

DR. RACHEL TZVIA BACK: POETRY AND TRANSLATION

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HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit podcast, Torah With a Point of View. Produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host and dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles. You've tuned into a Bully Pulpit special series for Symposium I, which the Hebrew Union College convened in New York City in November of 2016. Symposium I was organized around the theme of crafting Jewish life in a complex religious landscape. We at the Bully Pulpit had the privilege of interviewing some of the outstanding thinkers who participated in Symposium I, and we think you'll enjoy the conversation.

HOLO: I'm thrilled to welcome Dr. Rachel Tzvia-Bach who is Senior Lecturer of English Literature at Oranim College. Dr. Bach is a poet, a translator of Hebrew poetry, a scholar and an author of critical studies on American literature. Her 2014 selected poems of Tuvia Ruebner, *In the Illuminated Dark*, printed by our press, Hebrew Union College Press and the University of Pittsburg Press was a finalist in 2015 for both the National Translation Award in poetry and Jewish Book Council Award in poetry. And we're excited that in 2017 we expect her new title, also from HUC Press, called *On the Surface of Silence, the Last Poems of Leah Goldberg*. Dr. Bach, thank you for joining us. It's a pleasure to have you.

TZVIA-BACK: Thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

HOLO: I'd like to talk to you about poetry and some of the resonances that really came through to me, at least, in your translations. If you take poetry in high school in any society that cares about these things, you know that poetry's power, among other things, is its capacity to convey multiple meanings at the same time, and to refuse to resolve that multiplicity of meanings in ways that prose feels obligated to resolve. As a translator, I think it's also fairly evident that there's a, as the Italians say, "To translate is to betray," that you're forcing a choice in resolving the multiplicities of meaning in a way that's got to be very complicated. And I want to hear you talk about that. But what struck me about one of your translations is the opposite. Is the way in which the translation opened up new multiplicities of meaning that maybe weren't in the original Hebrew? And I'd like to hear your thoughts on that. I'm thinking of the first quarter of the collection from Diti Ronen, the *Inner Moon Notebook*. Each of these quarters, as it were, has a title. The first one is called *saharon* in Hebrew. And you call it crescent in English. And I was thinking that *saharon* evokes notions of glowingness. Whereas crescent evokes

notions of growth. The crescent moon is the opposite of the waning moon. And the poem itself has a specific argument to make about the contradiction of contracting in order to create something and to grow. It seems to me that the English was more resonate and more polysemous than the Hebrew in this case. And I thought that maybe you were becoming a co-poet with the poet. So I'd like to ask you to read, if you would, the first quarter, which is titled "Crescent."

TZVIA-BACK: Okay.

First Quarter: Crescent.

Once there was no earth, the universe was bare.
and all my sides were luminous
and my face was luminous and my eyes were luminous
and the soles of my feet were luminous
and even the place where the soles of my feet stepped was luminous

And I wasn't capable of even the slightest waning
of even nearing the awareness of waning
and from the moment there was awareness of waning, waning was formed

Later there was earth
and in the power of its orbit came the crashing sickle
like the falling of the meteor and the Big Bang

And the hour of my death was the hour of my birth.

I read the last line backwards. That's so interesting to me that I did that. I transposed it. I transposed it.

HOLO: Death and birth.

TZVIA-BACK: Yes. Even as it's right in front of me there. So.

HOLO: So tell me a little bit about how the translator becomes a poet.

TZVIA-BACK: This translator, meaning me, I am a poet to begin with. And I certainly don't assert this as an absolute but in my experience, I think that translators of poetry usually are more successful when they themselves are poets. Even though many non-poets are translating poetry. But as a poet you come with a certain sensibility that is already honed to the particular aspect of poetry that your poet is trying to achieve. What is true is that I agree with your wonderful introduction and your question which is itself multifold and full of various meanings that we enter into, we translators of poetry, enter into a relationship with the original poem that is complex and exists of many different levels. It's hard to explain that entirely. And people who translate prose, I think they're doing a different type of work all together. There's an inhabiting, that's my experience,

which is a very moving experience to be engaged in where you have been allowed or you give yourself permission to inhabit somebody else's voice in that level of intimacy. There's something very, very intimate about it. And because of that I think there is a new creation. That from that intimacy comes a new creation.

