



# LET'S STUDY **ONKELOS**

**A Guide for Rabbis, Teachers and Torah Students to Study and Teach the *Parashat Hashavua* through the Eyes of its Most Important Translator**

**By Stanley M. Wagner and Israel Drazin**

**Based on the five volume, *Onkelos on the Torah (Genesis-Deuteronomy)*, *Understanding the Bible Text*, by Israel Drazin and Stanley M. Wagner, published by Gefen Publishing House, Jerusalem/New York, 2006–2010.**

## **STUDY GUIDE**

### **NASO (CHAPTER 4:21–7:89)**

#### **SUMMARY OF THE TORAH PORTION**

The duties and responsibilities of the Gershonites and Merarites Levite families are specified, and a census is taken of all the Levites; those suffering from the illness of *tzara'at* are evacuated from the camp until they are cleansed; the laws dealing with people who illegally hold money that does not belong to them, then committing perjury about it, are discussed; the “trial by ordeal” of a *sotah*, a married woman who is suspected of infidelity; the laws a Nazarite must observe and how he must purify himself if he becomes contaminated; the priestly benediction and the mandate for priests to bless the Israelites with it; the heads of the tribes bring offerings day after day after the consecration of the Tabernacle.

## **BIBLICAL WORDS WHOSE MEANINGS CHANGED**

There is more than one word that has crept into the Hebrew lexicon that has changed its meaning over time. One such word is *nefesh*, translated today as “soul.” The term is mentioned in *Genesis* 2:7, where the Bible states, “The Lord God created Adam from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, *vayehi Adam l'nefesh chayah*. These Hebrew words are alternately translated as, “and man became a living soul” (Soncino); “and man became a living being” (ArtScroll); “so man became a living personality” (Hirsch); and “man [thus] became a living creature” (Kaplan). We translated

the phrase in accordance with the unusual translation of the targumist, “and it became in Adam a power of speech (literally, speaking breath).” Our commentary in *Genesis* explains that the targumist understood Scripture’s *l’nefesh* as “power,” and *chayah*, “living,” as “speaking.” Rashi explains: animals are also living beings, but humans are more elevated since they also think and speak. Thus, the targumist is telling us that Scripture is highlighting the human uniqueness.

However, while the targumist did not use an Aramaic cognate *nafsha* in this verse, he uses the cognate, an Aramaic version of *nefesh*, without defining the term in most of the well over one hundred times in the Pentateuch where *nefesh* appears. Thus, he generally chose not to address the issue whether the Bible means “person” or “soul.” We explain this issue about *nefesh* in our appendix of our *Bemidbar* introduction:

*Although the term “nefesh,” which is used today for “soul,” appears frequently in the Torah, it never has the connotation of “soul” in Scripture. It means “a person” or “life force.”*

*Unlike his father, Abraham [Maimonides] defined “soul” as the separate spiritual part of a person, the inner being, that aspect of a person that survives the body’s death. In a word, Abraham’s concept of the “soul” parallels the vague and amorphous definition held by most people today. The “soul” somehow mystically aspires and longs for the spiritual, heavenly world. It is withheld from attaining its goal by the unholly, almost demonic, pull and behavior of the body. Its function is to obey God, serve him, and be present before Him. Its goal is “the (mystic) union (with God).”*

*This understanding of “soul” does not exist in Hebrew Scripture. Thus, when Leviticus 2:1 speaks of a “nefesh” bringing an offering, it certainly does not infer that the sacrifice is being somehow mystically or magically conveyed by the inner separate part of the person, the person’s “soul.” It is offered by a person.*

*Maimonides uses “soul” in the biblical and scientific sense. This “soul” or life of a person is comprised of five elements or systems: nutrition (digestion), sensation (the senses), imagination (memory and the power to imagine impossible and unknown things), stimulation (emotions), and conceptualization (thinking).*

*Unlike his son, Maimonides saw the function of the intelligence to acquire knowledge about the world, what it is and how it functions, and use the knowledge for self-improvement and the improvement of society. He would cringe at the mystical notion, expressed by his son, that it is possible “to be present before Him.” Additionally, contrary to the view of his son, Maimonides felt certain that it was the intellect that survived death and not the “soul,” the inner personality.*

In our commentary on 5:1 (page 39)<sup>1</sup> in our *parashah* we add a number of scriptural words that are understood differently in post-biblical Hebrew:

---

<sup>1</sup> All page numbers refer to the Drazin-Wagner *Onkelos on the Torah* volumes.

*Some biblical words had a totally different meaning than they have in post-biblical Hebrew. For example, “leiv,” “heart,” in the Bible is the area of thinking, not feeling; in Scripture “emunah” does not denote “faith”—a concept that is absent from the Five Books of Moses—but “steadfast.” Similarly, “nefesh” is not a soul, another idea that is not in the Bible, but “a person” or “a life”. Accordingly, some Onkelos versions, but not Sperber and Berliner, change “nefesh” in this passage to “d’enosha,” “a human being.” The latter word is in 9:6, 7, and 10 of Sperber and Berliner. Pseudo-Jonathan is more specific with its addition “of dead,” which Onkelos also uses in 19:28 and 21:1. Neophyti uses “d’bar nash” here, which some people mistakenly translate “son of man” (see also commentary on verse 23:19, “also [his deeds are] unlike . . .”), but all that it means is “a man” or “a human,” a synonym for Onkelos’ “d’enosha.”*

Also note that in 5:6 (pages 38–41), the targumist translates *nefesh* as *enasha*, or *insha* according to some versions, both of which mean a “person,” the biblical meaning of *nefesh*.

