

Translation and the Art of the Jewish Book
A Panel for the European Jewish Studies Meeting in Ravenna, Italy, July 25 – 29
Moderator: Murray Baumgarten

Translation as a cultural and linguistic practice has a long history in western culture. It intersects with and shapes interpretive habits. Jewish interpretation of traditional texts, notably Midrash, has been part of this history of the theory and practice of translation, (The word Midrash מדרש means to begin with to investigate, examine, and interrogate the text.) The text is one that is usually known by heart, and the translation and/or midrash is the result of an intense knowledge and continuing interrogation of the given passage.

Translators have often claimed that translation betrays the original text: Traduttore, traditore, the Italian pun goes. Midrash, however, supposes the text is a fountain of meanings, and each version comes with a supplement that can only be revealed through the midrashic interrogation. When he comments that “He who makes a literal translation of a verse of Scripture is a liar, and he who adds to it is a blasphemer,” the second century Talmudic scholar, Rabbi Yehudah Ben-ilai, further complicates the issue. The panelists will discuss a range of texts that engage these questions.

Yotam Benziman, Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, Israel
The (Un)translatability of Ethical Concepts

The conceptual roots of ideas and meanings are often to be found in grammatical roots. Therefore, when ideas are translated into another language made of different roots, part of their essence is lost on the one hand, and acquires a new dimension on the other hand. I will discuss the Hebrew roots and signification related to major ethical concepts such as forgiveness, impartiality and gratitude, and analyze their meanings in biblical and modern Hebrew and in the Mediterranean and Semitic lingual context. Comparing these concepts and roots to their English counterparts, I will offer an explanation for some differences between Hebrew and non-Hebrew ethical discourses.

Hana Wirth-Nesher, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Israel
Translating the Ineffable: the ABC's of Modern Jewish Writing

This paper examines the role of Hebrew and Hebrew letters in Modern Jewish Literature written in the Roman alphabet. How has Hebrew often come to signify the untranslatable? What role does Hebrew play in literature that is concerned with the representation of the ineffable? In particular, how is the representation of the ineffable in recent Jewish writing entangled with the subject of representing the Holocaust? I will be discussing how Hebrew enacts the untranslatable semantically, thematically, and visually. My case studies will be multilingual: Abraham Sutzkever's poem about Hebrew as the limit of Pasternak's comprehension of Yiddish poetry; Daniel Mendelsohn's reclaiming of Hebrew as Holocaust commemoration in his memoir *The Lost: The Search for Six of Six Million*; Gilles Rozier's positioning of Hebrew as the untranslatable remainder between German and Yiddish in his French novel *The Mercy Room*.

Murray Baumgarten, University of California, Santa Cruz, California, USA

Primo Levi: Thinking in German

His knowledge of German helped Primo Levi survive Auschwitz. That part of his experience has often been commented on. His study of chemistry, then a scientific discipline conducted in German, provided him with the fundamental building blocks of the language, that were augmented by personal interest and experience. Many of the key moments in his memoir of Auschwitz, *Se Questo e un uomo*, turn on German phrases, including his initiation into the life of the Lager. Thirsty, Primo Levi reaches for an icicle, only to have it snatched away by a guard. "Warum," he asks, only to be answered, "Hier ist kein Warum." The German phrase echoes throughout the account. Another phrase, on which I want to focus my discussion, comes in the *Sistema Periodico*, when Primo Levi thinks about his supervisor in the Buna Chemistry laboratory, Dr Mueller. That thought melds his memories of the other German scientist with whom he has interacted, Dr Pannwitz. Primo notes, "At that time I was thinking in German –" My talk will explore the resonance of that phrase for his writing, in the context of the many languages Primo refers to, analyzes, and comments on.

Michal Ginsburg, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA

Madame Bovary in Jerusalem

Amos Oz's novel *My Michael* can be read as a rewriting of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and his novella "The Hill of Evil Counsel" can be read as a rewriting of one important episode from that novel. What happens when *Madame Bovary* leaves her native land and moves to Jerusalem of the 1960's? Why would Amos Oz, at that point in his career, turn to a model from French literature (rather than find a model from within Hebrew literature) and create a heroine whose fantasies are largely inspired by works of popular (rather than canonical) European literature? This is not an attempt to document literary influence but rather seek to explain the role a certain "foreign" literature plays in a novel primarily concerned with Israel and Jerusalem of the mid 20th century.

Michal Peled Ginsburg is Professor of French and Comparative Literature and Director of the Program in Comparative Literary Studies at Northwestern University. She is the author of *Flaubert Writing: A Study in Narrative Strategies* (1986) and *Economies of Change: Form and Transformation in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1996) as well as co-author of *Shattered Vessels: Memory, Identity, and Creation in the Work of David Shabar* (published both in English and in Hebrew, 2004).

Hana Wirth-Nesher is the Samuel L. and Perry Haber Chair on the Study of the Jewish Experience in the United States at Tel Aviv University, where she is also Professor of English and American Studies and Director of the Goldreich Family Institute for Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture. She is the author of *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge University Press) and, most recently, *Call It English: The Languages of Jewish American Literature* (Princeton University Press) which was runner-up for the National Jewish Book Award (2007) in the category of Modern Jewish Thought. She is also the editor of *What is Jewish Literature?* (Jewish Publication Society) and co-editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish American Literature*. She has published numerous essays on English, American, Jewish, and Jewish American literature, including articles on Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Cynthia Ozick, Sholem Aleichem, as well as Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, Henry James, and Mark Twain. Prof. Wirth-Nesher has been visiting professor at Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, and the University of Michigan, and has lectured at many universities in the United States, Europe, and Israel.

Professor Murray Baumgarten teaches English and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is the emeritus editor of *Judaism: A quarterly journal of Jewish Life & Thought*, published by the American Jewish Congress, and has published widely on urban Victorian and Jewish culture, beginning with *City Scriptures: Modern Jewish Writing* (Harvard 1981).

Dr. Yotam Benziman teaches philosophy and political science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and is the co-editor of *Identities -- a Journal for Jewish Culture and Identity* at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. Among his publications are the following books (in Hebrew): *Until You Are in His Place* (Magnes Press, 2004); *Forgive and Not Forget* (The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Hakibutz Hameuchad, 2008); *Thinking About Thanking* (Magnes Press, 2009).