I've been extremely fortunate to work for quite a few years with the poetry of Tuvya Ruebner who's a glorious older gentleman now. He's 92 this year. He has been very supportive of my translations of his work. And I tell a story in a presentation that I've given a few places on Ruebner that my first translations of his poems had come out in the lovely journal *Modern Poetry and Translation* which is located in England. And it was *Shavuot* and I made my way to his kibbutz in order to bring him a copy, a kind of first fruits feeling about it. And I left the journal with him because we were busy talking about everything else. And the next day I received an email from him. He said that he had had a lovely experience that morning. That he had sat with the journal, which is only in English. They don't provide the original language. He said, "I had sat with the journal and I was reading through it from right to left," as is his fashion, "and I stumbled," says Tuvya, "across this lovely poem that had the final stanza 'One can endure almost anything. And no one knows when or where happiness will overcome him.'" And Tuvya says in this email to me, "I thought what a lovely poem. I wish I had written it. And then I discovered I had." It was his poem. But it was a new poem for him in English. And he was delighted with it. So, there is there co-creation. "Co" might be an overstatement. Elliot Weinberger speaks about it as a new music which I resonate to. And of course, he's pulling from being Benjamin and other important theorists on what translation of poetry is striving to do, what it can do. The notion of a new music suits me very well.

HOLO: And does it free you, perhaps, from some of the constraints that might otherwise in a prose-minded fashion, regardless of whether or not one is translating prose, but in a prose-minded fashion might shackle someone?

TZVIA-BACK: Well, not so much in connection with prose because I think that prose doesn't have those particular shackles. I think that the shackles in poetry translation, which could be pitfalls to mix our metaphors unfortunately, are the questions of rhyme. Rhyme's a very big question. You know, poets and lots of Hebrew poets, Tuvya also and now I've been working on Goldberg also, use end rhymes because Hebrew lends itself to end rhyme in a particular fashion in which English does not. So how do you relate to that? And how do you, I would say, liberate yourself from the expectation that you will transfer the Hebrew one to one? You don't. With HUC Press and University of Pittsburg Press, I've been very fortunate to have these bilingual editions, the Ruebner and the Goldberg now coming out. And it's wonderful to have the Hebrew and the English side by side. I think that's the way translation should live in the world. Having said that, it poses a particular challenge because the reader who is conversant in the Hebrew, or in the original language, will often sit in a one to one type of reading.

HOLO: It promotes it, you mean.

TZVIA-BACK: It promotes it. Exactly. That's well said. It promotes it. And I think that's a mistaken approach. And it also, the reader of the Hebrew who then comes to the English will even be looking for the places where you've veered away for the reasons that you veered away, but once necessarily assimilate that and then will get stuck on the fact, well here she's made choices which don't seem to me exact. Now the word exact is so very...

HOLO: Right. It's revealing of the reader's approach to the poetry in the first place.

TZVIA-BACK: Exactly. Exactly.

HOLO: On the other hand, for someone who does have, perhaps middling access to the original language, your translation could be a powerful, powerful tool because of the admittedly possibly slavish correlation. Could nevertheless be a window back into the Hebrew for some people that they wouldn't have if they didn't have that one to one correlation, for all its slavishness.

TZVIA-BACK: Yes. Though again, the one to one doesn't even exist. I mean we know that to be a falsity. So, that you can perhaps delude yourself to it but it doesn't exist.

HOLO: Yes. But the delusion could be productive if one chooses to work it.

TZVIA-BACK: Yes. Yes. I think that there is a way in which it could open it back towards the Hebrew, yes.

HOLO: And from the point of view of let's say, I don't know, I think of languages with which I haven't even the slightest familiarity like Russian or something, I can imagine a face to face translation on two sides of a page or what have you to be the opportunity for a Russian speaker to read it in Russian just for me to hear it and get the rhythms and the rhymes. And just enjoy that aesthetic experience. And then that might promote the trust I need to have in the translator.

TZVIA-BACK: Yes.

HOLO: And then enjoy the translation.

TZVIA-BACK: Yes. Yes, if you're lucky to have someone to read the original, yes, I agree with you. And then, of course, you're talking about the musical aspect which will absolutely be different, right.

HOLO: It's one of the joys of language is the musicality. So you don't want to...

TZVIA-BACK: You don't want to give up on it.

HOLO: I'm glad HUC is on the side of the angels here keeping it...

TZVIA-BACK: Absolutely. Very much on the side of the angels.

HOLO: Good.

TZVIA-BACK: Absolutely. Yes.

