם מִקְרָא וְאֶחָד תַּרְגּוּם.

וַאֲפִילּוּ "עֲטָרוֹת וְדִיבֹן".

שֶׁכָּל הַמַּשְׁלִים פָּרָשִׁיּוֹתָיו עִם הַצִּבּוּר
מַאֲרִיכִין לוֹ יָמָיו וּשְׁנוֹתָיו.

Questions for discussion:

» What do you think it means to ask a person to complete their portions "with the congregation"?

» Why would one continue to recite the translation even for a verse made up entirely of place names, like "Atarot and Divon…"? What do you think is the value that R. Ami is trying to instill?

◇ **Shulhan Arukh** The essential and influential compendium of Jewish law by R. Yosef Karo. It is divided into four sections. Orah Hayyim is the one devoted to issues of prayer.

The phrase from the Talmud above, *shnayim mikra v'ehad targu*m is taken to be part of the legal mandate and eventually separated out from the synagogue context. See how the Shulhan Arukh◇ understands the practice:

SOURCE #3

Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 285:1

1) Even though each person hears the Torah reading every Shabbat with the congregation, one is still obligated to read to oneself, every week, the *parashah* of that week, twice through in the text and once with Targum. Even "Atarot and Divon."

2) If one learns the *parashah* with Rashi's commentary, that is considered like a Targum. But those who fear Heaven will read the *parashah* with both the Targum **and** Rashi's commentary.

שולחן ערוך אורח חיים רפ"ה:א

א.) אע"פ שאדם שומע כל התורה כולה כל שבת בצבור חייב לקרות לעצמו בכל שבוע פרשת אותו שבוע שנים מקרא ואחד תרגום אפילו עטרות ודיבון:

ב.) אם למד הפרשה בפירוש רש"י חשוב כמו תרגום וירא שמים יקרא תרגום וגם פרש"י:

Questions for discussion:

» Why would we be encouraged to read the *parashah* on our own every week on top of hearing it read on Shabbat? And why might reading it in translation be an essential part of that practice?

» Notice that by the time of the Shulhan Arukh (1550), studying the parashah along with Rashi's commentary was potentially an acceptable substitute for the Targum. What does it say about the Targum that it is being compared to an interpretive commentary?

Because of the longstanding tradition of studying the Torah with the Targum, nearly every edition of Mikra'ot Gedolot includes the Targum running prominently alongside the main text.

III. HOW DOES TARGUM ONKELOS WORK?

It might be tempting for the modern *parashah* student to ignore Targum Onkelos. Most of us don't speak Aramaic anyway, so why not just study an English translation instead, or just jump straight to Rashi? Well, both of those might be good ideas also, but don't be too hasty in disregarding Onkelos!

First of all, Rashi's commentary itself cites Onkelos as an authority, so familiarizing ourselves with the Targum is good preparation for our next session on Rashi. But more than that, the careful reader of Targum Onkelos will find that it has *hiddushim* (insights) of its own. Sometimes we find that Onkelos' translation deviates from literal, word-for-word rendering into more conceptual or theological explanations that blur the line between translation and interpretation.

Take, for example, his translation of the last phrase in this verse that describes the divine formation of the human being. Here's the original verse followed by Targum Onkelos:

SOURCE #4

Genesis 2:7

The Eternal God formed the Human from the dirt of the ground, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. And the Human became **a living being**.

בראשית ב:ז

וַיִּיצֶר ה׳ אֱלֹקִים אֶת הָאָדָם עָפָר
מִן הָאֲדָמָה וַיִּפַּח בְּאַפָּיו נִשְׁמַת
חַיִּים וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה׃

SOURCE #5

Targum Onkelos to Genesis 2:7

The Eternal God then created the Human from the dirt from the ground, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. And the Human became **a speaking spirit.**◇

תרגום אונקלוס על בראשית ב:ז

וּבְרָא ה׳ אֱלֹקִים יָת אָדָם עַפְרָא
מִן אַדְמְתָא וּנְפַח בְּאַפּוֹהִי נִשְׁמְתָא
דְחַיֵּי וַהֲוַת בְּאָדָם לְרוּחַ מְמַלְלָא׃

» What is Onkeleos saying here about what it means for a human being to come alive?

