

A Philosophy of Faithful Translation

“New Flesh for the Same Spirit”

WORSHIPERS WHO UNDERSTAND Hebrew find in the traditional prayers language that is vital, intimate, and experience-near. That is why many of our prayers have endured for a thousand or even two thousand years; and, more to the point, it is why so many people never grow tired of them, repeating them daily or weekly. Conversely, literal English renderings of these prayers often sound abstract and vague, far removed from reality, and aloof from the actual, down-to-earth concerns of human beings. *Faithful translation* seeks to correct this experiential discrepancy between the original Hebrew and the English rendering.

Jewish prayer is written in poetic language and in a poetic spirit. Therefore the ideas of poets can be helpful to us. Robert Friend, for example, calls his translations of poems “*new flesh for the same spirit*.”

What does Friend mean by “flesh”? He means the sound, phrasing, and rhythm; the diction, cadence, and tone of the new language. What does he mean by “spirit”? He means the emotions and the ideas of the original. The messages of Hebrew prayers (their emotions and ideas) do not change when they are re-created with English words and syntax. What does change is the flesh — the message’s outer garment — the language that serves as container and vehicle for the all-important ideas and emotions.

The act of faithful translation has been described this way: “We cannot Xerox a poem from one language to another though we can make a rough copy. This means, of course, that we may have to add some words or omit others, that we may, and invariably need to, change the syntax, and that, sometimes, we may even have to tamper with the original poem’s form.”¹

When we say that a translation in our Machzor is “faithful” we mean that the language of the translation is *equivalent* to the original, but not identical to it. Why not? For one thing, we want to replicate the beauty, the poetry, and the richness of imagery and metaphor that the Hebrew prayer presents. That is all but impossible if one translates word for word or phrase for phrase; to replicate beauty, poetry, and richness we must translate “idea for idea” and “feeling for feeling.” Another

1. Minas Savvas, “Translating Verse,” *Poetry International* 15/16 (2010).

reason for equivalence is that words have different connotations and registers as we move from one language to another. For instance, a word like *chesed* is powerful and evocative in Hebrew; it is hard to define in a few words; *chesed* has layers of meaning that are lacking in the commonly used gloss “lovingkindness.” *Chesed* conveys the immediacy of God’s relationship to Israel within the covenant, whereas “lovingkindness” hobbles along laboriously, telling us that, yes, God is kind and loving; but its four syllables are too clumsy to get across the speed of God’s response implied by the quality of *chesed*.² John Felstiner’s insights, from his book *Translating Neruda*, are apt:

Bring over a poem’s ideas and images, and you will lose its manner; imitate prosodic effects, and you sacrifice its matter. Get the letter and you miss the spirit, which is everything in poetry; or get the spirit and you miss the letter, which is everything in poetry. But these are false dilemmas. . . . Verse translation at its best generates a wholly new utterance in the second language — new, yet equivalent, of equal value.

This is our hope for the faithful translation of our new machzor: prayer language that is “new, yet equivalent, of equal value”; English renderings that are as pleasing to heart, mind, soul, and ear as the original prayers are in Hebrew.

A Group Exercise: What Is a Faithful Translation?

T’kiah Sh’varim-T’ruah T’kiah / T’kiah Sh’varim T’kiah / T’kiah T’ruah T’kiah

Three times on Rosh HaShanah morning, immediately after each sounding of the shofar, the prayers *Hayom harat olam* and *Areshet s’fateinu* occur. Though they differ from one another, the translations below are considered by their authors to be faithful renderings of those Hebrew prayers.

1. *Hayom Harat Olam*

SHA’ARE TESHUVAH / GATES OF REPENTANCE (1978, Reform)

This is the day of the world’s birth. This day all creatures stand before You, whether as children or as slaves. As we are Your children, show us a parent’s compassion; as we are slaves, we look to You for mercy: shed the light of Your judgment upon us, O awesome and holy God.

MAHZOR LEV SHALEM (2010, Conservative)

Today the world stands as at birth. Today all creation is called to judgment, whether as Your children or as Your servants. If as Your children, be compassionate with us as a parent is compassionate with children. If as Your servants, we look to You

2. See Catherine Madsen, *The Bones Reassemble: Reconstituting Liturgical Speech* (2005), p. 126.

expectantly, waiting for You to be gracious to us, and as day emerges from night bring forth a favorable judgment on our behalf, awe-inspiring and Holy One.

NEW REFORM MACHZOR (our work in progress, 2011)

This day, the world is born anew, and all creation awaits Your judgment.

We are Your daughters; we are Your sons —

So love and remember us in the way of mothers and fathers.

We are Yours in service —

so let there be light to guide us in the corridors of justice and on the path of holiness.

2. *Areshet S'fateinu*

SHA'ARE TESHUVAH / GATES OF REPENTANCE (1978, Reform)

O God Supreme, accept the offering of our lips, the sound of the Shofar. In love and favor hear us, as we invoke your REMEMBRANCE.

MAHZOR LEV SHALEM (2010, Conservative)

May the words of our lips be pleasing to You, exalted God, who listens, discerns, considers, and attends to the sound of our shofar blast. Lovingly accept our offering of verses proclaiming Your remembrance.

NEW REFORM MACHZOR (our work in progress, 2011)

Taste the sweetness our lips sing to You, God Most High. You are knowing and attentive, watchful and aware when we call out: *T'kiah!* Lovingly, favorably receive our Service of Zichronot!

Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss the mood and feeling immediately after the sounding of the shofar. How do you personally feel at that moment? How would you describe what the congregation is experiencing at that moment?
2. Read the prayers aloud in order to experience the sound of each one.
3. What do you notice about each of the translations of *Hayom harat olam* and *Areshet s'fateinu*?
4. What strikes you most as you compare the three translations in each “trio”?
5. Remembering how you feel at this point in the service, what qualities of these translations capture that moment for you?
6. What is most important to you about the English translation of a Hebrew prayer? What qualities do you value?