HOLO: Before we return to the Bully Pulpit, we want to tell you about other programs on the College Commons platform for digital learning. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, synagogue subscriptions offer in-depth learning including online courses, live interviews, and a new program called The Teaching Podcast, selected episodes from the Bully Pulpit enhanced with text and teaching tools. We look forward to meeting you at CollegeCommons.huc.edu. Now, back to – oh one more thing. Help us out and rate us in iTunes. And whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

HOLO: I'd now like to shift a little bit to your classroom. You describe your teaching as a classroom for inter-ethnic and religious dialogue. And I want...

TZVIA-BACK: Can I stop you there?

HOLO: Yeah, correct me, please.

TZVIA-BACK: I don't think I've ever used that term.

HOLO: Fair enough.

TZVIA-BACK: I think that probably others have spoken about me in that way but it's – my classroom's a classroom. That's what it is. There are students who come who are Muslims and Jews and Christians. And as is the nature of our world, and mine in particular, we live in conflict. And so things evolve from that. But it's important for me to say we're a classroom. So we're – that's what we're doing.

HOLO: What does it look like when a classroom is colored by this forum of four conflicting parties? Specifically, your classroom. And I'm assuming we're talking about poetry which gets...

TZVIA-BACK: Yes, I'm extremely fortunate because my – I belong to the English department. And all of our studies are conducted in English. All of my texts are English texts. And my particular field of expertise is American poetry. And the reason why I feel that that allows me, and my students, to meet each other in a fashion which I think in other literature classes, from let's say Hebrew departments, are far less available is because it starts out as a neutral zone. And nobody is at an advantage.

Very recently I attended a presentation from a lecturer at my college who teaches Hebrew literature in the graduate program. The title of her talk was "Don't sell me the enemy's story: something, something." And she told us how she had taught a novel by a

Palestinian Israeli in one of her Hebrew classes and there was a Jewish student who was very antagonistic to it. This could also happen on the other side that if they were reading a novel by, I don't know, by some Hebrew writer, the Arabs in the classroom could be antagonistic.

I'm teaching African-American poetry and transcendentalists and the world seems as though it's far from their own realm. Now that's the beauty of it, obviously. I get to open up their hearts to questions that are very, very relevant to their own world but we're able to do it in a way that isn't already met with an antagonism and resistance that, of course, we know to be the case whenever anybody hears the other's story. And, of course, and this is what I'll be talking on tomorrow is that I have a strong belief, and it's a belief based on what I've seen on the classroom for many, many years that poetry is able to open up a particular place in a person's heart that I think prose doesn't necessarily do as readily. And I'm making an argument how the very form of poetry, you spoke about its multiplicity for example, and it's a multiplicity that doesn't ask to be resolved. Now that's unique. That's extraordinary. And to be able to show my students, here, look at this text. It speaks in many voices, and no single voice negates any other. Wow! That's an amazing thing for the students who feel at every moment that their own narrative or their own story is being challenged and doesn't have a place in the spectrum.

HOLO: That's a wonderful elucidation of how the form itself opens something up. Do you teach "Testimony" in your English classes?

TZVIA-BACK: No. I don't teach poetry in translation.

HOLO: You don't teach it.

TZVIA-BACK: No, I don't teach – I teach English language poetry. English literature. And every so often I teach in the graduate program, so every so often if there's some poem that I really need, I'll, for example, over the years I've allowed for the infiltration of one or two Rilke's and one or two Paul Celans but otherwise I'm very much a purist that I don't want to bring in poetry in translation.

HOLO: Okay.

TZVIA-BACK: So I don't teach "Testimony."

HOLO: I don't know if my line of questioning is going to work. But what I wanted to do is I wanted you to read "Testimony," if you would. And then I want to pick up on themes. But my picking up on the themes was a misapprehension on my part that it would be relevant to this social laboratory element of your teaching. So if it doesn't fit it doesn't fit.

TZVIA-BACK: First of all, I'm delighted you chose this poem. This is a poem that I adore. This is a poem by Tuvia Ruebner and it is one of his most important poems. It sits in the middle of his second book that, if I'm not mistaken I hope I have that right,

was published in 1964. And what your listeners might not know is that Ruebner's family was killed in the Holocaust, his parents, his grandparents, his little sister. And he was already in it was mandate Palestine. And then made the rest of his life in Palestine. The poem is resonating from that particular place. We had a celebration at the Metula Poetry Festival for Tuvya Ruebner's 90th birthday and they gathered a group of poets. And each one of us was asked to choose the Tuvya Ruebner poem that we wanted to read. And I chose this one. And so you couldn't be more spot on. You just couldn't. Alright, so.

