

## It's Not Over Our Heads: Translation, Narrative, and the Path to Peace

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I remember whenever I went to temple with my family as a kid, my parents would say, "Our rabbi is so brilliant. His sermons go right over our heads."

I remember being puzzled by that expression.

"It means that he's so smart that we can't understand what he's talking about."

Ah, I thought, I get it. But, actually, I didn't get it. You might say it went right over my head.

This expression came to my mind after my study partner and I read a teaching this week by the 18th-century Hasidic master Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak taught that when God "spoke" to us in the Torah, it went way over our heads. And that makes sense because, after all, how could we small, finite human beings possibly hope to understand *anything* coming to us from God, who is infinite and eternal?

This gulf between finite humans and the infinite God is unbridgeable. That means that so much about God and reality will forever remain a mystery. But it *doesn't* mean that we will never be able to understand *anything* about God.

This is where Moses comes in. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak said that Moses was God's translator.

See, Moses spoke to God face-to-face, which is something no one else could do—and he alone had the capacity to understand the brilliance of God's message. The rest of us ordinary human beings simply do not have the capacity to receive, let alone understand, what God has to say.

So, God spoke to Moses, and Moses translated the message into language that we can comprehend.<sup>1</sup>

I find this way of looking at the Torah fascinating.

Translation is, by definition, *interpretation*. As the legal theorist James Boyd White explains, "The 'original meaning' of the text cannot be *our* meaning, for in restating it in our terms, we produce something *new* and *different*."<sup>2</sup>

So, if Moses translated God's message from an indecipherable divine language into language that ordinary people can understand, that means that what we have in the Torah is actually Moses's *interpretation* of God's revelation.

But it begs the question: Can God's revelation actually be translated at all?

White would say no. He argues that a fully accurate translation from any one language to another is impossible (let alone from divine God-speak to human language). This is because the culture, the context, and all the innumerable nuances of any one language can never be fully reproduced in another language.

Think about our prayer book, for example. Most of us rely on the English translations to know what the prayers mean, and we assume that the English is identical—or pretty close to identical—to what the Hebrew means.

But ask anyone who is a native Hebrew speaker. Shy could tell you: The English language just can't fully capture the nuances of the Hebrew no matter how skilled the translator is, because so much of the meaning of the Hebrew is bound up with non-semantic elements of language: things like rhythm and cadence, word roots, idiomatic usages unique to Hebrew-speaking culture, associations and emotions that words evoke, and Jewish history from antiquity to modern Israel and everything in between.

That's why to translate is always, in reality, to create something new.

But that is in no way to minimize the value and importance of translation. In fact, White argues that translation is critical to the enterprises of justice and peacemaking.

As he defines it, translation is "the art of recognizing the difference between two languages, two worlds, two people, yet speaking across it nonetheless." (296)

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White develops these ideas as a theory about law. But I think it's equally profound and relevant to other spheres of human life in which we find ourselves and others standing on two opposite sides of a great divide.

The ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinians is one example that immediately comes to mind.

Michael Oren, a prominent Israeli diplomat and scholar, said in an interview shortly after October 7 that this is fundamentally not a military war. If it were, Israel would win easily because of its overwhelming military might.

And, indeed, each time tensions boil over into military conflict, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) eventually suppresses the enemy and restores some kind of security for Israel—at least for a time.

But Haviv Rettig Gur, a journalist and political commentator for *The Times of Israel*, explained recently that the conflict will never find full resolution through military operations, no matter how powerful the IDF is and no matter how long it goes on.

That's because, as Rettig Gur explains it, the generational conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is more accurately understood as a conflict between two discrete peoples' cultural and historical narratives—meaning: their two fundamentally different *interpretations* of their own history and their enemy's history.<sup>3</sup>

Rettig Gur argues that there will never be peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians until each side can learn to understand the other's interpretation, the story that the other tells about who *they* are and who their *opponent* is.

An important point, though: He emphasizes that understanding the other's story does not mean *accepting* it. In fact, he says that for Israel to expect that the Palestinians will ever accept Israel's interpretation of reality is a hopeless delusion, just as the Palestinians expecting that the Israelis will ever accept their interpretation is a hopeless delusion.

But there's even more to it than that. For Rettig Gur, to insist that the other side accept our version of the story, and all the more so to seek to forcibly compel them to accept it through militaristic, propagandist, or political means, would be not only a violent, total negation and erasure of the other, but it would also be counterproductive by deepening their resentment and hatred for us.

But peacemaking is not a zero-sum game; One side doesn't have to lose in order for the other side to win.

Rettig Gur believes that the best hope for peace is for the Israelis and the Palestinians to try to understand the other's narrative—not to accept it or even agree with any part of it but to take it seriously as their enemy's defining truth.

An Israeli, he says, needs to know how Palestinian people view him and why. He needs to understand how the Palestinians interpret history and the Jewish people and the Land of Israel and the divine order, and why. And, similarly, a Palestinian needs to understand how Israelis interpret those things, and why.

Rettig Gur admits that this is no easy feat. The gulf between us is so big, the hatreds run so deep, the emotions are so fraught.

Perhaps the path to peace and justice for all can be found in James Boyd White's profound concept of "justice as translation."

To quote White: " Translation as [White defines] it is...the art of facing the impossible, of confronting unbridgeable discontinuities between texts, between language, and between people. As such, it has an ethical as well as an intellectual dimension. It recognizes the other...as a center of meaning apart from oneself. ...Good translation thus proceeds not by the motives of dominance or acquisition, but by respect. ...It is not simply an operation of mind on material, but a way of being oneself in relation to another being."<sup>4</sup>

He goes on: "The translator"—we might say, the peacemaker—"would thus perpetually resist the claim...that everything can be translated without loss into [*her*] terms; she would similarly challenge the formulations by which the power of one person (or a group) over the lives of another...is justified or made to seem *natural*, by languages that assert their own unquestioned validity."

The translator-peacemaker's job—whether in law or diplomacy or person-to-person relationships—"is to provide a place in which unheard voices can be responded to; it is our task...to realize this possibility."<sup>5</sup>

If all this is going over your head, you're not alone. The path of "justice as translation" has gone over the heads of Israeli and Palestinian leaders for generations, probably because it's so overwhelming and so inaccessible.

It seems like we need another Moses to be our translator—someone who can help the two sides create a new story that affirms both interpretations.

Perfect translation is impossible, and both sides will lose something of their pure original. But I know we all pray that, in the end, everyone can emerge from the process a winner—and that one day soon, we will all sing to God a new song of redemption.

[Click here](#) to listen to an interview with Haviv Rettig Gur on the December 31, 2023, edition of the podcast *Call Me Back* with Dan Senior.

1 *K'dushat Levi, B'shallach* 17

2 James Boyd White, *Justice as Translation*, 241

3 Interview with Haviv Rettig Gur, [Call Me Back - with Dan Senor · December 31, 2023](#)

4 White, 257

5 *Ibid.*, 267