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On Translating Hasidic Homilies

THE HOMILETIC LITERATURE OF HASIDISM provides a special series of challenges to its would-be translator. Essentially an oral genre, the printed homily as we have it is but a summary and a pale reflection of the hasidic *derashah* as dramatic event. This situation is worsened for the translator by the fact of an already prior shift in language; since the oral sermon was preached in Yiddish, and the printed text is in Hebrew, he is already working from a translated version of the *rebbe's* remarks, and a rather woeful one at that. Into this very inadequate vessel the hasidic authors have poured a remarkably rich and complex product: homilies which, while often purporting to comment on verses of Scripture, quote, discuss, and remold vast areas of the whole intervening Jewish literature, including both halakhah and aggadah, as well as teachings of philosophers and Kabbalists of many generations. No wonder that those who have sought to present Hasidism to the modern world have generally shied away from this literature, the true core of Hasidism insofar as any hasid is concerned. Better to stick with the stories, though they too have their problems as documents of the movement. At least the hasidic tale will have wide appeal to the contemporary reader, while homilies, even in translation, will remain complex and bewildering.

Since the present writer has recently published a first attempt at breaking this virtual ban on the translation of such sources,¹ I thought it appropriate to reflect on some of these issues from the translator's point of view, hoping thereby both to share in a conversation among translators and to introduce others to the particular problems—and special charms—of the literature in which I work.

The religious literature of Hasidism differs from that of the classical period in Jewish mysticism, the Spanish Kabbalah, in a most important way: it is essentially a by-product. Classical Kabbalah, like its elder sister medieval Jewish philosophy, was primarily a literary movement. Intellectuals thought, read one another's works, and eventually composed and published manuscripts of their own. If these figures met with one another, or did anything other than read and write, that is nought but a footnote to history. Not so Hasidism. Here the essential deed was oral: that of speaking to others, passing the word of the Ba'al Shem Tov and his circle, spreading the new teachings. Whatever else Hasidism is, it must be described as one of the great success stories in the history of religious movements. Within half a century after the Ba'al Shem Tov's death, it is probably fair to estimate that well more than half the vast Jewry of Russia-Poland saw itself as belonging to the community of his followers. In this rapid spread of religious revolution (and it was nothing less) the printed word played a remarkably secondary role.² It was rather the spoken word, spreading the fame and miracles of one tzaddik or another (hence the hasidic tale) or, especially on sacred occasions, applying the movement's teachings to some appropriate words of Scripture, that took the fore in Hasidism.

When it came to preaching, the ideal among the hasidic masters was an oral homily of an entirely spontaneous and unplanned character. If Solomon Maimon's testimony is trustworthy, there were times when the Maggid of Miedzyrzec (Mezritsh) would playfully ask each of the disciples present to call out a biblical verse, and around these he would weave his teaching.³ The Maggid's disciple, Wolf of Zhitomir, speaks of preaching at its highest as an act of possession; the preacher's own self-conscious speech ceases as he is overpowered by the holy spirit that then speaks through his voice.⁴ For such an event it makes rather little sense to prepare in advance the text of one's remarks. Indeed there is preparation for such an act, but this preparation is of the pneumatic rather than the intellectual sort. The best description is probably that left by Nahman of Bratslav:

He who wants to interpret the Torah has to begin by drawing unto himself words as hot as burning coals. Speech comes out of the upper heart, which Scripture calls 'the rock of my heart' (Ps. 73:26). The interpreter has to pour out his words to God in prayer, seeking to arouse His mercies, so that this heart will open. Speech then flows from the heart, and the interpretation of Torah comes from that speech.⁵

Such a homily, spoken to an anxious and devoted crowd of listeners, can have about it the quality of high drama, one reinforced by periodic interruptions for enthusiastic song and liquid refreshment. The form of such events has changed little in two hundred years, and the reader is encouraged to see one for himself (the pronoun, alas, remains inten-

tionally masculine here) at the court of Bobov or Lubavitch in Brooklyn or at one of the major hasidic establishments in Israel.