Testimony.

I exist in order to say
this house is not a house,
place of confiscations, parched rock, fear
there by the central square, did I say central square?
Paved wilderness.

I exist in order to say

this road is not a road,
clung to by its travelers, ascending on dreams rust
from the forest, the sand mountain where
I walk, there, who is walking? There where I used to
walk, a child in the sun
of cessation, with outstretched arms, searching
and searching for my father's face my mother's

I exist in order to say

these are the cross beams and chronicles
of my parents, coal,
ash, wind
of my sister in my hair blowing
back and back, a night wind.

in my day I exist in order to say
to their nighttime voices yes, yes, to their weeping, yes
to the lost in their house of abeyance, to the falling from its wall's shadows
on the fear in my voice saying yes
in the emptiness.

HOLO: So I picked up on some of the predictable thematic words like cessation, abeyance, confiscation. And I think any Jewish reader or listener would have assumed Tuvya Ruebner's history even had you not shared it with us because those words resonate with the ashes of Europe to us. It's a standard. But in the context of a cross-

section of populations in conflict, in Israel, one can't help but think about the mirror that that might pose, for example, Palestinian Israelis.

TZVIA-BACK: Yes.

HOLO: And so I wanted to ask you, and you partially answered this with the form of poetry, but now let's talk about the content of poetry. I can see why literature in general, poetry certainly, can be a canvas for this kind of encounter, conflicted or not. But if we talk about it as a canvas it feels like a Rorschach test where you project and the canvas is implicitly blank. I want to talk about what poetry injects of its own, what it forces, into the conversation, not just allowing us to project our images onto it.

TZVIA-BACK: Explain to me a little bit better what you're saying.

HOLO: I'm saying that this poem, if we pick up on the themes that I've chosen to pick up on, abeyance, cessation, confiscation, it's not opening up a blank canvas conversation to conflicted parties. It's thrusting into this, not just the conflict itself but the destruction, the unredeemable aspects of the destruction. I want to talk about poetry's power to do that. Its obligation to do that.

TZVIA-BACK: Okay, so I'm listening to you elucidate your point and what – and you keep on returning to the very specific lexis choices as kind of touchstones, which of course they're translated, right. So we – which, of course, is a different issue and we'll put that on the side for the movement. And what comes to my mind, and I think you're, of course, absolutely right in this is what poetry does is it's the aspect of poetry which is based on concentration. Now the beauty of the word concentration is itself opens up to various aspects. And here, I'm actually thinking of a wonderful book by Jane Hirschfield which is called *The Nine Gates of the Mind*. I don't remember the second part of the title. But she talks about concentration in various aspects. And I'm thinking of it very specifically the way in which we would encounter it in an Emily Dickinson poem where she says in one of her famous letters, an oft quoted letter, she says, "I know not which word to take, as each must be the chiefest." And I always remarked to my students, "But look at what she's done. Not only is she careful with her words but she's even made up a word, because chiefest doesn't exist, right." And they're like, "Wow! That's pretty cool." The essence. That every word is genuinely a world. So you went back time and again to cessation and abeyance and you felt it thrusting. You as the reader into the world of destruction.

HOLO: Yes, absolutely.

TZVIA-BACK: And at the same time what you noted, which I really, I have to admit to you I've never read this poem in that fashion but I'm happy to have you open it up to me in that way, that a Palestinian, either Israeli Palestinian or West Bank Palestinian could come to this poem and read it as his or her own story. Now that's – it's chilling.

HOLO: Yeah.

TZVIA-BACK: It's chilling. And it's true. And here again, it would be because of the distillation, the concentration, the essence, without anything beyond it.

HOLO: Right. It's self-contained.

TZVIA-BACK: Self-contained.

HOLO: And sort of unquestionable in its realness because it's unmoored but not lost.

TZVIA-BACK: Oh that's beautiful. It's absolutely. And it speaks to us on a whole 'nother level that, of course, is not the way in which we converse in the day to day. And it's usually not the way in which prose talks to us unless it's a particular poetic prose. And that's poetry. That's poetry.

HOLO: That's a good way to end the topic then. And I want to thank you so much for taking the time.

TZVIA-BACK: Thank you.

HOLO: It's a pleasure to talk to you.

TZVIA-BACK: It was lovely. Thank you.

HOLO: You've been listening to the Bully Pulpit podcast, produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. We hope you enjoyed this podcast. And please join us again at CollegeCommons.huc.edu.

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