



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

BEHAR (CHAPTER 25:1–26:2)

SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION

A number of economic laws are declared (which could remind the Israelites that they are only tenants on God's land and must obey the laws meant to ensure their happiness on the land); among these laws are: the sabbatical year, during which time the land must lie fallow and all may eat of the soil's spontaneous yield; the jubilee year, when property sold before the jubilee returns to its original owner; the treatment of one who has become impoverished; laws pertaining to the Hebrew and non-Hebrew servant; and the Torah portion concludes with the prohibition of idolatry, the mandate to observe the Sabbath, and reverence for the Sanctuary.

ECONOMIC AND OTHER TERMS REQUIRING DEFINITIONS

While Torah laws governing the economic life of the Israelites living in their own land are a small portion of the social and ritualistic commands mandated, they had an enormous daily impact on the life of the community. Every healthy society has to take measures to safeguard the economic welfare of its inhabitants. Poverty retards physical and spiritual growth. The oral tradition expanded these laws immensely and added laws relating to the control of prices, competition, wages, labor, profits, protection of worker's rights, trade unions, banking, interest, taxes, and welfare (see *With All your Possessions*, M. Tamari, The Free Press, 1987).

Let us examine some of these extraordinary laws and how Onkelos and the oral tradition defined them. We begin with our introduction to 25:1 (page 202 and 203)¹:

Chapter 25 contains the uniquely advantageous biblical laws concerning the year of release, the “shemitah” year that occurs every seventh year, and the jubilee, the “yovel” year that reoccurs after seven “shemitahs,” after every forty-ninth year (see page 317). Maimonides explains some of the benefits in his Guide of the Perplexed 3:30, where (in the translation of M. Friedlander) he writes: some of the precepts relating to these years “imply sympathy with our fellow-men, and promote the well-being of mankind . . . and besides, the land will also increase its produce and improve when it remains fallow for some time. Other precepts of this class prescribe kindness to servants and to the poor, by renouncing all claims to debts (in the year of release), and relieving the slaves of their bondage (in the seventh year of enslavement). There are some precepts in this class that serve to secure for the people a permanent source of maintenance and support by providing that the land should remain the permanent property of its owners, and that it could not be sold (forever). . . . In this way the property of a person remains intact for him and his heirs.”

The Torah opens with a broad statement in 25:2 (page 202 and 203): “When you enter the land that I am giving to you, the land must observe a sabbatical before the Lord.” Scripture reads *veshavtah haaretz shabbat la’adonai*, selecting the word *shabbat* to describe the nature of the observance. However, the targumist translates *vetashmeit ar’a shemitsa*, substituting the word *shemitsa* for *shabbat*. Our commentary explains:

The sabbatical year, called “shemitah,” occurred every seventh year, when Israelites were forbidden to work the lands and to have non-Israelites do so for them (ibn Ezra). The Hebrew uses the root “sh-b-t” and the Aramaic “sh-m-t.” Both terms suggest “rest,” “idleness,” “cessation of activity,” and “release.” The Targums call the “shenat Shabbaton,” “sabbatical year,” in verse 5, “the year of release,” the “shemitah year,” using the root “sh-m-t,” the “year of the ‘shemitah,’” the name known to its readers and repeated in Sifra and other rabbinical works. They use “neyach shemitah,” literally “shemitah rest,” for Scripture’s “Shabbat Shabbaton” because this is what is required by the context of the passage, even though they render “Shabbat Shabbaton” as a “Sabbath of Sabbaths,” its literal meaning in 16:31 and Exodus 16:29 and other passages (see our commentary on Exodus 16:29). The change is characteristic. Onkelos frequently alters the wording of the text to enhance the meaning required by the context of the passage. Compare verse 47 where the Bible’s single noun “geir” receives two diverse treatments because of the context. The rabbis understood that the law of “shemitah” (the sabbatical year) only applies in the land of Israel, since Scripture states, “When you enter the land.”

Associated with the laws of *shemitah*, is the requirement to “count seven sabbatical years (*Onkelos: shemitin*), seven years seven times” (25:8 page 204 and 205).” Proclaim

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

the horn on the Day of Atonement throughout your land” (25:9 pages 204 and 205). “Hallow the fiftieth year. Proclaim liberty throughout the land for all of its inhabitants. Make it the jubilee” (25:10 pages 204 and 205). Note some of the targumic deviations in these verses, and some of the interesting definitions offered:

Verse 8. SABBATICAL YEARS . . . SABBATICAL YEARS. Bible: “Shabbetot shanim . . . Shabbetot hashanim.” Onkelos: “shemitan di’shnin . . . shemitan di’shnin.” In the Hebrew, the first phrase means “shemitahs of years” and the second “shemitahs of the years.” The Targum ignores the “hay,” “the,” in the second phrase.

Verse 9. THE HORN. While the Bible has “horn,” our targumist alters it to the definite “the horn,” the one mentioned earlier in the verse. Pseudo-Jonathan is even more specific when it identifies the instrument blown once on the sabbatical year as “the horn of freedom.”

