Translating Prayer into Words and Action

Creative Non-fiction by Rabbi Dov Zinger

A Proposal for a Thesis in Literary Translation

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תרגום תפילה למלים ופעולות

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Aims and General Description

My thesis will be a translation of a work of creative non-fiction תיכון תפילתי - מתכוני תפילה by Rabbi Dov Zinger.[1] The book is a combination of devotional writing and spiritual guidance, and is the outcome of Rabbi Dov's work leading "prayer groups" across Israel for the past ten years where participants have worked together to connect to the words of the ancient Jewish prayer book in new ways. From his work with these groups he formed the base of the material of this book.

This book is in itself a sort of translation- it attempts to take the age-old words and movements of the traditional Jewish prayer service and to make them accessible to the modern worshipper.

The overall aim of my thesis is to translate *Tikun Tfilati* in a manner that allows the English-speaking reader access to the wisdom contained within. This stream of wisdom is often called "Eretz-Yisraeli" (of the Land of Israel), a term oft associated with Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg, one of Rabbi Dov's main influences and teachers.[2] This refers to a kind of wisdom deeply influenced by what is experienced as the inherent holiness in the Land of Israel and is very faithful to the traditional wisdom of the Torah, yet does not lose this depth when being "translated" into a more modern form and language.

Further, I am curious to discover how the translation of the Hebrew, the language of the Jewish prayer book since its earliest form in the Second Temple period, will work when being adapted into English, in a more modern, interactive, and hands-on way.

[1] The book's title translates literally to "Fix My prayer- A Book of Recipes." Although this name will need to be changed, as the same play on words in Hebrew does not work in English (*tikun*, fixing, and *mitkon*, recipe, have the same root), the author offers encouragement as he explains why he chose to call the formulas he offers for practical work in prayer "recipes." All humans eat, and likewise he is suggesting all humans pray. Many people are afraid to experiment with cooking, something we must do in order to eat, and he is encouraging his readers not to fear prayer, for just as "many cakes are burned" on the way to successful baking, one mustn't fear failure in his or her to attempt to consciously work on prayer.

[2] Rabbi Shimon Gershom Rosenberg (acronym "Shagar") was a Torah scholar and religious Post-modern thinker.

Conceptual Background

Author

This book's author, Rabbi Dov Zinger, has served as the head of the flagship high school Yeshiva Makor Chaim since its inception. He received national attention, tragically, when two of the "Three Boys" who were subsequently found murdered, had gone missing after leaving Makor Chaim, and he was regularly interviewed and sought out by the media to bring spiritual guidance during this time.

In addition, Rabbi Dov is the founding director of *Beit Midrash Lihtichadshut* (Jewish Center of Learning and Renewal), a national initiative to reawaken prayer and spiritual principles in educational institutions across Israel. In conjunction with this, he has been leading the abovementioned prayer groups, as well morning prayer services held every Rosh Chodesh attended by hundreds of people from around Israel.

Rabbi Dov is in a unique position to bring this material to the Israeli public as he is a leading figure in the National Religious world who, in his work as Rosh Yeshiva for over 30 years, he has influenced and inspired two generations of the current teachers and principals of the National Religious schools across the country. He was a close student, friend and neighbor of Rabbi Menachem Froman z"l, who offered a new, yet traditional voice to the Israeli religious community, and many people, especially young people, seek him out as a spiritual teacher and mentor.

Tikun Tfilati was published in Hebrew by Magid in 2017. This is Rabbi Dov's only published writing, and he was assisted in the writing process by Reut Brosh.

Structure

Tikun Tfilati consists of eleven sections, each of which opens with a relatively long quote from "Likutei Tfilot" (called *The Fiftieth Gate* in English), a compilation of personal prayers written by Rabbi Natan of Breslov, as well as a piece of poetry from a modern Hebrew poet, from Zelda to much lesser- known poets.

Each of the book's sections is made up of anywhere from five to ten short chapters titled, for example, "Yearnings", "Praise", "Quiet " etc., and each chapter consists of three elements. First, two to four quotes from a range of traditional sources such as Tanach, Chassidic works and the traditional Jewish prayer book. Second, Rabbi Dov's own writing, a very poetic prose on the subject at hand, and third,

instructions for hands-on activities or actions one can do to develop his mastery of the particular element of prayer being discussed.

This formula repeats itself again and again and I believe makes the book very accessible, as one reader said to me: “like little candies.” The reader can take just a few minutes before his or her prayer and enjoy this sweet guidance on how to connect a bit deeper.

Many of the traditional texts have already been translated into English, some of them many times, by folks much more knowledgeable in the particular work being translated than I. I propose that the work I, as the book's translator, would need to do is to find any and all available translations and choose the best one, and only attempt to retranslate if I find something seems especially off. Of course, I would credit each and every source from which I would take the translation. There is, however, a lot of content that has not been translated and that would be the bulk of my efforts when translating these traditional sources.

The same also applies to the modern poetry. If it has been translated, my sense is it would be best to receive rights to use that translation. Of course I will determine this on a case to case basis. If the poetry has not yet been translated, it would naturally be my job to do so.

Most of the translation will be of Rabbi Dov's own commentary.

Target Audience

The question I will face as translator of this book is how to bring its material to the English speaking world in a way that will translate not only in the plainest sense of the word, but also cross-culturally, where Rabbi Dov’s influence is significantly less, and perhaps, the thirst for this kind of material is less.

