
The Translator's Paradox

Hillel Halkin

MY FIRST paid translation went unpaid. It was commissioned by an Israeli writer named Matti Megged, who, in 1959 or '60, toured America on a grant from a U.S. foundation and ran into me on the Columbia University campus, where I was an undergraduate. A tall, craggy-faced man, the brother of the better-known Israeli novelist Aharon Megged, he discovered I knew Hebrew and offered me \$25 to put a short story of his into English. This I did; before paying me, however, he took a bus to New Orleans, was rolled in a bar there, returned to New York with nothing remaining of his travel grant but a Greyhound ticket left thoughtfully in his pocket, and did not contact me again.

I can't say I felt badly cheated: my translation was wooden and never appeared in print. But it was the start of a professional career, because a year or two later, when Schocken Books in New York chose to put out an anthology of Israeli fiction in English, it asked me, solely on the basis of Matti Megged's guilt-ridden recommendation, to do several stories. That was how hard it was to find Hebrew-English translators in those days. The only

HILLEL HALKIN, *who writes from Israel, is a columnist for the New York Sun. His translation of the first part of S. Y. Agnon's novel To This Day appeared in last month's COMMENTARY. A different version of the present essay was delivered in April at the Schusterman Center for Jewish Studies at Brandeis University.*

ones to be had were a handful of amateurs who made their livings from other things, and the quality of their work was low. In his preface to Schocken's *Israeli Stories*, published in 1962, the volume's editor declared with some pride that

Special care has been taken to avoid the archaisms and crudities in language which in the past have often vitiated Hebrew literature in English. . . . Freed of its artificial quaintness, Hebrew prose can be enjoyed and evaluated like any other modern literature.

Even in the way of the artificially quaint, moreover, the modern Hebrew literature available in English at the time would have fit on a small shelf. There was, as I recall, one other anthology of fiction, Viking Press's *The Whole Loaf; In The Heart of Seas*, a novella by S.Y. Agnon, who had not yet won the Nobel Prize; Moshe Shamir's Israeli best-seller *A King of Flesh and Blood*; a selection from the poetry of Chaim Nachman Bialik; a novel about kibbutz life by a now-forgotten author named David Malitz; and a scattering of short stories and poems in various Jewish magazines and periodicals. That was about it.

Today, professional Hebrew-English translators, some of them very good, abound and the shelf has expanded to several large bookcases. To mention a part of their contents, there is the nearly complete work of Agnon; novels and novellas by 19th- and early 20th-century pioneers of modern Hebrew lit-

erature like Joseph Perl, Peretz Smolenskin, Mordecai Ze'ev Feierberg, Chaim Nahman Bialik, Micha Yosef Berdichevsky, Chaim Yosef Brenner, and Uri Tsvi Gnessin; volumes of fiction by post-World-War I Hebrew authors including Haim Hazaz, David Fogel, and Avigdor Hameiri; more fiction by such prominent Israeli novelists of the 1950's, 60's, and 70's as S. Yizhar, Haim Gouri, Aharon Megged, Hanoach Bartov, Pinchas Sadeh, and David Shahar; a vast amount of contemporary Israeli prose, including nearly everything written by internationally known figures like Aharon Appelfeld, Amos Oz, A.B. Yehoshua, David Grossman, and Meir Shalev; and, in addition to several anthologies of Israeli poetry, one or more individual volumes of verse by Yehuda Amichai, Dan Pagis, Avot Yeshurun, Abba Kovner, Leah Goldberg, Meir Wieseltier, Yona Wallach, Aharon Shabtai, Dahlia Rabikovitsh, Zelda Shneurson, and T. Carmi, to give a partial list.