In fact there is reason to suspect that this sense of spontaneity was observed partially in the breach, even from the very beginning. It is simply hard to imagine sermons like those of the *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef* delivered without a note, or at least without careful prior mental notation. These vast edifices opened with a series of objections to the verse at hand, sometimes listing twenty or more minor points of grammar, syntax, word order, and the like. As they went on, wending their way through major halakhic as well as aggadic/theological themes, one might almost forget the challenge at hand. Then, with a single deft blow, all the rabbinic sources marshalled would be used to resolve the would-be problems seen in Scripture, and the homily would be drawn together into a single tightly constructed whole.⁶ Such concern for form is generally (though who are we to say?) outside the realm of concerns that occupy the holy spirit, and bespeaks preparation of a human sort. In the case of Bratslav, where all sorts of written documentation were carefully preserved, we have brief notes for certain homilies, and in at least one case Nathan of Nemirov assures us that these were found written in his master's own hand.⁷

How did the hasidic homily then travel the route from living oral drama to body of written literature? There were several paths, including both an occasional self-conscious literary production (the *Tanya* of the Lubavitchers is the classic example) and latter-day anthologization of teachings attributed to several masters. But the most common route seems to be the following. At the conclusion of the Sabbath or Festival on which the master's words were spoken, a disciple would write down from memory the major outlines of his *rebbe's* teaching. He would do this by maintaining in his mind the order of the quotations and the thread of argument used to hold them together, rather than by attempting to memorize the entire verbal content of the homily as delivered. When he committed this summary/reconstruction to paper, he immediately did so in Hebrew rather than Yiddish. This was entirely the natural thing to do, since he was essentially working from Hebrew fragments, the quotations used in the homily having been preserved and recorded in the original rather than in Yiddish. This Hebrew rewrite of the homily, sometimes as corrected by the master himself, but often prepared for publication only after his death, was entered into one or another of those collections that make up the classics of hasidic literature.

The Hebrew in which they wrote was, as we have indicated, woefully inadequate. Generations of *maskilim* had fun at the expense of the hasidic authors in mocking their casual disregard of such essential Hebrew niceties as agreement of number and gender, proper use of the

construct, and consistency in voice or person. But the problem with hasidic Hebrew goes beyond such guffaws, relatively remediable in the hands of the translator. The syntax in which the Hebrew text is composed is almost entirely that of Yiddish. What it reflects, however, is not the syntax of modern Yiddish, quite well controlled and not far, as it happens, from that of English. The Yiddish that underlies this Hebrew is in fact the purely oral Yiddish of the Polish *besmedresh*, as yet untamed by the rules of diction and sentence structure with which later generations were to fence it in. Listen, for example to a sentence (two sentences? three?) in the *Me'or 'eynayim*:⁸

אך דהנה הבריאה היה בשביל התורה ובשביל ישראל דהיינו לגלות אלקותו
 ית' לישראל שיכירו וידעו מציאותו אף שמהותו אי אפשר להשיג כשידעו
 שיש אלוה מצוי יעשו כל מעשיהם לשם שמים לקיים בכל דרכיך דעהו
 וליחד א"ע אליו ית' כי אין זולתו ואפס בלתו ולית אתר פנוי מיניה כמאמר
 מלא כל הארץ כבודו.

The passage is entirely Yiddish in form, from its beginning with the word *akh* (*nor* in Yiddish), through *de-haynu* (*dos heyst*), down into the typical *kesheyede'u . . . ya'asu* (*az zey veln . . . demolt veln zey*) construction. Even the term used to tie in the concluding scriptural flourish, *kema'amar* (an ellipse for *kema'amar hakatuv*), functions precisely like *vi s'shteyt*. A second example may make the linguist's delight and the translator's terror even clearer. Here we choose from another hasidic classic, the *No'am Elimelekh* by Elimelech of Lezajsk:⁹

דהענין הוא כך שהצדיק צריך לקדש עצמו כ"כ ולהכיר נפלאות וגדלות
 הבורא ב"ה עד שיבא למדרגה כזו שגם אם יראה איזה פלא לא יפליא
 בעיניו לחידוש גדול נגד נפלאות הבורא יתעלה שבידו לעשות פלאי פלאות
 יותר ויותר אין קץ.

