



LET'S STUDY *ONKELOS*

A Guide for Rabbis, Teachers and Torah Students to Study and Teach the *Parashat Hashavua* through the Eyes of its Most Important Translator

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Based on the five volume, *Onkelos on the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy)*, *Understanding the Bible Text*, by Israel Drazin and Stanley M. Wagner, published by Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem/New York, 2006-2010.

STUDY GUIDE

T'TZAVEH (CHAPTER 27:20–30:10)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

God ordains and describes the priestly vestments; priests are required to be consecrated for service; offerings are mandated for a seven day period; the daily offering is prescribed; the design of the incense altar is presented.

ONKELOS AND THE PRIESTLY VESTMENTS

The Torah portion of T'tzaveh contains a description of the special vestments worn by the high priest and ordinary priests when they ministered in the Tabernacle and, later, in the Temple. They were called *bigdei kodesh*, “garments of sanctity,” which the targumist translates literally into Aramaic. This name, as we point out in our commentary to 28:2 (page 189),¹ was given to the garments because they were worn in a holy place (ibn Ezra).

In this verse, the Torah states that the purpose of the vestments is *lechavod u'letifaret*, which can be translated “for honor and distinction” or “glory and splendor.” The *Targum* renders these words *liykar u'letushbecha*, which may also be translated in various ways, including “for honor and glory,” “for worth and praise”, or, as we have translated, “for dignity and beauty.” As we have often noted, not only can the Torah have alternative translations, but so can the Aramaic in *Onkelos*.

¹ All page numbers refer to the *Onkelos on the Torah* volume.

The wearing of the priestly garments was so important that in 28:43 (pages 196 and 197) they are instructed, “They should be on Aaron and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting, or when they approach the altar to serve in the sanctuary, so that they do not incur guilt and die.” They were punished with a heavenly death penalty for neglecting to wear the appropriate vestments when serving God.

One of the items that the High priest was required to wear was the *choshen mishpat*, “the breastplate of judgment” (28:15, pages 190 and 191). Saadiah translates *mishpat* as “according to its rule,” meaning according to the instructions given for constructing it, as the word is used in 26:30.

Scripture outlines how the *choshen mishpat* should be constructed in fifteen verses (28:15-30). We will focus on the twelve stones that were set in the breastplate and how they are identified by the *Targum*. They corresponded to the twelve tribes whose names were inscribed on them. In verse 17, the instruction was to set in the breastplate “mounted stones, in four rows of stones.” As he does in verse 11, the targumist adds “good” stones, meaning valuable stones.

The Bible names these stones, but we are no longer certain of the identity of these stones. Our commentary, “CARNELIAN,” (page 190) points out how the names in the *Targum* are not really helpful in identifying the stones. It only gives some descriptions:

Scholars dispute the meaning of both the Hebrew and Aramaic translation for the following twelve stones. Onkelos texts differ in the spelling of the nouns. In the case of this stone, Carnelian (odem) and the Aramaic samkan mean “red.”

TOPAZ (pit’dah). Onkelos translates as “green.”

SMARAGD (bareket). Both the biblical and the Aramaic “barkan” have the root “barak,” which means “lightning,” referring to the flashing or glittering quality of the stone.

CARBUNCLE (nofekh). There are multiple variant readings of the targumist’s rendering. It may be that the roots, “zmr,” “song,” and “gwn,” “color,” found in all of them, were meant to create an adjectival noun to describe the stone.

SAPPHIRE (sapir). It is possible that the root of the Aramaic “shavzayz” implies that it “sparkles seven times,” meaning that it sparkled greatly.

EMERALD (yahalom). The Aramaic “sivhalom” has the root “beats (sparkles),” and may also tell us that it sparkled greatly.

JACINTH (leshem). Onkelos has “kankeerei,” which may have the root “naki,” meaning “clear.”

AGATE (shevo). The Aramaic “tirkaya” sounds like and may be akin to “turquoise.”

AMETHYST (achlamah). The Targum’s “ein eegla” may mean “the eye of a calf.”

