



Devarim

HOW TO MAKE A SUCCESSFUL REMAKE

Transmitting Values in a New Language Is an Art Form

PARSHAH OVERVIEW

Devarim

On the first of Shevat (thirty-seven days before his passing), Moses begins his repetition of the Torah to the assembled Children of Israel, reviewing the events that occurred and the laws that were given in the course of their forty-year journey from Egypt to Mount Sinai to the Promised Land; rebuking the people for their failings and iniquities; and enjoining them to keep the Torah and observe its commandments in the Land that G d is giving them as an eternal heritage, into which they shall cross after Moses's death.

Moses recalls his appointment of judges and magistrates to ease his burden of meting out justice to the people and teaching them the word of G d; the journey from Mount Sinai through the great and fearsome desert; and the sending of the spies and the people's subsequent spurning of the Promised Land, so that G d decreed that the entire generation of the Exodus would die out in the desert. "Also against me," says Moses, "was G d angry for your sake, saying, 'You, too, shall not go in there.'"

Moses also recounts some more recent events: the refusal of the nations of Moab and Ammon to allow the Israelites to pass through their countries; the wars against the Emorite kings Sichon and Og, and the settlement of their lands by the tribes of Reuben and Gad and part of the tribe of Manasseh; and Moses's message to his successor, Joshua, who would succeed him in taking the Land and lead them in the battles for its conquest: "Fear them not [in these battles], for the L-rd your G d, He shall fight for you."

QUESTION

What are some guiding principles to ensure a resonant but genuine remake?

TEXT 1

*Maimonides, Letter to
Rabbi Shmuel ibn Tibbon*

שכל מי שירצה להעתיק מלשון ללשון ויכוון
לתרגם המלה האחת במלה אחת גם כן, וישמור גם
כן על סדר המאמר וסדר הדברים — יטרח מאד
ותבוא העתקתו מסופקת ומשובשת ביותר ואין
ראוי לעשות כן.

אבל צריך למעתיק מלשון אל לשון שיבין הענין
תחילה, ואחר כן יספר ויפרש אותו במה שיובן
ממנו הענין בלשון ההיא — ואי אפשר לו מבלי
שיקדים ויאחר, ויספר על מלה אחת במלות רבות
ויספר על מלות רבות במלה אחת, ויחסר תיבות
ויוסיף תיבות, עד שיסודר הענין ויבואר יפה ויובן
לפי דרך הלשון ההיא אשר יעתיק אליה.

Whoever wishes to translate, and aims at rendering each word literally, and at the same time adheres slavishly to the order of words and sentences in the original, will meet with much difficulty; his rendering will be faulty and untrustworthy. This is not the right method.

The translator should first try to grasp the sense of the passage thoroughly, and then state the author's intention with perfect clearness in the other language. This, however, cannot be done without changing the order of words, putting many words for one, or vice versa, and adding or taking away words, so that the subject may be perfectly intelligible in the language into which one translates.

Moses uses his speeches to remind the Jews of their national history, clarify points of law, and prepare the people for life in Israel.



TEXT 2a

Deuteronomy 1:5

בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב, הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה בָּאֵר אֶת
הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת לֵאמֹר.

On that side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses commenced [and] explained this Law, saying:

TEXT 2b

Rashi, ad loc.

“בַּאֵר אֶת הַתּוֹרָה”: בְּשִׁבְעִים לָשׁוֹן פִּרְשָׁה לָהֶם.

“Moses commenced [and] explained this Law.” [This means that] he explained the Torah to them in [the] seventy languages [of the ancient world].



Moses successfully made the very first Torah translation, into seventy ancient languages.

TEXT 3

Talmud, Soferim 1:7

מעשה בה' זקנים שכתבו לתלמי המלך את התורה
יונית, והיה היום קשה לישראל כיום שנעשה העגל,
שלא היתה התורה יכולה להתרגם כל צרכה.

It once happened that five elders translated the Torah into Greek for King Ptolemy. That day was as ominous for Israel as the day the Golden Calf was made, since the Torah could not be adequately translated.

QUESTION

Moses had set an affirmative precedent to Torah translation. So why the ambivalence toward the translation commissioned by Ptolemy?

And, more bizarrely, why the sinister comparison to the “day on which the Golden Calf was made?”

TEXT 4

Talmud, Megilah 9a

רבן שמעון בן גמליאל אומר: אף בספרים לא
התירו שיכתבו אלא יוונית.

Rabbi Shimon the son of Gamliel says,
“The only language appropriate for a Torah
scroll [other than Hebrew] is Greek.”

