JEWISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS:
PERSONALITIES, PASSIONS, POLITICS, PROGRESS

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Joshua Holo: Welcome to the College Commons Podcast, passionate perspectives from Judaism's leading thinkers, brought to you by the Hebrew Union College, Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, Dean of HUC's, Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles and your host.

JH: Welcome to this episode of the College Commons Podcast, where I look forward to sharing with you a conversation with Leonard Greenspoon. Leonard J. Greenspoon holds the Philip M. And Ethel Klutznick Chair in Jewish civilization at Crete University, where he is also a Professor of Theology and of classical and Near-Eastern studies. He's the editor of the 32-volume, and counting, studies in Jewish Civilization series, and his most recent book is called Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics, Progress from the Jewish publication society and University of Nebraska Press in 2020. Professor Greenspoon, thank you so much for joining us on the Commons Podcast.

Leonard Greenspoon: Thank you for having me.

JH: You begin your book, Jewish Bible Translations, by addressing a concern about the difference of approaches embedded in Christian and Jewish translations of the Bible, but before we return to that theme, I wanna ask you a bigger question from within the Jewish perspective at large. Why do translations matter so much in our discovery of our own Jewish experience across time and geography?

LG: Within Judaism as I understand it today, even from the most untraditional to, of course, the most Orthodox, reading the biblical text, reading the scroll, is a continued, valued, phenomenon ritual within Judaism. In order to do that, typically in an American format, kids like myself went to Sunday School, which in my day was Sunday and two-week days as well, and we learned that the rudiments of Hebrew, and in spite of changes over the centuries, this centrality of reading the Bible in Hebrew has been

retained. And of course, this doesn't mean at any great level of comprehension, the majority of Jews throughout the majority of time, and here I'm being somewhat hyperbolic, had little, if any proficiency in Hebrew. And therefore, for example, when Bible translations were made in Yiddish, they were often spoken of as Bible translations for the home and the school, that is where women and children abided as ora.

LG: And the unstated premise was that adult Jewish men would be educated enough to understand the Bible in its original Hebrew and Aramaic. But this was really never entirely accurate. People need the translation because, otherwise, they would not understand the text. And getting meaning out of, in this case, the biblical text, has always been considered important. Either we're going to educate everybody so that they can understand the Hebrew Bible in its original language, which I think is laudable but unrealistic, or we're going to meet people where they are. I've always held that Jewish Bible translations are meant to supplement, but not supplant the original, and that translations of the Hebrew Bible for Jews indicate in one way or another that it's a translation, an aid for understanding without taking the place of the biblical text original languages.

JH: You used a phrase "To meet them where they were" meaning to accept the fact that the majority of people who would be functioning liturgically in Hebrew wouldn't necessarily understand the Hebrew at a high level, but that you want to enfranchise those people anyway. Is it fair to say that that desire to enfranchise the broadest possible set of Jews, despite their limited literacy, that that willingness to include them, effectively enfranchised and legitimated the diasporic experience whereby translations were necessary on the one hand, but whereby we chose not to disqualify them on the other hand, so that we could keep diaspora non-Hebrew speaking Jews within the fold?

LG: I had not heard it expressed it exactly that way, but that's what I feel is the case. And just to build off of that a little bit, while it's clear that a translation fills this gap in knowledge between the language of the original and the vernacular language, Jewish translators from very early on have been motivated by other factors as well. So, for example, translations into the vernacular have been used by some Jewish translators and committees to help situate Jews in the culture, which is almost entirely been a Christian culture, but also obviously it's not been a Jewish speaking culture.

LG: For example, Moses Mendelssohn's translation beginning in the second half of the 18th century, Moses Mendelssohn had in mind that the language of his contemporary Jews, which was Yiddish, was not appropriate for Jews who were gaining the opportunity to be part of the general, political, social, economic life of German-speaking lands. And so the translation was partly shaped in the German of the day, High German. Mendelssohn based his German text on the classic Protestant-German translation by

Martin Luther from a century and a half earlier, and he felt as if, okay, yes, we have to make the text available to the vast majority of people who can't read it in the original, at the same time, we want them to be acquainted with, even immersed in the language of the dominant culture, because the dominant culture was then allowing many opportunities for Jews, and it was felt by Mendelssohn and other Jewish enlightenment leaders that part of getting into the salon culture, sort of being part of the sophisticated society, is being able to speak the language and Yiddish wasn't the language.