In this case let us attempt a ludicrously over-literal translation, but one which will show us, through the English, how the cadences of Yiddish are here preserved:

The fact is thus, that the tzaddik has to so sanctify himself and come to know the blessed Creator's wonders and great acts until he reaches such a level where even if he sees some wonder he shouldn't consider it too wonderful or great compared to the wonders of the exalted Creator who could perform still more wonderful wonders without end.

The *eyn kets*, the reader will by now understand, could as well be applied to the sentences of these writers as it could to the wonders of God. Redivision of the work into manageable English sentences is clearly a part of the task that the translator cannot escape. In doing so he will inevitably lose some of the particular flavor of the original. Here a decision has to be made: shall he attempt to preserve some degree of that oral Yiddish cadence in his English version, or will he do better to

cut his losses, as it were, and opt for straightforward English prose? My choice of the latter course was partly influenced by a fear of cuteness, a sense that any attempt to carry over this pattern of speech could easily reduce the hasidic authors to the East Side Jewish grandfathers of American Jewish comedy routines. Returning to the first of our two examples, that run-on bit of Yiddish Hebrew emerges in English as

Creation took place for the sake of Torah and for the sake of Israel. Its purpose was that God be revealed to Israel, that we come to know of His existence. Even though His true nature lies beyond our grasp, once we recognize that God exists we will do everything for His sake. Thus will "Know Him in all your ways" (Prov. 3:6) become a reality, as we seek to be united with Him. There is no other and there is nothing without Him! There is no place devoid of Him; "the whole earth is filled with His glory!" (Isa. 6:3)

The hasidic master speaks without a Yiddish accent. He is thus liberated to address his English-reading audience with the message that truly concerns him, that of religious enthusiasm and the spirit of revival. The task of any translator, that of seeking a "voice" in which his author is to speak in the new language, is doubly crucial and doubly difficult in the case of which we speak. An oral quality, if not *the* oral quality, of the homilies must be retained; it should be possible to hear echoes of oral preaching behind the text, especially if read aloud. A translation that made the hasidic *derashah* into a purely literary product would belie its true nature. At the same time, too rigid an attempt to preserve the original voice of the Yiddish/Hebrew source would lead to a borscht-circuit parody, utterly belying the authors' great seriousness of tone. Nor may one play cultural havoc with these writings by using the sorts of popular preaching language that are available in English: one could hardly want the *Me'or 'eynayim* to sound like a Baptist preacher in a Southern revival tent. The voice here chosen, one of relative dialectic neutrality, might arguably place the *rebbe* in an Ivy League chapel service, an even less comfortable setting for him in which to cry out the pervasive presence of God. The point is that such a choice is inevitable; best that the translator make it self-consciously, and with his reader as well as his author in mind.

The sort of Hebrew in which the hasidic sources are composed engenders yet another problem for the translator. Because that language was artificial and only poorly known by most of the writers, the vocabulary employed is remarkably weak and repetitious. Note in our second example how many times the word *pele'*, or some derivative thereof, is used in a single sentence. In my mock translation I intentionally rendered each of these as "wonder," attempting no variegation of language on my own. Of course this will not work in English, distinguished as it is among languages for its richness of vocabulary. Some of

these *pela'ot* will simply have to become miracles, marvels, signs, or supernatural acts, lest the reader die of boredom.

The example of *pele'* addresses only the question of variety for its own (literary) sake. There are other situations, however, where limited Hebrew vocabulary uses a single term that must alternatively be translated by several different English terms, depending on its context. This is particularly true of certain technical usages in the theological terminology of Hasidism. Lacking the ability to say much of color or variety in Hebrew, the authors fell back all too quickly onto this technical language, an instrument that itself had once had a much more refined usage (in the hands of the Lurianic Kabbalists) but had now become something of a catch-all for broad hasidic conceptualizations.