The
Golden Calf



TEXT 5a

Exodus 32:1–5

א. וַיֵּרָא הָעָם כִּי בָשָׁשׁ מֹשֶׁה לָרֶדֶת מִן הָהָר, וַיִּקְהָל
הָעָם עַל אֶהֱרֹן, וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו קוּם עֲשֵׂה לָנוּ אֱלֹהִים
אֲשֶׁר יֵלְכוּ לִפְנֵינוּ, כִּי זֶה מֹשֶׁה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלָנוּ
מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לֹא יָדַעְנוּ מָה הָיָה לוֹ.

ב. וַיֹּאמֶר אֶלֶהֱם אֶהֱרֹן, פָּרְקוּ נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי
נְשֵׁיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם וּבְנֹתֵיכֶם וְהָבִיאוּ אֵלַי.

ג. וַיִּתְּפְּרוּ כָל הָעָם אֶת נְזָמֵי הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם,
וַיָּבִיאוּ אֶל אֶהֱרֹן.

ד. וַיִּקַּח מִיָּדָם, וַיִּצַּר אֹתוֹ בַּחֶרֶט וַיַּעֲשֵׂהוּ עֵגֶל מִסָּכָה,
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם.

ה. וַיֵּרָא אֶהֱרֹן וַיָּבֹן מִזְבֵּחַ לִפְנָיו, וַיִּקְרָא אֶהֱרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר
חַג לַה' מָחָר.

1. The people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him.”

2. Aaron said to them, “[You men,] take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”

3. The people took off their gold earrings and brought them to Aaron.

4. Aaron took [the rings] from them and cast them in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. [Seeing this,] the Jews exclaimed, “This is your elohim, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!”

5. When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before the calf. Aaron announced, “Tomorrow shall be a festival of G-d!”

TEXT 5b

Ibid., 32:6–8

ו. וַיִּשְׁכְּבוּ מִמָּחָרֶת וַיַּעֲלוּ עֹלֹת וַיִּגִּשּׁוּ זִבְחֵימִים, וַיֵּשֶׁב
הָעָם לֶאֱכֹל וְלִשְׁתּוֹ וַיִּקְמוּ לְצַחֵק.

ז. וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה, לֵאמֹר כִּי שָׁחַת עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר
הָעֵלִית מִמִּצְרָיִם.

ח. סָרוּ מִהֵרָא מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִם, עָשׂוּ לָהֶם עֵגֶל
מִסִּכָּה, וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לוֹ וַיִּזְבְּחוּ לוֹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הָעֵלֵנוּ מִמִּצְרָיִם.

6. The people arose early the next day and offered up sacrifices. They sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance.

7. G-d spoke to Moses: “Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have rebelled.

8. “They have quickly deviated from the way that I instructed them. They have made themselves a molten calf. They have bowed to it and sacrificed to it, saying, ‘This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!’”

QUESTIONS

What drove a people who had experienced revelation and pledged commitment to the prohibition against serving other G-ds, to do a 180-degree turn within just forty days of making that commitment?

Why did Aharon support the project and not protest?

TEXT 6

Nachmanides, Exodus 32:1

הכתוב הזה הוא מפתח לדעת נכון ענין העגל
ומחשבת עושיו.

כי בידוע שלא היו ישראל סבורים שמשה הוא
האלוקים, ושהוא בכוחו עשה להם האותות
והמופתים, ומה טעם שיאמרו כיון שהלך משה
ממנו, נעשה אלקים? ועוד, כי בפירוש אמרו
"אלוקים אשר ילכו לפנינו", לא שיהיו נותנים להם
חיים בעולם הזה או בעולם הבא.

The opening verse is the key to correctly understanding the incident of the Golden Calf, and the thought process of those who made it.

It is unthinkable that the Israelites thought that Moses was G-d, and that the signs and wonders that he had performed were through his own power. So, once Moses went missing, it's inconceivable that they would suggest replacing him with a god.

Rather, they worded their request carefully and clearly said, "Make us a god who shall go before us"—not a deity who should give us life in this world or in the next.

TEXT 6

Nachmanides, Exodus 32:1

אבל היו מבקשין משה אחר, אמרו: משה שהורה לנו הדרך ממצרים ועד הנה . . . הנה אבד ממנו. נעשה לנו משה אחר שיורה הדרך לפנינו על פי ה' בידו.

וזה טעם הזכירם "משה האיש אשר העלנו", לא הקל אשר העלם, כי יצטרכו לאיש אלוקים.

The Jews just wanted another Moses [another agent of G-d]. They said, "Moses, the man who showed us the way from Egypt until now, . . . is now lost to us. Let us make ourselves another Moses, who will show us the way based on the commandment of G-d."

This is why, in their request, the Jews mentioned "Moses—the man who brought us [from the land of Egypt]," rather than "G-d, Who brought us up." They were looking for another representative of G-d [not a substitute for Him].

QUESTION

What drove a people who had experienced revelation and pledged commitment to the prohibition against serving other G-ds, to do a 180-degree turn within just forty days of making that commitment?