And this is quite apart from earlier periods of Hebrew and Jewish literature. At the time I began my career as a translator, the English reader had available one Jewish translation of the Bible, the 1917 Jewish Publication Society edition; today, 50 years later, he has at his disposal half-a-dozen different Jewish Bible translations. And this is just the beginning. In recent years there have appeared two complete new editions of the Mishnah; two complete new editions of the Babylonian Talmud; numerous volumes of classical Midrash; many works of medieval Hebrew philosophy; a generous sampling of medieval Hebrew poetry and prose; a completely new four-volume text of the Zohar; other works of Jewish mysticism; dozens if not hundreds of rabbinic texts and commentaries; volumes of hasidic literature, and so on and so forth, much of it in scholarly editions that come with notes and commentaries. Such a library makes it possible to acquire a thorough education in the classics of Judaism entirely in English.

It is now possible to follow events in Israel entirely in English, too. Nor does this have to be done by means of the *Jerusalem Post*, an English-language daily written and produced by Anglophone immigrants to Israel. For a native perspective on Israeli affairs, there is Y-Net, the Internet edition of the mass-circulation *Yedi'ot Aharanot*, and print and Internet editions of the liberal *Haaretz*, each produced by a small factory of Hebrew-English translators working around the clock. Given the seven-hour time difference between Israel and the east coast of America, the surfer in New York often can know

what is happening in Jerusalem before Jerusalemites awaken to read about it in the morning news.

MATTI MEGGED and I were, unwittingly, at the front edge of a wave that has changed Diaspora Jewish life, preeminently in the United States. But the change has not been all for the better. It has contributed to the loss of Hebrew as the international language of the Jewish people.

True, from the time of its demise as a vernacular in antiquity to its spoken revival by modern Zionism, Hebrew was the native language of no Jew on earth. Jews spoke other tongues, and, until the early or mid-19th century, there was hardly a Jewish community in the world that did not have its distinctive medium of speech.

In Russia, Poland, the Baltic states, Rumania, and parts of Hungary, the medium was East-European Yiddish; in Germany and Holland, Western Yiddish; in Italy, Judeo-Italian; in the Balkans, Greece, and Turkey, Ladino; in North Africa and the Levant, various dialects of Judeo-Arabic. Although each of these developed from a non-Jewish base (e.g., medieval German in the case of Yiddish and 15th-century Spanish in that of Ladino), it was partially or entirely incomprehensible to non-Jews. The moment a Jew addressed another Jew in it, a communal "we" was established.

Of course, such a declaration of Jewish identity was also an admission of Jewish dispersion, since the members of one speech community could not communicate with those of another: Yiddish speakers did not know Ladino and Judeo-Arabic speakers did not know Judeo-Italian. But even when speakers of such different languages met, they were not necessarily at a loss as long as they had Hebrew in common.

History offers copious documentation of Hebrew's use as a Jewish lingua franca. The written record goes as far back as the 9th century, when a mysterious traveler known as "Eldad the Danite" turned up in North Africa. Eldad claimed to have come from descendants of the biblical tribe of Dan living in Ethiopia, and he talked in Hebrew—the only language, so he said, that he knew—to the Jews he met. Throughout the ages, traveling Jewish merchants and fund-raising emissaries, generally sent from Palestine, routinely spoke Hebrew wherever they went. The German-Jewish physician Jacob Pollak, who taught and practiced medicine in Persia in the 1850's, wrote of such voyagers encountered by him in Central Asia:

It is amazing to see how far these men manage to circulate. They travel without a qualm to

Samarkand, Bukhara, Kandehar, Harat, and Balk to visit their brethren, going to regions where the ordinary European would be in great danger and getting from place to place on the strength of Hebrew alone, guided by shepherds and nomads through tribal territories infested with bandits and always reaching their destinations safe and sound.

Such men, to be sure, sometimes had difficulty making themselves understood even in Hebrew. The itinerant 19th-century Jerusalem fund-raiser Ya'akov Sapir reported after a visit to Yemen that its Jews had laughed at his Hebrew accent, which they found outlandish and incomprehensible. But even when Hebrew was an unreliable means of spoken communication, every knowledgeable Jew could read and write it.