No term is more central to the theoretical literature of early Hasidism than *da'at*, the state of mind or quality of religious awareness that lies at the very core of the hasidic world view. The translator will search in vain for a single English term to convey all the many cases that this single Hebrew word is forced to cover. In varying contexts it needs to be translated as "mind," "awareness," "intimate knowledge," "consciousness," and several more. In cases where the reference is to the third of the ten *sefirot* the term is best left untranslated. But what to do where the term, as it does so frequently, carries several of these meanings at once? In a situation where the sefirotic component is an important one, I opt for transliteration, hoping that the reader will be able to absorb a certain number of these terms and have his own vocabulary enriched by them.

והדעת הוא כוללת אהבה ויראה חסד וגבורה כנודע שלכך נאמר בכל התורה וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר דבר אל בני ישראל שהוא כאמור אצלנו במקום אחר שע"י משה בחינת סוד הדעת נמשך סתימת התורה מעולם המחשבה להתגלות לבני ישראל בבחינת דבור שזוהו וידבר ה' אל משה שבאמצעות הדעת נתאחד בחינת התגלות התורה שבבחינת הדבור להמקור של מעין החכמה שבסתימו'.

Da'at includes both love and fear, both compassion and rigor. It is because Moses represents *da'at* that the Torah so frequently says: "The Lord spoke unto Moses saying 'Speak unto the children of Israel.'" We have shown this elsewhere as well: Moses brings the hidden Torah from the World of Thought to the children of Israel in the form of speech. By means of *da'at*, the revelatory power of speech has been joined to the source of secret wisdom.¹⁰

No translation would have done for *da'at* in that final sentence; better the reader here learn that hasidic mysticism has a specific technical term for that point of nexus between transcendent silence and revealed speech, a nexus especially crucial in a culture where the essential mystery is, after all, that of language and the word's power to transcend.

The mysteries of language bring us face to face with another issue to be confronted in the translation of hasidic texts, one caused precisely by this faith in language itself as a source of revealed truth. We refer to the notion that the Torah's language, and the Hebrew language in general, as the vehicle through which God spoke the universe into being, is an endless treasure of hidden meanings and profound secrets. These may be uncovered through any number of techniques developed over the centuries (and long before Hasidism) for esoteric reading of a text. The letters of a word may be read as numbers, added up and compared to the numerical value of another word or phrase. Words may be turned into acronyms, letters may be reversed, and unrelated but similar roots may be associated with one another. None of this works, of course, in translation. It may not be set aside entirely by the translator, for without it a great many hasidic teachings would seem meaningless; the associations that link one part of a teaching with another are very often just these plays of language. On the other hand, the translator must take care not to overburden the reader with lengthy explanations of that which takes place on a level of the text that remains essentially inaccessible to him. I offer two examples of this problem and my attempts to solve it. The first text, appropriately enough, deals with language and its permutations:

That was why God commanded that the offering of shekels be made before the decree of Haman came upon the Jews. The rabbis said that it was the fulfillment of this commandment that negated his decree. Haman had weighed out ten thousand pieces of silver for the lives of the Jews (Esth. 3:9). But "the utterances of God are pure" (Ps. 18:31) can also be read as "the utterances of God are permutations (*TSeRuFah/TSeRuFim*) and the secret of these permutations of language has been given to Israel, in order to turn them to the good. Of the *SHeKeL* that they gave, fulfilling the commandment of God, there can be wrought *LeKaSH* on the other side. *LeKaSH* is the "straw" of "The house of Jacob shall be fire . . . and the house of Esau shall be straw; they shall burn and devour it" (Obad. 1:18). By the flame of Jacob's devotion, performing the commandments in both love and fear, the power of the holy will grow strong. The letters will be so turned as to bode ill for the idolators; in this and every way Israel so turn the permutations as to uplift the holy from the clutches of evil and to broaden its boundaries.