ANSWER

The Jews didn't seek to replace G-d. They only sought to replace Moshe, G-d's agent.

TEXT 7

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot
24, p. 6*

כדי אז א איד דא למטה זאל זיין פארבונדן מיט
דעם אויבערשטן און אים דינען ווי עס דארף צו
זיין מיט אלע כחות הנפש, אויך מיט זיין שכל און
מיט זיינע געפילן, איז עס ווען אלקות ווערט נמשך
כביכול דא למטה. . . .

אלקות ווערט נתגלה צו אן "איש" למטה, א נשמה
בגוף, און נתלבש בו וביחוד נפלא ביז בדוגמת משה
וואס איז "איש האלקים", איש וואס מ'קען עס זען
און הערן.

און כדי אלקות זאל נאכמער נמשך ווערן און
דערהערט ווערן אין וועלט, אין עולם הזה הגשמי,
ובכל הענינים, האבן זיי געמיינט אז עס דארף
נמשך ווערן דורך א נידעריקערער דרגא אין עולם
הזה, און דורך דעם וועט עס האבן מער ווירקונג
און אין וועלט.

The ideal is for a Jew to connect with G-d with all their faculties, including their mind and heart. This is facilitated by G-dliness being manifest in the world. . . .

G-dliness is revealed to a human being, a soul in a body, and is manifest in them. This was especially so with Moses, who was called “a man of G-d,” a “man” who can be seen and heard [but, at the same time, of G-d].

[By creating the Golden Calf] the Jews sought to further manifest G-dliness in the world and impact the world, into even lower forms of life [than humans like Moses].



The Jews
hypothesized that
with a golden calf,
even emotional and
bodily instincts would
be able to manifest
and communicate
with the divine.

TEXT 8a

Exodus 25:8

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשִׁכְנָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם.

Make for me a Temple and I will manifest
in it.

TEXT 8b

Exodus 25:22

וְנוֹעַדְתִּי לָךְ נָשָׁם, וְדִבַּרְתִּי אִתָּךְ מֵעַל הַכַּפֹּרֶת מִבֵּין
שְׁנֵי הַכְּרֻבִּים אֲשֶׁר עַל אֲרוֹן הָעֵדֻת, אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר
אֶצְוֶה אוֹתָךְ אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

There [at the ark] I will meet with you, and I will impart to you—from above the cover, from between the two cherubs that are on top of the ark—all that I will command you concerning the Israelite people.

TEXT 8c

Sifrei, Bamidbar 58

היה משה נכנס ועומד באהל מועד והקול יורד
משמי שמים לבין שני הכרובים, והוא שומע את
הקול מדבר אליו מבפנים.

Moses would enter and stand in the
Tabernacle, and G-d's voice would
descend from the Heaven of Heavens to
between the two cherubs on the ark
cover, and Moses would hear the voice
speaking to him.

QUESTION

Why did Aharon support the project and not protest?

ANSWER

The Golden Calf held great potential to achieve the goal of manifesting G-d in the lowest realms, and Aharon knew it.



The crack in the design of the golden calf was the fact that it was commissioned by humans, not G-d.

TEXT 9

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot
24, p. 7*

די עצם זאך אז ס'זאל ווערן אן אפגעטיילטע
מציאות — אפילו אויב מ'מיינט אז דורך דעם זאל
נמשך ווערן אלקות כו' כנזכר לעיל — וויבאלד
דאס איז ניט מצד ציווי ה' (לשון צוותא וחיבור)
קען דערפון נסתעף ווערן דער חטא עבודה זרה, אן
ענין פון שתי רשויות.

מה שאין כן ווען דאס קומט מצד הציווי, על דרך
ווי דאס איז געווען אין דעם משכן ארון וכרובים
כנזכר לעיל, הערט זיך דעמאלט אן בלויז אז
דורכדעם גייט דורך דער דבר ה'. ס'איז ניטא קיין
שום מציאות וענין אין דער זאך גופא, ובמילא וועט
דערפון ניט ארויסקומען קיין טעות דשתי רשויות,
חס ושלום.

The instances of the Temple and the ark
[manifesting G-d] were commissioned by
G-d. [So though these physical items held
tremendous significance] it was apparent
that they were merely a media through
which G-d could communicate without
their having any power of their own. There
was no concern that this would lead to
attributing deity controls to an entity
other than G-d.

However, the Golden Calf was not
commissioned by G-d. It was its own
entity. Therefore, though its creators
intended it to manifest G-dliness, it
opened the door toward idolatry, namely
attributing deity controls to an entity
other than G-d.

As soon as an entity enjoys any kind of independence from G-d, attributing power to it is a step toward deifying it.



The words that emanated from Moses' mouth and from the cover of the ark were G-d's unadulterated words, like water flowing through a pipe.



