

## **Forgotten Synagogue Classics Part II**

### ***Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan's Living Torah: How Literally Must One Translate the Chumash?***

#### **I. A Brief History of Jewish Bible Translations**

##### **1) Bereishit 22:1-2**

א וַיְהִי, אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, וַהֲאֱלֹקִים, נִסָּה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם; וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו, אַבְרָהָם וַיִּגְדֹּל.

ב וַיֹּאמֶר קַח-נָא אֶת-בְּנֶךְךָ אֶת-יִחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר-אַהַבְתָּ, אֶת-יִצְחָק, וְלֶךְ-לְךָ, אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַמִּרְיָה; וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם, לְעֹלָה, עַל אֶחָד הַהָרִים, אֲשֶׁר אָמַר אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

##### **2) King James Version (1611)**

1. And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.

2. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

##### **3) Jewish Publication Society (1917)**

1. And it came to pass after these things, that God did prove Abraham, and said unto him: 'Abraham'; and he said: 'Here am I.'

2. And He said: 'Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.'

##### **4) Jewish Publication Society (1962)**

1. Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, "Abraham," and he answered, "Here I am."

2. And He said, "Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you."

## 5) Bereishit 22:9

ט וַיָּבֹאוּ, אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר-לוֹ הָאֱלֹקִים, וַיָּבִן שָׁם אֲבְרָהָם אֶת-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, וַיַּעֲרֹךְ אֶת-הָעֵצִים; וַיַּעֲקֹד, אֶת-יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ, וַיִּשֶׂם אֹתוֹ עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ, מִמַּעַל לָעֵצִים

“And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built the altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood.”  
(OJPS)

“They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham built an altar there; he laid out the wood; he bound his son Isaac; he laid him on the altar, on top of the wood.” (NJPS)

## 6) Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Letter to Rabbi Theodore Adams at the Rabbinical Council of America (Aug. 11, 1953) reprinted in *Community, Covenant, and Commitment*

As to the question of a new English translation of the Bible suggested by the Jewish Publication Society, I am afraid that the purpose of this undertaking is not to infuse the spirit of *Torah she-be-al peh* into the new English version but, on the contrary, following the footsteps of the Protestant Liberal ministers who recently revised the English text of the Bible, to satisfy the so-called modern “scientific” demands for a more exact rendition in accordance with the latest archeological and philological discoveries. In other words, the Jewish Publication Society is going to give us a translation in full accord with, or at least influenced by, higher Biblical criticism, and I cannot see how we, representatives of *Torah she-be-al peh*, can lend our name to such an undertaking.

## II. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan’s *Living Torah*

### 7) R. Aryeh Kaplan, *Jewish Meditation* (1995)

I recall that when I was in yeshiva, a few friends and I decided to have a contest to see who could memorize the most pages of Talmud. For me, it was an interesting experience. The first page took considerable effort and time, perhaps several hours. As I continued, each page became progressively easier. Eventually, after 10 pages or so, I found that I could memorize a page after three or four readings. By the time I had gone through some 20 pages, I could memorize a page with a single reading. What had originally been extremely difficult had become relatively easy. My friends reported the same experience.

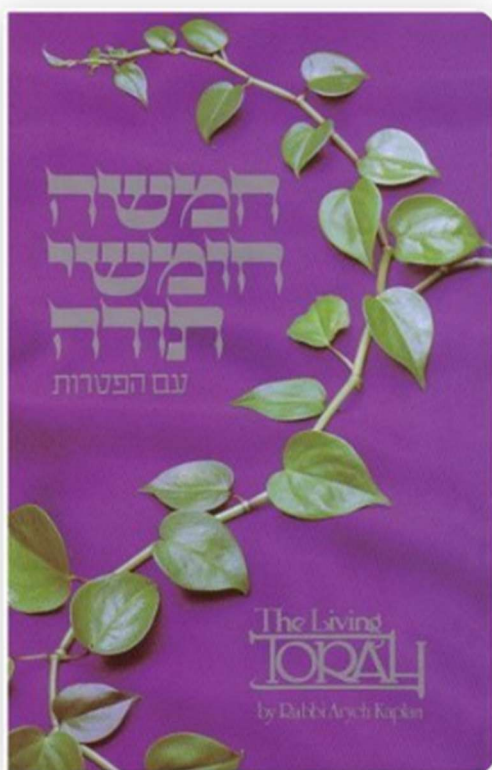


**Aryeh Kaplan (1934-1983)**

8) Aryeh Kaplan, Chapter 15 to the Handbook of Jewish Thought (1968, unpublished)

15:2]However, God created the initial matter of the universe with such properties that would assure its development according to His plans, as the Torah states, “God ceased from all the work which He had created — to complete” (Genesis 2:3).<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, each thing came forth in its time as planned,<sup>66</sup> and the universe developed, evolving stars and planets, geological formations,<sup>67</sup> and eventually life itself. Just as the properties of matter cause a symmetric crystal to grow, so the laws of nature that God had implanted in His world made the evolution<sup>68</sup> of lower animals,<sup>69</sup> and eventually man<sup>70</sup> inevitable in the course of time.

9) R. Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah* (1981), From the Introduction



What justification is there for a new translation? What will this one have that others have lacked?

Most previous translations of the Torah can be divided into two categories. The “traditional” ones are, for the most part, based on the King James translation. Although a superb scholarly work, this translation is not rooted in Jewish sources, and often goes against traditional Jewish teachings. Furthermore, the language is archaic and difficult for the modern reader. Both of these shortcomings remain in most “traditional” translations.

Although the modern translations may be more readable, they are often even more divorced from Judaic sources than the others. While archeological and linguistic discoveries may be extremely interesting, they are not part of an unbroken tradition. ...