◇ **A speaking spirit**
This is an especially striking translation choice when the Torah has already used the phrase נפש חיה (living being) several times in the first chapter of Genesis to describe animal life, and every time there Onkelos translates the phrase literally: נפשא חיתא.

◇ **The meaning of the verse**
Onkelos also clarifies the time of day, but that is not our focus here.

Onkelos is best known for taking this kind of interpretative license in order to defend the principle of the incorporeality of God. So any time that God is described in the Torah in ways that suggest God has physical form, Onkelos' translation strains to correct the potential misunderstanding:

So, for example, when Adam and Eve have eaten from the fruit of the forbidden tree, we read:

SOURCE #6

Genesis 3:8

They heard the sound of the Eternal God moving through the garden at the breezy time of day. Adam and his wife hid from the Eternal God among the trees of the garden.

בראשית ג:ח

וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת קוֹל ה' אֱלֹקִים
מִתְהַלֵּךְ בַּגָּן לְרוּחַ הַיּוֹם וַיִּתְחַבֵּא
הָאָדָם וְאִשְׁתּוֹ מִפְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹקִים
בְּתוֹךְ עֵץ הַגָּן׃

» What is the problem with the verse (from the perspective of God's incorporeality)?

Onkelos inserts some extra language into the verse that helps him resolve the problem. See if you can figure out what has been added, and how it changes the meaning of the verse:◇

SOURCE #7

Targum Onkelos on Genesis 3:8

They heard the sound of the word of the Eternal God moving through the Garden towards the evening of the day. Adam and his wife hid themselves from the Eternal God among the trees of the Garden.

תרגום אונקלוס על בראשית ג:ח

וּשְׁמָעוּ יָת קַל מֵימְרָא דַיְיָ אֱלֹקִים
מְהַלֵּךְ בְּגִינְתָּא לְמִנַח יוֹמָא וְאִיטַמַר
אָדָם וְאִתְּתֵהּ מִן קֳדָם ה' אֱלֹקִים
בְּגוֹ אִילַן גִּינְתָּא׃

» How has Onkelos changed the meaning of the verse, and what theological problem does the translation solve?

◇ **Maimonides**
R. Moshe ben Maimon (1135–1204), also known as the Rambam, is probably the most important Jewish thinker of all time. The Guide, originally written in Arabic, is his main philosophical work. Translation is based on Friedlander.

Maimonides,◇ in his Guide of the Perplexed, cites Onkelos admiringly:

SOURCE **#8** ◘

Guide of the Perplexed, Part 1, 27

Onkelos the Convert, who was thoroughly acquainted with Hebrew and Aramaic languages, made it his task to oppose the belief in God's corporeality. Accordingly, any expression employed in the Torah in reference to God, and in any way implying corporeality, he paraphrases in consonance with the context. All expressions denoting any mode of motion, are explained by him to mean the appearance or manifestation of a certain light that had been created [for the occasion], i.e., the Shekhinah (Divine Presence), or Providence. Thus he paraphrases "God will come down" (Exodus 19:11 ◘) "God will manifest Godself"; "And God came down" (19:20), "And God manifested Godself"; and does not say "God came down"; "I will go down now and see" (Genesis 18:21 ◘), but paraphrases, "I will manifest myself now and see." This is his rendering [of the verb *yarad*, "he went down," when used in reference to God] throughout his version. … A remarkable proof of this great man's talents, the excellence of his version, and the correctness of his interpretation!

» Why is this such an important precedent for the Rambam, who also opposed the notion of God's corporeality?

» What do we learn from these examples about the relationship between translation and interpretation of the Torah?

Take a Step Back

1. Before studying these sources, you might have thought of a translation as simply a way of putting the same text into another language. How do the examples from Targum Onkelos challenge that assumption? At what point does a translation become an interpretation?
2. If you are familiar with Targum Onkelos, share with your *havruta* how you use it when you study Torah. If you read the Torah with an English translation, do you have a preferred translation you consult? What do you like about it?
3. If every translation involves interpretation, what should we look for when deciding whether we trust a particular translation? Is literal accuracy always the most important criterion?