It was in Hebrew that Jews prayed; studied the Bible and other great Jewish texts; wrote and read works of commentary, philosophy, theology, hagiography, poetry, and fiction; sent each other letters and missives; requested and received legal opinions from rabbinical authorities; and read in translation books written in other languages. (Many of the great works of medieval Jewish philosophy, written in Arabic in Islamic lands, were read by non-Arabic-speaking Jews in Hebrew, in which alone they survived in the Jewish canon.) Until modern times, a Jew with a reading knowledge of Hebrew—and only such a Jew—had access to the thought and creativity of Jews everywhere.

THIS STILL seemed true at the end of the 19th century. As late as 1896, when the distinguished Russian Jewish thinker and essayist Ahad Ha'am founded his periodical review *Hashiloab*, which he hoped to develop into a forum for worldwide Jewish cultural and intellectual exchange, he chose to do so in Hebrew in the confidence that this was the language best suited for the task. Not only did he deem it the natural language of Jewish discourse, but any other language would have been parochial, understood by Jews in some countries but not in others.

Ahad Ha'am's confidence, however, was misplaced. By the time *Hashiloab* was founded, Hebrew as an international language was steeply on the decline, and the journal folded after several years—the very years, it so happened, in which the spoken Hebrew revival was taking root in Palestine. As for American Jewry, by the time Ahad Ha'am died in 1927 it had its own literary

review, the *Menorah Journal*, which would have embodied Ahad Ha'am's editorial vision almost entirely were it not for the fact that it was in English. Most of its readers could not read Hebrew at all. They were the first of the new audience of American Jews for whose benefit the great Hebrew-English translation enterprise of the last 50 years has taken place.

Here, then, is a great historical irony. As long as Hebrew was the first language of no educated Jew in the world, it was the second language of every educated Jew; now that it has become the mother tongue of millions of Jews in the state of Israel, it has largely ceased to be studied by Jews elsewhere. It has in effect been demoted to a Judeo-Israeli, a new Jewish regional speech. In both relative and absolute numbers, far more Israeli and Palestinian Arabs now have a working command of it than do American Jews.

If an Eldad the Danite were to turn up today, Hebrew would not get him very far. It is in English that Jewish travelers speak to Jews in foreign countries; in English that Jewish scientists in Russia e-mail to their Jewish colleagues in France and Jewish professionals in Argentina write to Jewish counterparts in Great Britain; and in English that our contemporary Eldads—peoples in remote regions making claims to ancient Israelite roots—enter into contact with the world's Jews.

It is in English, too, that audiences are addressed at international Jewish get-togethers. Some twenty years ago, I attended a conference in Jerusalem whose subject was the fiction of Agnon. All of its participants were Agnon scholars and critics. The language it was held in? English, of course—not only because this was the language in which the conference's organizers wished to publish the proceedings, but because the Israeli presenters were more comfortable in English than the non-Israeli ones were in Hebrew.

Indeed, the very high level of English in Israel enables the tourist there to engage Israelis from all walks of life without having to speak a word of Hebrew. And even when speaking Hebrew among themselves, many Israelis are often subliminally thinking in English: a great deal of the colloquial Hebrew spoken in Israel today is little more than English in Hebrew translation.

ENGLISH HAS become the new international language of the Jews because it has become the international language of everyone. But it has been aided in its displacement of Hebrew by Jewish as-

similation, which has deprived millions of Jewish children of the Hebrew they once acquired as part of a religious upbringing. Although a functional literacy in Hebrew was very far from universal in traditional Jewish communities, it was the defining mark of a Jewish education and the aspiration of every Jew. It is no idealization, certainly, to point out that in many 19th-century European *shtetls* there were study groups in which ordinary workmen—coachmen, carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, water carriers, watchmakers—gathered to read basic Hebrew texts like the Mishnah.

Of how many American Jewish university professors, lawyers, doctors, scientists, financial analysts, and hedge-fund managers can this be said today? Of course, there are American Jews professors, lawyers, and doctors who can and do study Hebrew texts; the growth of Jewish day-school education, and the re-traditionalization of a part of the American Jewish community, has even brought about increasing numbers of them. And yet Hebrew as a medium of communication, it must be said, is not greatly emphasized in American Jewish curriculums. I have yet to meet the graduating senior of a day school who, on the basis of his schooling alone, could conduct more than a rudimentary Hebrew conversation or read a contemporary Hebrew novel. Doctor, lawyer, or professor, the Hebrew of such Jews is no better than was the *shtetl* shoemaker's.