In Israel the target audience is the National Religious community where the desire for a more personal connection to text and prayer has grown significantly over the past 15-20 years. While the most direct target audience of an English version of this book would be the Modern Orthodox communities of the United States, South Africa, England and Australia, I contend that limiting the translation could be a mistake, for the interest of these communities in this kind of personal and subjective perspective is less than it is in Israel.

There is, however, a growing thirst among more liberal Jews, and the style of the writing could truly speak to them. This would, however, require the agreement of the book's author and publisher, as it

would require a meaningful adaption of the book. As a friend who is himself part of the liberal Modern Orthodox community but works in the larger American-Jewish community said " to reach the non-frum (religious) world you would need to have gender neutral translations and vary the God imagery. 'King' is a non-starter for most liberal Jews."

While attempting to make it accessible to all Jews across the spectrum of religiosity could make it much more appealing, there is a question of it losing authenticity in the eyes of Orthodox readers. I am in conversation with the author and publisher about this, and despite this concern I believe the book's rich potential to reach seekers across the Jewish spectrum justifies this adaption, and as long as it does not contradict the perspective of Orthodoxy in any way, it has the potential for reaching the entirety of the Jewish community, due simply to the authenticity of the book's content.

My Chaburah

A personal aim I have with this is book, as it is very much a book meant to be practiced, and not simply read, is to put it into practice myself, with the goal of making sure that English-speaking readers will be able to do so as well. I plan to begin a *chaburah*, study group, of English-speakers who will meet once a week, learning together and committing to practicing the material we have studied that week. I will take notes as we go along, to record how this "live" practice works.

Procedures/Methodologies/Detailed Descriptions

Transliteration of words: Jewish English?

Many of the potential English-language readers of this book are, at least tangentially, if not very, familiar with the Jewish prayer book. This means that there is likely less of a cultural gap between the source text culture and the target text culture than is generally the case in translated works.[3] The reader of the translation of *Tikun Tfilati* likely does not have the level of Hebrew necessary to read the book in its original language, however, he or she will probably know many of the Hebrew words that are used as they may even say them daily, albeit perhaps lacking complete understanding. Even a reader who really does not understand the Hebrew words in their prayer book is still less distant on a cultural level than, for instance, than if I were to read a book about religious practices in China. (I am not Chinese and have never visited China.)

Since this book's aim is to make the experience one that any Jewish worshipper can relate to, it may be that it is already is already a step in the process of translation, for Orthodox and non-Orthodox readers alike.

This is being said, the first question that jumps to mind when thinking about how to translate this book, is to what extent I can allow myself to use Hebrew words in transliteration? Can I say Torah instead of Bible? Breishit rather than Genesis? Siddur rather than prayer book? And if I do, must I italicize these words? In *The Task of the Jewish Translator: A Valedictory Address* by David G. Roskies, a founding editor of the academic journal Prooftexts, he argues that Jewish-specific words should be used in transliteration without italics as a kind of expression of emancipation of the American, English-speaking diaspora Jewish community, claiming as it were, that these words can, should and are becoming part of American English.[4]

[3] "Language reflects the interests, ideas, customs, and other cultural aspects of a community. The vocabulary of a language manifests the culturally important areas of a group of people in a particular setting whether religious, aesthetic, social, and environmental, among others"; (Bahameed, 2008).

[4] The Task of the Jewish Translator: A Valedictory Address, by David G. Roskies, Prooftexts, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Fall 2004), pp. 263-272

Translation Theories

It seems clear to me that this work, and perhaps no work, can be limited to only one possible translation theory as the work itself is not theoretical, but rather alive and dynamic. What is right for one sentence isn't necessarily right for another. The desire for faithful translation and the attempt to match idioms as closely as possible for example, might be wonderfully possible in one place but truly impossible, and therefore undesirable, in another.

Many years ago I attended a lecture by writer Amos Oz at the Hebrew University's Rothberg International School. I remember very little of what Oz said, and I do not believe his lecture was specifically about translating. However, since he was speaking in English, he naturally broached the subject, and this one line, even though I had no idea at the time that I would one day become a translator, stuck with me: "I tell my translators something I would never tell my wife, 'In order to be faithful to me, you have to cheat.'"

One of the reasons I was attracted to this book is the opportunity to translate different forms of writing: traditional Jewish texts, poetry, and creative prose. Each one, naturally, will present its own challenge. As this is not a work of fiction, there may be more room, or even more of a need, to make certain changes in order to make it more accessible to the target audience.

Where I will need to translate traditional sources, each quote, depending on the work itself, will require a different effort as each one has its own style which includes language used and how clear the language actually is. Many Jewish texts use words very sparingly and assume a meaningful amount of knowledge on the part of the reader that not every modern reader possesses. My task should be less challenging, since I am only being asked to translate just a few words here and there, than it would be if I were attempting to translate, say, a whole chapter or an entire work. I will, when translating (or choosing a translation of) the traditional texts, attempt to stick as closely as possible to a literal translation , only deviating from this if clarity demands me to do so.

As for the book's original writing, I will likely choose more of an adaptive translation style, in consultation with book's author, in order to make it more understandable and perhaps even more palatable to the non-Israeli reader. As for the book's poetry, I believe it will also lend itself to a more adaptive style.

Adaption Across Religious Boarders

As I hope to expand the book's audience beyond the Modern Orthodox world, I will need to adapt its language so that it does scare away non-Orthodox readers, and does not turn away observant readers. Not an easy task, but I believe I can do this as I was raised in a very secular Jewish home and grew up with both liberal values and a love of Judaism, a love that then led me as an adult to adopt a traditional, observant lifestyle. While I hold a deep belief in authentic Jewish writings and practice, I still hold a place inside that looks to bridge these two elements of myself.

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