



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

By Stanley M. Wagner and Israel Drazin

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

KEDOSHIM (CHAPTER 19:1-20:27)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

Once again, the people of Israel are commanded to be holy and to “imitate” God; holiness is defined as commitment to the laws outlined in the Torah portion, which include: revering parents and the Sabbath, rejecting idolatry, offering sacrifices in a proper fashion, sharing bounty with the less fortunate, acting honestly in business activities, upholding the principles of justice and engaging in decent social relations; it is also necessary to observe laws that may not seem rational, such as not crossbreeding animals, or planting with mixed seeds, or wearing garments made of linen and wool woven together; especially heinous is giving one’s child to the idol Molech; the punishments for violating the laws of forbidden sexual unions are outlined.

THE TARGUMIST’S TREATMENT OF IDOLS

In biblical times, the most vexing ideological challenge confronting the Israelites, from the appearance of Abraham through the period of the prophets, was polytheism and idolatry, in all of their various constructs. The prohibition of idolatry is emphasized in the “Ten Commandments.” Yet, as seen in the excoriations of the prophets and evidence in archeological excavations, the Israelites were drawn to it, and their faithlessness and disloyalty to God and His commands had serious adverse consequences for them.

But even following the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE, when the more degrading forms of idolatry evaporated from Jewish life, Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic manifestations of polytheism and idolatry continued to attract spiritually weaker Jews. (See *Great Confrontations in Jewish History*, edited by Stanley M. Wagner and Allen Breck, University of Denver, 1977, “Paganism and Biblical Judaism,” Nachum Sarna, pages 1-20 and “Hellenism and Judaism,” Samuel Sandmel, pages 21-38).

The targumist, who lived in the fourth century CE, used his translation to degrade idolatry, using derisive terms to describe it. Our “*Onkelos Highlight*” (page 156)¹ explains:

The Onkelos targumist, ever respectful of God, was concerned to avoid creating any misleading intimation of divinity to idols, thus, when the Torah uses a form of “el,” “god,” to describe an idol, he does not insert this noun into his translation, but downgrades the idol to a sham, thereby precluding his unsophisticated readers from imagining that many gods exist. He substitutes a form of the words “dachal” or “ta’avat.” The first denotes “a fearful thing” and the second “a mistake.” The former appears only once in the Leviticus translation, in 19:4, while the latter occurs thrice, in 19:4, 26:1, and 26:30. The use of insulting descriptions for idols is also found in the Bible. In 26:30, for example, Scripture uses “giluleikhem” for idols, a word meaning “dung.” The Midrash Sifra lists ten disparaging epithets by which Hebrew Scripture denigrates idols; neither “dachal” nor “ta’avat” is included, as they are both Aramaic terms.

The acceptance of the practice to utilize disparaging names to describe paganism is discussed in the Talmud, as we point out in our appendix on page 308.

The frequent use of disparaging descriptions of heathen practices and idol worship is based on Deuteronomy 12:3, “you should destroy their name” (see Rashi on that verse, “give them a disparaging name,” and the Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah, Temurah 28b, Sifra) and Deuteronomy 7:26: “You shall not bring an abomination into your house and be under a ban like it. You should utterly detest it and utterly abhor it, for it is a banned thing.” See also the Jerusalem Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3:6 and the commentary to 19:4. On this passage, Rashi states: “these are their social customs (Targum Onkelos’s word), things which they consider to have the loftiness of statues. They include theaters and stadiums.” Hoffmann (Das Buch Leviticus 11:14) adds holidays where levity deteriorates into lewdness.

In 19:4 of our *parashah* and commentary, “IDOLS . . . IDOLS” (page 146) we focus on a verse that has two statements about idols. It reads: “Do not turn after *ha’elilim* or make *elohei* of cast metal for yourselves.” The targumist uses two different disparaging nouns to define the root *el*, as is explained in our commentary on page 146:

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

Some commentators, such as ibn Ezra, Rashi, and ibn Kaspi, (1) derive (the meaning of “el” and “elil,” the latter being a form of the former) from “al”, “nothing,” as in Job 24:25, and see it as a disparaging description of an idol’s lack of power and usefulness. Others (2) take it to be a form of (the majestic plural Elohim) “God,” written diminutively, and suggest that the singular disparages the idol. The plural form denotes something that is considered “great”: the noun “Elohim,” “God,” is used to describe the great deity, a mountain of Elohim means a large mountain, and a judge is called “Elohim.” The singular, on the other hand, denotes the opposite: in Job 13:4, “rofe’ei elil” means “ineffectual physicians”; and in Jeremiah 14:14, “kesem elil” denotes “ineffectual (or worthless) divination.” Since ... the average Targum reader might suppose that the verse is ascribing divinity to idols or suggesting that many gods exist, our targumist substitutes disparaging nouns that literally mean “a fearful thing” and “a mistake.” The targumist uses two distinct terms for Scripture’s “gods” because of his usual, oft-noted preference not to repeat words.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

Since monotheism is the foundation of Judaism, it is quite understandable that its greatest thinkers fought strenuously to eradicate every vestige of idolatry from the private and public life of the Jewish people. However, one can question whether this practice shows proper sensitivity to other religions. Christians were bothered by some statements and censored parts of the Talmud and prayer book during the Middle Ages to expunge what they considered disparaging references to Christianity.