What is lacking in contemporary American Jewry is an ethos of Hebrew, the belief that without Hebrew, Jewish lives are incomplete. Although such an attitude was never prominent in America, it did once exist and even flourish in some places. It was found in elite schools where Hebrew was the medium rather than merely the object of instruction; in Hebrew-speaking summer camps that attracted thousands of campers; in a small but intense American Hebrew literary scene, with publications like *Bitzaron* and *Hadoar* and serious novelists and poets like Hillel Bavli, Reuben Wallerod, Isaac Silberschlag, Simon Halkin, Abraham Regelson, and Gabriel Preil; in American Jewish readers who read such writers. All this has now vanished, along with the feeling that Hebrew is a Jewish necessity.

The Hebrew-English translator has reason to wonder, then, how much of a service he has ultimately performed. Yes, he has helped to spread knowledge, to transport it across linguistic frontiers, to make it available to those without access to it in its original language—in a word, to do what

translators have always done. He has made it possible for many Jews to learn about a heritage and its riches that would otherwise be barred to them. Surely, this is a noble calling.

And yet, to whoever bewails Hebrew's plight today and calls for its re-establishment as a central feature of Jewish life, the ready answer is: why? What need for it is there? Granted, there is something to be said for literary connoisseurs reading a work in the language it was written in, be it the Bible, Amos Oz, or Homer. But why demand of ordinary American Jews that they spend years studying a difficult Semitic language when practically everything in it that might be of interest to them already exists in a language that they know?

Most Hebrew-English translators, one assumes, have a love for Hebrew; why else would they have chosen their profession? It was such a love, more than anything, that kept me attached to my Jewishness in the years in which I met Matti Megged, when I had drifted far from Jewish life in other respects. But this only makes it sadder to realize that if Hebrew is in sore straits in America today, we Hebrew-English translators bear our share of the blame for it.

ALREADY IN ancient times, the rabbis of the Talmud understood the duality of translation. A midrash in the tractate of Megillah has this to say about a first-century *targum*, a translation of the Hebrew prophets into Aramaic, then the spoken language of the Jews of Palestine and the Middle East:

The *targum* of the prophets was composed by Yonatan ben Uzziel. . . . When he finished it, the land of Israel quaked over an area of 400 parasangs by 400 parasangs, and a divine voice went forth and exclaimed, "Who is this that has revealed My secrets to mankind?" Yonatan stood up and said, "I am he who revealed Your secrets to mortals. It is known and manifest to You that I did it not for my own honor nor for the honor of my father's house, but for Your honor, so that controversy should not abound in the land."

Yonatan argued the case for translation: if some Jews can read sacred literature in Hebrew and others cannot read it at all, there will be two classes of Jews, one educated and one ignorant. Furthermore, the translated text is the more trustworthy document, it being a characteristic of translation

that it fills in gaps of meaning, irons out contradictions, eliminates ambiguities by coming down on one side or the other. Every translation is also a commentary—and Yonatan's *targum*, which caused the land of Israel to quake with astonishment and perhaps dismay, was a particularly audacious act of commentary, since it systematically introduced rabbinic interpretations into the biblical text. It indeed gave away God's secrets, to Jews as well as to Gentiles. Whereas the Hebrew reader of the prophets had to struggle with each unclear passage, Yonatan clarified God's word for him—and so deprived him of the opportunity to clarify it for himself. No wonder God felt presumed upon, even if the rabbi let Yonatan have the last word.

Such an ambivalent attitude toward translation runs throughout the Talmud. On the one hand, we find there the statement: "Aquila translated the Torah into Greek in the presence of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua and they applauded him, saying, 'Through Grecian grace you have made its beauty known among men.'" On the other hand, there is the remark in the tractate of Soferim, made about the Greek Septuagint, the early Bible translation produced in 2nd-century B.C.E. Ptolemaic Egypt, that "the day on which the elders wrote the Torah in Greek for King Ptolemy was as intolerable for Israel as the day the golden calf was made."