LG: Interestingly enough, the translation that I grew up with, which was the Jewish Publication Society translation of 1917, which continued being used into the late '60s and '70s, the editor of that translation, Max Margolis, who was an immigrant from Eastern Europe, based his text on the King James. And he had in mind something very similar. And although it's not exactly accurate to say that speaking King James English was what... Even educated people spoke in the early 20th century, nonetheless, that was the idea.

JH: What are the watershed translations of the Bible in Jewish history?

LG: The first translation of the Torah, the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses from Hebrew into Greek, which took place beginning in the first quarter of the third century, BCE 275, continued perhaps for a century or two centuries to include eventually all the books of the Hebrew Bible as well as translations of other Semitic texts, which were not part of the rabbinic Bible. This was the first translation of the Hebrew Bible. And more over a bit of a hyperbolic statement, but it's more or less the case, that it's the first time a significant text was translated from another language into Greek. Because the Greeks typically believed that they were superior and part of that superiority was their language and that they would civilize the world by making sure that they would translate everything into other languages, so people would be able to understand their... Appreciate their wisdom, but not really considering it important to translate other people's texts into Greek.

LG: And then the Targums which are Aramaic translations, mainly, from the first century to the sixth century of the common era, these are significant because for the Jewish community, the Aramaic had replaced Greek as the language of the dominant societies in which they inhabited. And the Targums were spoken in synagogues, along with the Hebrew which was chanted from the schule. And as a result of that and other factors, study of the Targums became part of a traditional Jewish education where a study of the Septuagint is certainly not been. So if we move ahead, it's not difficult for me to say that another watershed event took place at around the year 1000, when Saadia, who was a Gaon or leader of one of the academies in Babylonia, translated the text from Hebrew into Arabic. And Arabic, of course, had become the dominant language.

LG: And this translation is interesting in the sense that Saadia's primary concern was to make his text intelligible for the Arabic-speaking audience that he envisioned. And at the same time, he was rabbinic but he was faced with opposition from other groups. Just as an example, when we get to the passage which we found three times in the Torah, do not boil a kid in his mother's milk, in Saadia's translation, you actually have in the translation itself, do not eat milk and meat. What kind of translation is that? Well, it's certainly Saadia's understanding of what should be in the text.

LG: Among other translations, certainly Moses Mendelssohn's translation, which he began, actually as... Not as an experiment so much as a project, to educate his own children and was the first translation of the biblical text into German. And that was very important to Mendelssohn. His translation was opposed by some of his contemporaries because they felt if Jews were introduced to a high literary style of German, they might start reading other German works. And if they started reading other German works, they might be enamored, if you will, of German Protestant life and leave Judaism, which in fact, clearly was not what Mendelssohn had in mind, but in fact, almost all of Mendelssohn's descendants from his own children to the next generation did leave Judaism and perhaps they were enticed by the very language that Mendelssohn intended to educate. At the same time, he wanted them to know the Jewish interpretation of biblical passage. And he is very clear about this, he said he's not blaming non-Jewish translators for not understanding the text as he would have understood it correctly, because they weren't trained to learn it correctly.

LG: And then the last one I'll mention now is the Jewish Publication Society or Tanakh, using the acronym for the Torah, Nevi'im prophets, and Ketuvim writings that JPF first produced in the 1960s. And this is become the biblical text of record for use in non-traditional synagogues. And beyond that, it's the text which is used in so many study guides and so many commentaries that appear across the board to members of the Jewish community. And what's interesting about this translation is that it is not a literal translation or what we now would call a formal translation, but it's more intended to be written in the language of the people. I would like to think that translation isn't necessarily a betrayal of the original, but so many of the translators or translators will need to determine what it is from the original that they wanna convey in the vernacular into which they're translating the text. And the fact that translators have different approaches to that is one of the reasons why we have so many different translations.

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JH: Before we return to the podcast, we wanna let you know about digital learning on the College Commons platform. Beyond this podcast, which is available to the public at large, check out the online courses at collegecommons.huc.edu for in-depth learning, digital syllabi, assignments, inspiration for teaching and one of our most influential courses called Making Prayer Real. Subscribe with your synagogue for all this and more. Just click, sign up at collegecommons.huc.edu. Oh, and one more thing, help us out and rate us on iTunes. But whatever you do, do not give us five stars, unless we deserve it. Now, back to our podcast.