There are other biblical words whose meaning was radically transformed in post-biblical Hebrew, such as *geir* and *ezrach*, as we describe in *Leviticus* 16:29:

*The noun “ezrach” means a well-rooted tree and is an appropriate word for a citizen; “geir” is derived from “gargir,” a “berry” that is plucked from its branch (ibn Ezra to Genesis 12:10). The term “geir” means “dwell”; the person comes from elsewhere to dwell among the Israelites (Rashi to Exodus 22:2 and Radak). It may also be derived from the root “g-r-r,” “to move from place to place,” although “ezrach” may stem from “z-r-ch,” “bright,” because it is “clear” who he is (Radak). As usual, the Targums retain “geir,” which came to mean “proselyte” when the translations were written, and only substitute “dwellers” when “proselyte” is inappropriate. The Targums’ “proselyte” here obscures the halakhah that non-Israelite aliens must also refrain from work on the tenth of the seventh month. This is another example of the (Onkelos) translator’s unconcern for teaching halakhah.*

Why did the targumists generally define *geir* as “proselyte” when it is clear that the Bible means a non-Israelite who happens to be dwelling with the Israelites? Furthermore, by using the term “proselyte” the targumists seem to be making a distinction between a person who was born from Jewish parents and an individual who converted to Judaism. This distinction is inappropriate. Once a person converts, the individual is just as much a Jew as someone whose parents were Jewish.

We have no way of knowing why all of the targumists defined *geir* as “proselyte.” We can offer a suggestion, but we must admit that our suggestion does not really satisfy us. The transformation of the word *geir* to its post-biblical meaning may have been prompted by the early attitude of the Pharisees, especially the School of Hillel in the early part of the Common Era, to encourage conversion. The Pharisees and later rabbis wanted to emphasize that proselytes should be treated with special loving care. Since the Torah

mentions loving a *geir* as many as thirty-six times, including loving a *geir* “as yourself” (*Leviticus* 19:10), they said that this command refers to a proselyte.

Unfortunately, this affirmative view concerning proselytizing was reversed in the early fourth century CE when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and Jewish proselytizing was prohibited. Thereafter, to this day, it became the policy actually to discourage prospective converts from becoming members of the Jewish community, although those who convince a religious court of their sincerity and commitment are permitted to convert. However, the targumists, writing after this time, may have continued to define *geir* as “proselyte” to stress the love that must be given to people who accept Judaism as their way of life.

## ADDITIONAL DISCUSSIONS

### ON *ONKELOS*

In this Guide, we have become sensitive to the fact that biblical words have a different, sometimes opposite meaning than they have today. We learnt this by analyzing *Onkelos*. This phenomenon is not unique to the Hebrew language. Languages live. They change. Think about English and you may discover words that had different meanings in the past. Since we now know that words change, we can begin to realize that phrases also change. Thus, some biblical phrases that appear to be clear may have been intended to mean something entirely different. We will see this in future Guides.

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

The existence of a “soul” as a “spark of the divine” residing within the human being, thus distinguishing it from all the creatures that God created, is a well-entrenched theological principle in contemporary times, shared also with Christianity and Islam. Of course, not all Jewish thinkers accept this definition, among them Maimonides, whose view we discussed above. The function of the soul according to non-Maimonideans is to control the body and bring people close to God. The person’s soul, according to this view, is judged after death to see whether the individual accomplished this mission.

How do you feel about the “soul” and “judgment?” What would the world be like if billions of people stopped believing that their behavior is judged, that we are all accountable to God, and there would be a divine meting out of reward and punishment for our behavior? What do you think is the relationship between the “soul” and our “conscience?” What role does social determinism (what kind of family and community did we grow up in), biological determinism (our genetic dispositions), or historical determinism (the forces of history that shaped our lives), play in the exercise of our “free will?”

Do you believe that the policy regarding proselytism should be revised today, assuming that would-be converts would embrace Jewish observances and participation in Jewish life, given the fact that we are losing many Jews to assimilation and aggressive non-Jewish proselytizing? The Jewish movements all have their own standards for conversion and one movement can reject the converts of another movement, thus creating a body of Jews recognized as such by only part of the Jewish community. How do we overcome this hurdle? What commitments should proselytes make?

## **FOR FURTHER STUDY**

1. See 5:10 and commentary, “SACRED TITHES” (page 40). The targumist renders the biblical *kedoshav*, translated alternatively as “(his) sacred offerings” (Kaplan); “(his) holies” (ArtScroll); “(his) holy things” (Hirsch); “(his) hallowed things” (Soncino), as “sacred tithes.” Did he miss the mark?
2. See 5:22 and commentary “AMEN, AMEN” (pages 44, continuing on page 47). The use and repetition of “Amen” in the *Targum* and Scripture.
3. See 6:24 and commentary “THE” (page 54). Translating the “priestly benediction.” Did our targumist translate these verses, or not?