Translation is double-edged. It is the great go-between of humanity, the international hawker of cultural wares, the oldest and most powerful of all globalizing forces. But it is also a golden calf, a false representation. It reveals and thus conceals. It clarifies and so obscures. It betrays our secrets to mankind.

Living in translation has its advantages for the Jewish people: it facilitates communication among them, disseminates Jewish culture, creates a new Jewish literacy to replace the old one that has been lost. Yet it dilutes the culture it disseminates, weakens Jewish distinctiveness, puts Jews at a remove from themselves. It makes them vulnerably transparent to the outside world. A people's language is its private home; in it, it can pursue its own business, conduct its own quarrels, make its own jokes, let down its hair; it can be itself without fear of eavesdroppers. One can argue in a Jewish language about Judaism, about Zionism, about any aspect of Jewish life, but one argues *in* a language, not about it; the language itself belongs to all. Precisely because it is neutral, language has always been the strongest of communal bonds, the magic circle that no interloper could cross.

For the first time in their history, most Jews no longer have a language of their own. They are overheard when they speak to each other. The salient difference between contemporary American Jewish writing and writing in a Jewish language is that the former is also read by non-Jews; it lacks the unambiguous "we" of a community. When an American Jewish author insists on being viewed as part of American rather than Jewish literature, he is only stating the obvious. Even if he wished to write as a Jew, he lacks the privacy to do so single-mindedly.

But does a Hebrew author in Israel enjoy such privacy today? Not when he knows—or hopes—that his novel will soon appear in translation and be reviewed in *Le Monde* or the *New York Times*. Indeed, it is not uncommon today for leading Israeli writers to sign translation contracts with American or European publishers even before they begin work on a book. In what sense are even they writing as Jews for Jews? Certainly not in the sense that Agnon did in an age when translation could not have been farther from his mind as he wrote.

THERE ARE no longer any magic circles. All frontiers have become porous. Transparency is the contemporary condition. We live in a world without secrets.

Still, there is something wondrous in the porousness of contemporary Jewish life, too. Two years ago I spent several weeks at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, where I gave three lectures on Yehuda Halevi, the great medieval Hebrew poet and philosopher who disappeared on the last leg of a pilgrimage from Spain to the Land of Israel in the year 1141. The first lecture was devoted to my translations of Halevi's poetry, with whose help I sketched an outline of his life. One of them was of the best-known of all his poems, *Tsiyon halo tish'ali bishblom asirayikh*:

Zion! Do you wonder how and where your
captives
Are now, and if they think of you, the far-flocked
remnants?
From north and south, east, west, and all
directions,
Near and far, they send their greetings
As I send mine, captured by my longings
To weep like Hermon's dew upon your
mountains.

Mourning your lowliness, I am the wail of
jackals;
Dreaming your sons' return, the song of lute
strings.

I read a few more lines, paused for a sip of water, and looked out at my audience, which wasn't very large. Some members of it I already knew from contacts with the university's Jewish faculty; others were new to me. None of them was asleep, which I took to be a good sign. But no one was quite so awake as a woman sitting in the front row. She was an attractive redhead with bright, coppery hair, a woman of about forty, and she was listening to my translation with tears streaming down her cheeks. The teardrops were so big that I could practically count them.

After the lecture, I went up to her. What was it, I

asked, that had made her cry? "Oh," she said, and her cheeks turned the color of her hair, "those words went right to my heart. They're just the way I feel about Israel."

"You've been there?" I asked.

"Fifteen times."

"Fifteen times!" I exclaimed. "That must be a record for the Jews of Champaign-Urbana."

"Well, actually no," she said. "I'm not Jewish."

She was, it turned out, an evangelical Christian. Later that week, I visited her and her husband at their home in the Illinois countryside. It was set back 50 yards or so from the main road, and the side of the house facing the road had a large Israeli flag on it. Now the tears were in my eyes.

So Hebrew-English translations cross strange borders. Yehuda Halevi is now overheard, too. It has never been this way before.