An example is the “Aleinu” prayer, originally included in the High Holiday service, but which was incorporated in the daily, Sabbath, and festival prayer book, since about the fourteenth century. It is recited three times daily at the end of each of the three daily services by Jews. Some sages opine that this prayer was originally composed by Joshua after he led the Israelites into the Holy Land. Others suggest that the Babylonian sage, Rav, wrote it. It reads, “for they bow down to vanity and emptiness and pray to a god that offers no salvation” but we bow and worship and offer thanksgiving before the King of all kings. These words were derived from the prophet *Isaiah* in 30:7 and 45:20, centuries before Christianity emerged. But in the year 1370, a Jewish convert to Christianity maligned the Jewish community by insisting that the words were directed against Christian beliefs. The accusation was refuted, but the hostility continued until the sentence was dropped from the Ashkenazic prayer book. In the Italian prayer ritual, “they bow” was altered to “they bowed,” and “vanity and emptiness” became “idols.” Only now, with an enlightened Christian community who understand that it refers to idol worship, the ancient wording is finding its way back into the prayer book.

We have two questions: Since the Torah does not use disparaging language in describing idolatry in these verses, by what authority does a translator have the right to substitute his own language for Torah words if he thinks he has a good reason for doing so?

Secondly, in our age, characterized by efforts of many religious traditions to help unify the world that is badly in need of unity, is it really necessary to discredit other religions or degrade them in any way, which only causes inter religious conflict? Each religious tradition claims supremacy in one form or another. How does it help “puff up” our commitment to Judaism today by disrespecting other religions?

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Let us focus on what many people consider one of the most important verses in the Torah. In 19:2 (pages 146 and 147), we find an opening statement that introduces the entire *parashah*, laden with commandments. It reads, “You must be holy, for I, the Lord your God am holy.” This is the explanation we offer in our commentary, “YOU MUST BE HOLY” (page 147):

Nachmanides states that the Torah cautions the Israelites to embrace a holiness that transcends the mere observance of the law by practicing moderation in all matters, even in behavior that is permitted, for it is possible to become a base person even while technically fulfilling the Torah laws. Thus, for example, the Torah does not specifically prohibit drunkenness and gluttony. Yet, the requirement to be holy proscribes such inappropriate behavior. This is the concept introduced earlier by Maimonides in his Shemoneh Perakim: a person must develop habits of behavior according to the golden mean. Sforno adds another view, that this verse and the chapter that follows enshrine the concept of “imitatio dei,” the requirement to emulate the ways of God. He felt that this is the teaching embodied in the concept that God created man “in His image and after His likeness” (Genesis 1:26). The Midrash Leviticus Rabbah has still a third and a fourth interpretation: many of the essential laws of the Torah can be derived from statements contained in this Leviticus chapter, and these teachings parallel the laws of the Ten Commandments. Sifra has a fifth idea: the Midrash sees God explaining, “Just as I, God, am set apart, so you must be set apart,” for the definition of “kadosh,” usually translated “holiness,” is “separation,” the meaning it has in verse 24. This, of course, does not imply that the Israelites are as holy as God, for as stated in I Samuel 2:22, “There is none so holy as the Lord.”

The mandate of the verse is clearly the requirement to aspire to “holiness.” It is then immediately followed by the practical command to revere one’s parents. The intent of this entire chapter must be, therefore, that by observance of the commandments, and beyond, we can achieve “holiness.” It is not by asceticism, and not by disengaging from the world, but by an encounter with the world in a particular fashion that we can sanctify our lives. But doesn’t this proposal also carry with it some dangers? How do we

protect ourselves from assimilatory forces, from the potential for moral pollution that is found everywhere? How do we deal with T.V. sets and computers, and videos and movies, which are harbingers of values and ideals inimical to Judaism?

If *kadosh* also means “separate,” is that a suggestion that Jews should separate from the rest of society to avoid the potential for the problems listed above? Do you see some Jews doing this? Are they violating the essence of Judaism? What is the proper way to avoid the potential for failure?

We cited Maimonides in the quote from our commentary and said that he encouraged people to act according to the “golden mean,” the midpoint between avoidance and excess. However, Maimonidean scholars say that this statement was made for the average person who needed a clearly stated rule. But Maimonides encouraged people who are more intelligent to sometimes, when appropriate, to go toward an extreme. For example, the general rule for average people is that they should not give too much charity and should not be overly modest; but an intelligent person may evaluate a situation and see the need to give more charity in a certain instance and to be more modest at all times. Does this distinction between an average person and a person who is more intelligent make sense to you? Why?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 19:3 and commentary, “SABBATH” (page 147, and the appendix note, page 309). The targumist often splits one biblical word into two words.
2. See 19:16 and commentary, “SPEAK SLANDER [LITERALLY, SPEAK DESTRUCTION]” (page 151, and appendix note for this verse, page 309). The targumist paraphrases an important phrase in an unusual fashion.
3. See 20:2 and commentary, “HOUSE OF ISRAEL” (page page 159, continuing on page 158). *Targum Onkelos* changes the biblical *am ha'aretz*, “people of the land” into a phrase that explains it for a very important reason.