Verse 10 LIBERTY. The commentators differ concerning the origin and meaning of the Hebrew “deror,” “liberty.” Some of them compare “deror” to other Hebrew words. Others see the analogy between the Hebrew term and other ancient Semitic languages. For example: (1) It is derived from “dur,” “dwell”: a person is truly free when he can dwell where he pleases (Rashi, referring to an opinion in the Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 9b). (2) It is the name of a swallow that sings when it is free, but dies when it is captive (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 106a, b; Beitzah 24a; and ibn Ezra, referring to Proverbs 26:2). (3) It is connected to “dor,” “generation” (Nachmanides). (4) It is “an ancient word from the Akkadian “(an)duraru”=“freeing from burdens”” (Noth, Leviticus, page 187). (5) The Targums’ “freedom” is in Sifra and the Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 9a, and is the meaning in Isaiah 61:1 and Jeremiah 34:8. It captures the general intent of all the prior translations (see page 317).

Appendix (page 318). The term “liberty” is generally recognized as being a concept of political philosophy. It reflects a person’s ability to act according to his or her own free will. John Stuart Mill, in his On Liberty, and Isaiah Berlin, in his Two Concepts of Liberty, identify two opposite concepts of liberty, one positive and the other negative. The former addresses the ability to act as the individual desires to fulfill his or her potential. It describes the freedom to achieve worthy goals. It addresses the positive moral principle that people can exercise certain rights, such as believing what they want, assembling where they desire, and standing for a political office. The latter concept focuses on how the individual is protected from tyranny and the arbitrary use of political or any other coercive authority. The “shemitah” and jubilee years, like the Sabbath, also have these positive goal-oriented and negative protective purposes both for society generally and for the individual.

Verse 10. JUBILEE. “Jubilee” is a transliteration of the Hebrew “yovel.” What does it mean? (1) The Septuagint translates it as “aphesis,” “release,” as does ibn Ezra. (2) Philo (Decalogue 164) renders it “apokatastasis,” “restitution.” (3) The Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 26a, states that “yovel” means “horn” and is named after the ram’s horn sounded at the beginning of the year (see Onkelos to Exodus 19:13

and Targum Jonathan to Joshua 6:4). (4) Luzzatto (Commentary, page 431) feels that this is a rationalization and suggests that the word was originally the name of a holiday shout by Baal idol worshippers made up of “yw,” an exclamation of joy, and “bl,” a shortened form of “Baal.” The Torah adopted, transformed, and elevated the word to describe a period of time when people would recall that the land belongs to God, when the poor and slaves would be redeemed, and produce would belong to rich and poor alike. (5) Sidney B. Hoenig in “Sabbatical years and the Year of Jubilee” suggested that the jubilee year was forty-nine days in length. It was a leap year that brought the lunar calendar in harmony with the solar year. The Targums retain the Hebrew word and do not explain it, but handle it as if it were “hayovel,” with the definite “hay,” “the,” here and in verses 11 and 12, as Sifra and the Bible have it in verses 13 and 15.

The laws of *shemittah* and jubilee taught the Jewish community a profound lesson that was intended to fashion a *sine qua non* perspective on life. It is summed up in 25:23 (pages 206 and 207), “Do not sell the land in perpetuity for the land is Mine.” If the land belongs to God, indeed, if the world belongs to God, then we are merely tenants on earth and we are required to abide by the rules of “occupancy” set by the “Landlord.” *Onkelos* lacks this idea and the homiletical interpretations of many commentators for it is only a translation.

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

ON ONKELOS

One should not expect *Onkelos* to provide startling, unique, exceptional translations in every verse. That would be an unfair and improbable expectation. Once we understand the translator’s style and mission, which is our focus, we will learn to anticipate the nature of the contributions he makes, some quite significant, some less so. He also had a different reading audience than we have in the contemporary Bible student and he was sensitive to their linguistic difficulties and level of Torah knowledge. Hence, what might appear to be a uninformative translation, could have been quite revelatory in the fourth century. Nevertheless, *Onkelos* has withstood the test of time and is worthy of the title *Targum didan*, “our translation,” the only rabbinically authorized translation of the Pentateuch in Jewish history.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

If we study the economic laws of the Torah carefully, we can see that they address specific social problems that can plague any society. Judaism is not merely a “religion” in the dictionary sense, “the belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God entitled to obedience and worship” or “a particular system of faith and

worship” (*The Oxford Dictionary*, 1996, page 1270). It is an all-encompassing “way of life” that demands commitment to a broad range of social values, promulgated to create an ideal society. This does not mean that we cannot raise questions that challenge some of Judaism’s premises. For examples, we turn to our “Beyond the Text” (page 231) with issues requiring satisfying responses:

One of the most serious deficiencies in any economic system is the gap that separates the wealthy and poor. By providing free access to the spontaneous yield of the soil and through the cancellation of debts on the sabbatical year, and by requiring the land to be restored to its original owner every jubilee year, the Torah also “levels the playing field.” Members of the society are not permanently locked into their penurious condition and a healthier and more wholesome society is forged. Do these laws seem fair? Why should a person be relieved of paying his debt simply because a sabbatical year is ushered in? While allowing land to lie fallow for a year may improve the quality of the soil, can’t this objective be accomplished by simply rotating the crops? By mandating the return of land to its original owner at the jubilee year, aren’t we causing the value of land to decrease year after year? What benefits are derived from observing these laws? What obstacles stand in the way of their observance?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. See 25:18 and commentary, “SECURELY ON THE LAND” (page 207). The targumist clarifies the meaning of “secure.”
2. See 25:29 and commentary, “SURROUNDED” (page 209). The *Targums* add a word that clarifies a biblical law.
3. See 25:35 and commentary, “DWELL, RESIDE, AND LIVE WITH YOU” (page 211). Rashi takes issue with the translation of *Onkelos* (and *Pseudo-Jonathan*) in terms of who in the community must be supported when becoming impoverished.