JH: What's going on when we think about the difference between literal translation and free translation, but what's going on in particular when we're talking about translating a sacred authoritative text and presumably claiming to retain that authority and that sanctity when we translate?

LG: That's an important question. My primary teaching has been at Clemson, which is a state university of South Carolina, therefore a public institution, and almost all the students were Baptist and still are or Methodist. And then for the last year is where I've had my chair at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, which it's chairs were Catholic. And especially among the first group, there's a sense in which the literal reading of the text is the only serious reading of the text. If you don't read the text literally, you're not taking the text seriously. So I keep that in mind, but I also keep in mind that within Judaism, as well as in fact, within Roman Catholicism, a fixation on the literal reading of the text is just not part of our tradition.

LG: It is a distinctly protestant development in a way it's a distinctively American phenomenon 'cause America is overall still largely a protestant country. So, what's at stake when you read the text more literally is a sense that the structure of the language, that it's not just the individual words, but the structure of sentences, structure of phrases, repeated language, even including verb subject order, that these elements of grammar, phonology are inextricably connected with the meaning of the text. That is the form of the text, in this case, biblical Hebrew full of some biblical Aramaic, that you need in your translation to reflect as much of the style and the grammar, and to an extent the vocabulary of the original as possible. And by doing that, you will retain the most important elements, and this is a form of translation which has dominated Bible versions, but it's not the only option. So, one of the advantages or perhaps disadvantages, the literal translation requires work on the part of the reader. The other approach which we can speak of more as functional equivalence, and this is... I say this is the JPS version that came out in the '60s which continues to dominate in most all Jewish activities is a different question.

LG: And the question that the translators of this type asked is, "What was the translator saying to his audience" or what were translators saying to their audience. How do we say that today? And consequently, an emphasis on the form of the original becomes far less important, that translation then will be concerned as it were with a number of stylistic features of the original. Let me just point out if I may, if we look at the Bible translations that are widely available that were done by Jews, and at least in part with the Jewish audience in mind, certainly the translation which is regarded the most noticed in recent years is Robert Alter's. Alter was a professor at University of California Berkeley, very well known in literary circles, and his goal was to produce a text where as many of the specific features of the Hebrew language would be visible.

LG: And so a classic example from Alter is the following. Biblical Hebrew, to use a technical term is grammar's protactic, which means "And Moses came and he saw the burning bush and he stopped and he took off his shoes, and, and, and, and, and." And Alter feels that this repetition of the conjunction is a central part of his translation, and therefore, I remember analyzing some Biblical verses where the Hebrew text had, let's say a dozen uses of the conjunction in two or three verses. And Alter has a dozen uses of the conjunction in English for these verses. And then you look at the JPS translation, the Tanakh, Tanakh would be much more likely to have something like this. "When Moses saw the burning bush, he took off his shoes after which he spoke to the voice." This makes a difference. We can understand both of these English language versions. The JPS translation sounds like English to us. The Alter translation, it's English and I can understand it, but it's not native to me.

JH: I think one of the distinctive problems that we derive from two mutually contradictory religious traditions that undertake to translate the same text, that is to say, obviously, Christianity's Bible is different from the Hebrew Bible, but it's nevertheless the case that the majority of the Hebrew Bible constitutes the majority of the Christian Bible. Judaism, despite millennia of polemics against polytheism, doesn't actually worry so much about... I don't know, like the Hindu Vedas, for example, the sacred texts of Hinduism, nor do Jews and Judaism really care about Hindu translations of the Hebrew Bible, because at the end of the day, neither Judaism's nor Hinduism's claims really impinge on those of one another. Would you agree, by contrast that much of the millennial conflict between Christianity and Judaism actually derives from the fact that in translating texts that are purported to be in common, the translations actually shine a very harsh light on how much that textual commonality is in fact deceptive.

JH: That is to say that divergent translations of a given text necessarily compete with one another, and when the text in question claims to be divine, as the Bible does, that

competition also raises the stakes for religious conflict. Is that a fair assessment of what's sometimes at stake in Jewish-Christian translation?