In this case, if I may be permitted to say so, the translation has been carried off with relative success, i.e. the puns are demonstrated to the reader clearly but unobtrusively, and the sense of the passage as a whole is well preserved. Neither of the two puns here is particularly complicated, and the English reader can get by in the passage without struggle. Our next example represents a more complicated and hence, in a sense, less successful attempt.

This is why it was said that “the son of David [messiah] will not come until the last penny (*PeRuTah*) is gone from the pocket (*KiS*). It is known that the Torah contains general and specific (*PeRaT*) rulings; there are times when a general principle may require detailing or when a specific ruling may require a general rule. But the “general” Torah may also be taken to mean the “entire” Torah (*kelal*), both written and oral, including Mishnah, Talmud, and other teachings of the rabbis. The “specific” may then refer to that which has fallen among the nations, as in “the gleanings of thy vineyard” (Lev. 19:10—*PeRaT/PeReT*). The general needs the specific—it needs to purify and uplift it, until the “penny,” that is the gleanings, comes out of the “pocket,” its place of hiding (*KiS/KiSSui*).

Here I felt forced to add a footnote that reads

This paragraph is based on an essentially untranslatable combination of puns, playing the opening Talmudic statement off against the hermeneutical principle of *kelal hatsarikh liperat*, “the general requires specification.”

If the techniques of textual interpretation and language play create pitfalls for the translator, so does the final “payoff” point in nearly every homily of the collection. Though our interest may be captured along the way by the major doctrines of Hasidism as conveyed by the master or by interesting snippets of earlier tradition and their reinterpretation, we eventually must come back to the verse of Scripture at hand and ask what reading it is that our author offers for it. This is not always as obvious as it sounds, and I dare say that a good many Hebrew readers of the hasidic homilies also miss the exegetical point that is the author’s final tour de force in any given homily. Here I found that the use of capital letters was a tool that English had to offer the translation. I had the verse at hand printed, whenever it appeared in the homily, all in caps. This allows it to stand out, reminding the reader that it is the exegesis of this verse that remains the matter at hand.

If, however, a person does not study Torah for its own sake and does not bring about this union, THE EARTH WAS FORMLESS AND VOID. AND DARKNESS. Then is the light hidden; as the two are not joined together, the upper Torah cannot give of its light. And yet THE SPIRIT OF GOD HOVERS; even when one studies for the wrong reason, there is something spiritual in the holy letters, hovering OVER THE FACE OF THE WATER.

The truth is that all these techniques work best when they are not constantly needed, when there is enough “content” to the particular homily that is not dependent either on plays of language or exegetical precision. This brings me to the final matter I wish to discuss in connection with the translation of hasidic sources, in fact the very first matter that the translator has to consider as he sets upon his task: the selection of the text. There are a great many entirely worthwhile hasidic texts that simply should not be translated. In some cases the teachings are too short and entirely dependent on matters that would require explana-

tion for the reader, hence making a collection of simple *pshetlekh* into a cumbersome tome. An old favorite of mine among the hasidic classics, the *Degel mahaneh Ephraim* by the Ba'al Shem Tov's grandson Ephraim of Sudilkov would probably make a poor candidate for translation on these grounds. On the other end of the spectrum, I would hardly recommend that anyone undertake a translation of the *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef*. Here the individual homilies are so long and their structure so complex that I find it hard to imagine a reader of the translation who would find the patience to hold all the threads of argument together. Anyone with that much time and patience to devote to Jewish study would be better spending it on the mastery of Hebrew, and probably would have done so already. Still others among the sources are very rough in their editing, and lend themselves more to anthologizing than they do to translation in their entirety. Those works which seem most ready for the translator are collections such as the *Me'or 'eynayim*, *Kedushat Levi*, *No'am Elimelech*, well known works of single authors where the body of each homily is of sufficient length and (in most cases) completeness to make a comprehensible and readable translation a likelihood.