QUESTION

Moses had set an affirmative precedent to Torah translation. So why the ambivalence toward the translation commissioned by Ptolemy?

And, more bizarrely, why the sinister comparison to the “day on which the Golden Calf was made?”

ANSWER

The rabbis saw themselves as standing at the very same terrifying junction as the Golden Calf creators. They stood on the precipice of either a monumental achievement or a disastrous failure.

A fine line separated success from failure, but they were successful.

TEXT 10

*The Rebbe, Rabbi
Menachem Mendel
Schneerson, Likutei Sichot
24, p. 9*

לפועל איז בא דעם תרגום התורה ליוונית . . . ניט ארויסגעקומען קיין ענין הפכי (ניט ווי בא דעם יום עשיית העגל).

ויש לומר יתירה מזו: כשם ווי ב"יום שנעשה בו העגל" האט אהרן געזאגט "חג לה' מחר", וואס כפשוטו מיינט עס אז אויב מ'זאל דאס נוצן כדבעי, קען דערפון ארויסקומען אן ענין של חג, און יעבדו את הקדוש ברוך הוא, כנזכר לעיל.

איז טאקע אזוי ארויסגעקומען פון דעם תרגום התורה ליוונית, בשעת די ע"ב זקנים האבן מתרגם געווען די תורה לתלמי המלך . . . איז ניט נאר אראפגעקומען אויך צו אומות העולם אחדות ה' ווי דאס ווערט געזאגט בתורה.

נאר ס'איז געווארן א הלכה אז די (איינציקע) שפראך וואס מ'מעג שרייבן ספרים (ספרי תורה) איז ביוונית . . . די שלימות הבירור פון דעם כתב ולשון יוונית.

Unlike the creation of the Golden Calf, the translation of the Torah into Greek did not have negative results.

Regarding the Golden Calf, Aaron had announced, "Tomorrow shall be a festival for G-d." Should the Golden Calf have been utilized properly, it could have generated a tremendous celebration surrounding the service of G-d.

When the elders translated the Torah for Ptolemy, they indeed [successfully actualized the opportunity's potential]. They exposed the unity of G-d, as expressed in the Torah, to the nations of the world.

Furthermore, the Jewish law became that only the Greek translation was allowed to be used for Scripture. This reflects the ultimate elevation of the Greek language and alphabet.

QUESTION

What are some guiding principles to ensure a resonant but genuine remake?

ANSWER

You need to burn with excitement about the opportunity to get the message across to a new audience. But simultaneously, you need to be aware of the realistic challenges involved in this process.

TEXT 11

*Mordechai Lightstone,
“Mobilizing The Mitzvah
Tanks: The Untold Story Of
The ‘Are You Jewish?’
Guys,”
Chabad.Org/3698889*

Hailing a yellow cab, grabbing a slice of pizza after a Yankees game, strolling through Central Park . . . these are some of the indelible parts of a New York City experience. So, too, is the sight of yeshivah students clamoring from a converted RV—better known as the “mitzvah tank”—with tefillin and Shabbat candles in hand as they ask tourists and locals alike: “Excuse me, are you Jewish?”

The mitzvah tanks have become an iconic fixture in New York City and beyond, referenced in the media and popular culture throughout the world. . . .

Rooted in the unique challenges facing American Jewry during the second half of the 20th century, these “tanks against assimilation” go back 50 years to a pivotal time in Jewish history: the 1960s-era hippie movement, the start of the Six-Day War in 1967 and the launch shortly beforehand of the Tefillin Campaign by the Lubavitcher Rebbe—Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory.

Leading up to and following Israel’s miraculous victory, the Rebbe’s mitzvah campaign served also as a means for expressing Jewish pride, instilling Jewish identity, and inspiring spiritual exploration and expression, all of which were particularly needed in postwar America.

A synagogue
on wheels



KEY POINTS

1. Translations are not supposed to be slavishly beholden to the original, rather adapted and transported into the new host language.
2. Moses made the first translation of the Torah into seventy languages just prior to his passing.
3. Centuries later, however, the sages were very hesitant to translate the Torah into Greek, even comparing that day to the day the Golden Calf was made.
4. The Golden Calf wasn't intended to be idolatry per se. Rather, the Jewish people figured that if G-d could manifest through a human, it would be even greater if He could be expressed via the medium of an animal, or even a metal.

KEY POINTS

5. Their mistake: Moses was a medium to G-d, but by G-d's explicit instruction. Fashioning something on your own runs the risk of idolatry—which is indeed what happened.
6. Bearing this distinction in mind, the sages approached their translation task like the day the Golden Calf was made: aware of the great risk, and thus cautious to get it right. And they succeeded.
7. As for us, we should seek to make Jewish values relevant and engaging to a new generation, a “redo” if you will—while maintaining healthy caution.

