

Torah Thoughts Korakh

5778:

One of the reasons that I love to study the Hebrew language is that Hebrew, like all languages, has a character all its own. While we can appreciate the ease with which a translation can communicate a text's ideas, it is often surprising how many concepts a translation can actually obscure. Translation is always an act of interpretation, making choices among multiple possibilities and, by definition, excluding some.

One of the ways that a translation smooths out a text is its treatment of idioms. An idiom is a word or phrase that does not mean what it appears to mean, and which is understood by native speakers only through repeated usage. As English speakers, we know that something we call 'a piece of cake' is easy and that to 'kick the bucket' means to die. But those meanings don't translate to other languages, except in the limited circumstances where a speaker is talking about a literal piece of cake or actually kicking a bucket.

The Hebrew Bible has many such idioms, three of which appear in the parshah this week, which I will indicate here in italics. When Moses sends for two Israelites who are rebelling against his leadership, they refuse to appear, saying "Even if you had brought us to a land *flowing with milk and honey*, and given us possession of fields and vineyards, should you *gouge out those men's eyes?*" In translation, we understand the land of Israel being described as 'flowing with milk and honey,' because we have been reading that phrase all our lives and we understand that it means that the land is fruitful, not that milk and honey flow along the ground. But the other phrase gets our attention. In what way is Moses attempting to 'gouge out' someone's eyes? In biblical Hebrew, the phrase is the equivalent of 'pulling the wool over' someone's eyes, an idiom itself, meaning to fool them. In response to these rebels' words, Moses turns to God and says "Pay no regard...*I have not taken the ass of any one of them*, nor have I wronged any one of them." It is unlikely that Moses would be accused of stealing livestock from anyone, so the meaning here must be similar to the phrase that follows it, that he has not wronged them. It may even be the case that this idiom was unknown in the late biblical period, and that an early scribe added in the phrase 'nor have I wronged any one of them' to explain an already archaic idiom!

When we read sacred texts we should stay alert to what doesn't seem to make sense, then study whether it is the translation or the Hebrew original that is creating our problem and, finally, to come to a resolution that deepens our understanding. We do just that in my weekly parshat hashavuah class on Shabbat mornings at 9, and Dr. Judah Landa teaches Torah on Wednesday nights at 8:30. I invite you to join us to delve more deeply into the words of Torah, and into its meanings.

Shabbat shalom