The appeal of such works, even those carefully selected and skillfully translated, will be far from universal. Even when presented at their best, these homilies hardly make for light or easy reading. But there are several audiences who require such translations, and for these the task needs to be undertaken. One such reading public is the community of religious seekers drawn to Judaism, hoping to find a "spiritual" side of the tradition that is relatively accessible and not presented in the usual portrayals available in English. Of course many readers of this sort will content themselves with the tales or a few anthologies. There is, however, a public both Jewish and non-Jewish that does not know Hebrew and that would seek out authentic sources of hasidic spirituality for reasons of personal religious nourishment.

Another body of readers with whom the translator should be concerned is the scholarly community devoted to the study and interpretation of religion. Too often the comparativists and phenomenologists of mysticism have given scant attention to the Judaic materials. The availability of Scholem's work, particularly the topical essays, has served somewhat to rectify this situation, and to lend to the study of Kabbalah a sense of general intellectual respectability. The fact remains, however, that there are relatively few primary sources of later Jewish mysticism or devotional piety available in languages other than Hebrew or Yiddish. While the classics of Jewish philosophy are largely available either in English or German, their parallels in the realms of mystical and devotional theology (think of the *Pardes rimmonim*, the *Reshit hokhmah*, or the *Shney luhot haberit*, to cite prehasidic examples) remain closed to the outsider. Only when the sources of Judaism that should be of special interest to the student of *Religionsgeschichte* are made available can we expect

that field to offer the Jewish materials the attention they so richly deserve.

Some two years ago, on the two hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first hasidic book, *Mossad HaRav Kook* began publication of a bibliographic encyclopedia of Hasidism. The first volume, indexing authors from *alef* through *tet*, must have covered nearly a thousand bibliographic entries. The entire set, at that rate, should document some three or four thousand works by hasidic authors. Of these, a shelf of a dozen or so in translation would seem like a modest and worthwhile undertaking. This literature, quintessentially Jewish in form, content, and language, may yet find a body of readers that would surprise the Ba'al Shem Tov himself. And when it comes to the matter that is nowadays called "outreach," he is no easy man to surprise.

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NOTES

1. Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, *Upright Practices, The Light of the Eyes* (= *Hanhagot yesharot* and *Me'or 'eynayim, bereshit*). Paulist Press, The Classics of Western Spirituality, 1982. I have previously translated, together with Barry W. Holtz, an anthology of prayer instructions from this literature, *Your Word Is Fire*, Paulist, 1977. The only other work of the theoretical literature of Hasidism to appear fully in English is the *Tanya* of Shneur Zalman of Lyadi, New York, 1968-72.

2. While publication of hasidic books began with the *Toledot Ya'akov Yosef* in 1780, we have rather little evidence that the printing of this or a relatively few other books had much influence in Hasidism's spread before 1800. We seldom see quotations from printed hasidic works until much later. It would seem that the tradition of seeking out a personal teacher was already established in the Maggid's day (i.e. before 1772) as central to one's identity as a hasid, and this did not change with the availability of the teachings in print. Frequent reference is found in the hasidic writings themselves to the need for learning mussar from a teacher rather than from books.

3. Solomon Maimon, *Autobiography*. New York, 1947, p. 54.

4. *Or hame'ir vayikra'* 26. Discussed by Joseph Weiss in "Via Passiva in Early Hasidim," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 11 (1960), n. 42.

5. *Likkutēy MoHaRaN* 20:2. Quoted from my *Tormented Master*, p. 151.

6. This is a classic form of medieval Jewish homiletics, by no means invented by the *Toledot*. His proximate source for it was probably the very popular homiletic collection *Torat Moshe* by Moses Alshekh of sixteenth century Safed.

7. *Likkutēy MoHaRaN* II 79. See also the "Added teachings from our master's own manuscript" published as an addendum to many editions of the work.

8. *Me'or 'eynayim*. Jerusalem, 1966, 16b.

9. *No'am Elimelech*, New York, 1974, 17a.

10. *Me'or 'eynayim* 63b.