Another problem in translating the Torah is that of sentence structure. Clearly, the sentence structure of the Hebrew of three thousand years ago bears little, if any, resemblance to that of any modern language. Therefore,

if one slavishly adheres to the original sentence structure in translating, he will often produce a result very different from that intended by the original. At best, many passages will be difficult, if not impossible, to understand. ...

An example of idiom is the manner in which the Torah handles dialogue. In English, this is handled by setting each statement in quotation marks and beginning it as a new paragraph. There is then no need to repeat the name of the person speaking. In Hebrew, the same goal is attained by repeating the expression, “And he said” before each statement. Translating this literally can be very awkward and repetitive. What we have done in a number of places is simply to translate “And he said” with a set of quotation marks.

**10) Bereishit 22:1**

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֵלִקים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הִנְנִי:

Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.” (NJPS)

**Living Torah:**

After these events, God tested Abraham.

“Abraham!” He said.

“Yes.”

**11) Bereishit 22:10**

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת־הַמַּאֲכָלֶת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת־בְּנוֹ:

And Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. (NJPS)

Abraham reached out and took the slaughter knife to slit his son’s throat. (Living Torah)

**12) Bereishit 19:14**

וַיֵּצֵא לוֹט וַיְדַבֵּר | אֶל־חַתָּנָיו | לֵקְחֵי בְנֹתָיו וַיֹּאמֶר קוּמוּ צְאוּ מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה כִּי־מִשְׁחִית ה' אֶת־הָעִיר וַיְהִי כַּמְצַחֵק בְּעֵינֵי חַתָּנָיו:

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, “Up, get out of this place, for the LORD is about to destroy the city.” But he seemed to his sons-in-law as one who jests. (NJPS)

Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were betrothed to his daughters. He said, “Get moving! Get out of this area! God is about to destroy the city!” To his sons-in-law, it was all a big joke. (Living Torah)

**13) Shemot 16:26-27 (Living Torah)**

כּו שְׁשֶׁת יָמִים, תִּלְקַטְהוּ; וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת, לֹא יִהְיֶה־בוֹ. כּו וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי, יֵצְאוּ מִן־הָעֵם לִלְקֹט; וְלֹא, מֵצְאוּ

26 “You are to gather [this food] during the six weekdays, but the seventh day is the Sabbath, and on that [day] there will not be any.” 27 Still, some people went out to gather [food] on Saturday,\* but they found nothing.

\*Saturday. Literally, “the seventh day.”

14) Bereishit 12:6 (Living Torah)

וַיַּעֲבֹר אַבְרָם בְּאֶרֶץ עַד מְקוֹם שְׁכֵם עַד אֵלֶּן מוֹרֵה וַהֲכַנְעִנִי אֵץ בְּאֶרֶץ:

Abram traveled through the land as far as the area of Shechem coming to the Plain of Moreh.\*  
The Canaanites were then in the land.

— the people they had gathered. Literally, "the soul that they had made," or "the souls that they had made." It can be interpreted to mean the servants they had acquired (Rashi), or the people that they had converted to God's cause (Rashi; Ibn Ezra). It can also denote the spiritual gifts that they had acquired (*Sefer Yetzirah* 6; Raavad *ad loc.*)


12:6 Shechem. A city near the center of the Holy Land, in the vicinity of the present Nablus.

— Plain of Moreh. (*Targum*; Rashi). *Elon Moreh* in Hebrew. See Deuteronomy 11:30. Other sources translate it as "the Terebinth of Moreh" (Ibn Ezra; Ramban on 14:6). The terebinth of the Torah is a large tree (*Pistacia atlantica*) of the sumac family, also related to the pistachio. It is also sometimes identified with the oak. The terebinth could live for over a thousand years, and was often as much as twenty feet in diameter. The Terebinth of Moreh would have been a particularly large tree that served as a landmark in the area. See Genesis 35:4, Judges 9:6.

12:8 Bethel. *Beth El* in Hebrew, literally, "the house of God." This was a city some 20 miles south of Shechem. It is identified with the modern Beitin, some 10 miles north of Jerusalem.

— Ai. A town a little less than two miles east of Bethel. Identified with the modern Haiyin.

12:9 south. Negev in Hebrew, literally the drylands.



Terebinth



15) Advertisement from OU Passover Directory (1985)

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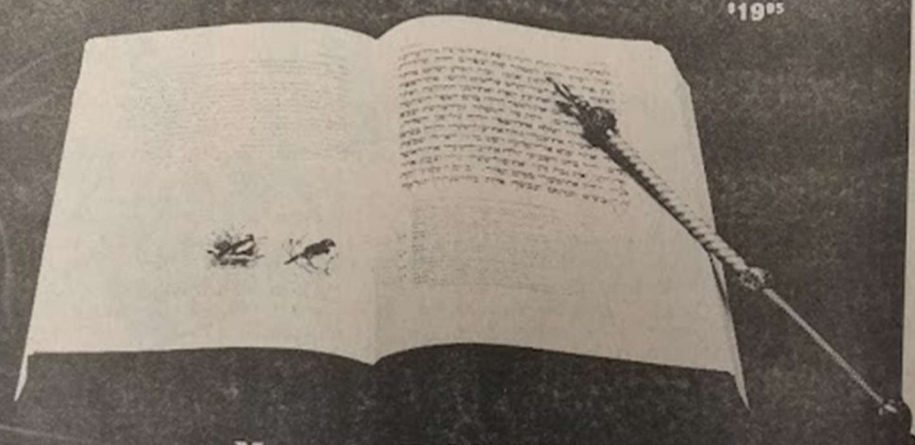
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