ONYX (shoham). The Aramaic is “burla,” which sounds like “beryl”. This raises questions about the translation of the prior stone.

JASPER (yashfe). The targumist's "fanteerei" may mean "leopard" and suggests multihued.

The identity of the stones is not the only problem in this Bible section. The Torah states that "Aaron should carry the names of the sons of Israel on the breastplate of judgment over his heart, when he enters the Sanctuary, as a memorial before the Lord at all times" (28:29, pages 192-195). The meaning of "memorial" is unclear and *Onkelos* does not clarify it.

Pseudo-Jonathan explains "memorial": the stones "remind God" of the "merit of the forefathers." Our translator avoids introducing such rabbinic concepts into his translation, ideas that suggest, anthropomorphically, that God requires a symbolic reminder, as if He is forgetful.

Some commentators say that "memorial" refers to the priest, not God. The high priest wears the names of all the tribes over his heart to remind him to love all of the Jewish people.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

While our translator associates no supernatural, mystical, or other unique qualities to the twelve breastplate stones, and only calls them "good stones," as we have said, some others do so. In *Ezekiel* (28:13) ten of the twelve stones enumerated here are named as precious stones found in "Eden, the garden of God" (not in Scripture's order and missing the agate and amethyst). *Numbers Rabbah* states that each of the stones had a different color, and the flag assigned to each tribe had the color of the stone.

We also find in the Talmud, *Midrash*, *Zohar*, and many of the classical medieval commentaries, notions about the magical influence of other stones, such as the statement in the Babylonian Talmud (*Bava Batra* 16b) that a stone worn by Abraham had the power to heal; or in *Genesis Rabbah* that in Noah's ark there was a stone that was dim during the day and lit up the ark at night; or in the Babylonian Talmud (*Megillah* 12a) a stone called *dari* that the king of Persia (*Achashveirosh*) placed in the midst of his banquet hall to provide light for all.

Many ancient and modern people believe that certain stones have magical qualities and they use stones as amulets. The rational thinker Moses Maimonides spoke against this superstition. Do you think that our targumist is similarly rational and this is why he did not offer any magical qualities for the priest's stones? Or, do you see this as nothing more than a translational technique? When thinking about this issue, keep in mind that Maimonides praised our translator close to two dozen times in his *Guide of the*

Perplexed for avoiding the anti-philosophical notion that God has physical qualities. This was clearly done for philosophical reasons.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

It is clear that one purpose for the priestly garments was practical. The vestments distinguished the spiritual leaders who wore them from those Israelites who were not members of the priestly clan. They also made the priests aware of their sacred duties and responsibilities, and inspired the Israelites by reminding them of the exalted status of their spiritual leaders, as they participated in the sacrificial services.

Some commentators saw a broader significance to the priestly vestments. Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that these garments were not owned by the priests, but by the nation. When the priests donned them, they were reminded that they served the nation, and the people were reminded of their duty to obey God's law. Benno Jacob discusses the meaning of "clothes" based on the biblical description of God "making" garments for Adam and Eve and "clothing them" (*Genesis* 3:21). He saw clothing as a "symbol of human dignity," that set people higher than the beast. Malbim writes that the outer vestments encouraged priest to cultivate "inner vestments" of nobility and piety.

What role do clothes play in our society? Do "clothes oft make the man," as Shakespeare suggests? How? In Jewish life, how would you explain the requirement to wear *tzitzit* in a *tallit* and *tallit katan*? What about the law prohibiting the wearing of wool and linen (*shatnes*) together? Do the laws of *tzeniut* (modesty) in dress suggest something about the need to be aware of our garments? What does the *shtreimal*, worn by Chassidim, symbolize? Should rabbis be required to wear special robes?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 28:3 and commentary (page 189). The targumist eyes the context of the verse one way and ibn Ezra another way.
2. See 28:11 and commentary (page 191). Rashi clarifies *Onkelos'* translation of a difficult verse.
3. See 28:38 and commentary (pages 914–197). How were the pomegranates and bells on the hem of the high priest's robes placed? Most views follow the *Targum*.