LG: Yes, although my preference is to highlight, as it were, the commonalities. Basic understanding, it is more complicated than that as if that weren't complicated enough, because although more substantial number of Christians today identify as Christian than in previous generations when they would identify as Roman Catholic or Baptist or Methodist, Presbyterian, nonetheless, there's a lot of internal controversies generated within the Christian community, the big one being the distinction between Roman Catholic understandings of the Biblical text and in fact, Roman Catholic understandings of what constitutes the Old Testament and Protestant, but even among Protestants, they have the distinction, and a lot of it has to do with how much is at stake when looking at the biblical text. And here, it's worth noting that as a sort of bedrock presuppositions of Protestantism, it is that the Bible is understood to be literally the word of God, moreover it contains all of God's revelation.

LG: So within Judaism, we certainly place great emphasis on the Biblical text, but in traditional Judaism, as you know, it's as rabbinically understood at one time period which is almost the entirety of Jewish-Christian interactions from the development of Christianity out of Judaism up until the 19th century in many places. When Jews and Christians got together to discuss the biblical text, Jews were forced by the ecclesiastical and/or monarchical structures of the countries in which they lived to be there, and no matter how brilliant the rabbi or other Jewish proponent was, he was sure to lose. And with that loss, could be burning of manuscripts and alas unfortunately, burning or torturing of people, and that there was clearly no interest in interdenominational or inter-religious dialogue. And then these generalized statements, so they're partly true, but we went through through a period, particularly as a result of the Holocaust and World War II, where the idea was Jews and Christians would come together and we'd say, "Wow, yes, we really are alike and yeah, if we can celebrate how much we hold in common", and I think there is a lot we hold in common...

LG: And we've moved, at least in many place beyond that, to understanding that there are common features, partly as a result of how we read the Bible, that we share, but there're also many interpretations which are different and which cannot be reconciled, that they're irreconcilable differences, and then what do we do with irreconcilable differences? I guess, ideally, we face them and acknowledge, for example, that while among Protestants and Jews, the Old Testament and the Hebrew Bible contain, they have the same contents, that is Jews and Protestants even though the order of books are different, the names of the books and the contents of the books and the number of the books in the Old Testament and in the Hebrew Bible are the same, but they're not

reading them and finding meaning from them. Communal and individual meaning, it's not the same experience.

LG: And then Roman Catholics along with Orthodox Christians, Eastern Orthodox Christians, have a larger Old Testament since it includes books like Tobit and Judith, First and Second Maccabees, The Wisdom of Solomon, books that were originally written by Jews for Jews, but are not part of the rabbinic that is the Jewish canon. And then the experience of reading that is different. One does not necessarily fall into the other, but they are different and we need to recognize those differences. I don't know that I've ever used the term irreconcilable differences in this context. Irreconcilable differences, for some reason as I said it now, so it might be okay, a couple's married, they have irreconcilable differences and they separate.

JH: Which seems to me that it's actually more apt.

[chuckle]

LG: Yeah, yeah, apt, but I'm trying... Yeah, I'm trying to hold 'cause I guess I'm like the marriage therapist who's trying to hold it together so that although we can respect the differences and understand where the differences come from, at the same time, we can still be not just, I guess, civil to each other, but we can still learn from each other, and that I'm still holding out at some point that there's a role for translation as part of this.

JH: What chapter of history, what translation, what thing, what unit of discovery surprised you in researching this book?

LG: Just how significant the number of Jewish Bible translations in Judaism that there are, which I don't think has been fully appreciated either by the Jewish community or, if I can put this with a Bible translation, scholarly community. I don't think Jewish translations and Jewish translators have been adequately covered even in broad Bible translation surveys or even in more serious and more focused translation studies. And beyond that, it's the translators themselves. This is a motley group, if I can put it that way, of translators, but it's amazing that so many of the translators about whom we have information... We really don't know anything specific about those who produced the Septuagint or those who produced Targums, but we get to know individuals, and it's amazing who these translators were, and they share so many features, including how many of these were child prodigies and then the degree to which these translators produced the translation as part of their understanding of what was needed in their Jewish community.

JH: Thank you, Professor Greenspoon for taking the time to share this book, Jewish Bible translations and leaving us thirsty for a little bit more to learn about these personalities that you've described and indeed is in the title, personalities, passions, politics, progress. Thank you so much for the conversation.

LG: Thank you.

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