

Lost in Our Translations

This Shabbat we read Parshat Re'eh from the Torah. Moses issues many commandments in this portion. Toward the middle of the *parsha*, Moshe says: "You shall not eat any *Toevah*." (Deut 14:3) This phrasing, *Toevah*, to describe food which we are forbidden from eating is not easy to translate. The commonly used translation for the word *Toevah* is abomination. Then, Moshe warns the people not to ingest something abominable. This doesn't sound accurate.

Ibn Ezra tries to harmonize the idea of a food being abominable. He writes that any food that is abhorrent to the pure spirit would be in the category of *Toevah*, such as insects. (See his comments, *ibid*) In his Aramiac translation of the word *Toevah*, Onkelos defines it as something that God has commanded us to push away; that type of food stuff we shall not ingest. This interpretation would be consistent with the rabbinic view of food which must be avoided. The classic example of this type of food is from a priest knowingly invalidates a first born animal, destined for the altar, so that he can eat it instead – this type of act is a *Toevah*. (Sifri, *ibid*; Rambam, Book of Mitzvoth, Negative Mitzvah 140)

The Midrash understands the *Toevah* as the act that renders the food unusable. While it is true that a blemished animal is unfit for the altar and the priest may use it for his own benefit – this type of behavior is underhanded and reprehensible, nonetheless. This might fall in the category of behavior which we define as a *naval birshut hatorah*, one who uses the Torah to legitimate unethical/immoral behavior.

Looking elsewhere in the Torah at the word *Toevah*, the woman who marries is divorced and remarries and divorces a second time is forbidden, by Torah law, to return to her original husband. (She could remarry her first husband if she were not remarried to another man in between.) The Torah describes this type of relationship as a *Toevah*. And here too Onkelos translates this marital arrangement as something that must be avoided. (see Deut 24:4)

This would explain the interpretation rendered by the S'forno who constructs a narrative about the remarriages: The two husbands plan to share this woman in religiously acceptable fashion – the first will marry, divorce, and share his ex-wife, and then plans to remarry the same woman when husband #2 is finished with her. (See his comments, *ibid*) According to Jewish law, a married woman is forbidden to another man, but if she were divorced, she could remarry. However, this arrangement is something that must be repulsed because it sets up a morally repugnant community and a derelict value system. Here too, as by the food *Toevah*, the use of the word *Toevah* is applied when people try to construct a morally ambiguous reality under the guise of religious sincerity.

Following this logic, we might explore other uses of the term *Toevah*. Is this application consistent or useful in how we understand a term that carries intense moral valuation?

Before Josef reveals his true identity to his brothers, they dine in Egypt. And there, the Hebrew brothers eat apart from the Egyptians. The Torah describes the reason for the separation – Hebrews and Egyptians eating together would be a *Toevah*. Now, in this context, describing segregation of the two nationalities as necessary for the sake of moral uprightness seems misplaced. Rather, as Onkelos translates here – inconsistent with his Deuteronomic translations of the word – the Egyptians would not eat with the Hebrews because the Hebrews would eat from the flesh of the cattle, which the Egyptian held in sacred reverence. (see Genesis 43:32) This use of the word *Toevah* would imply a social abhorrence; Hebrew irreverence for the Egyptian god forbade meal-sharing.

Finally, the use of the word *Toevah*, which has been the source of much debate, is the application in Leviticus to homosexual relationships. “Man shall not lie with another man as with a woman -that is a *Toevah*.” (Leviticus 18:22) That is typically translated as abomination. But as we see from the applications of the same word elsewhere in the Torah that translation would seem to be shallow. It is interesting to note that Onkelos does not translate the word *Toevah* in Leviticus like he translates in Deuteronomy or Genesis. Rather, he does not translate it at all – *Toevah* here is translated as *Toeevah*. (See translations, *ibid* and Lev 20:13) Which meaning does Onkelos favor in Leviticus? Or does he propose a 3rd meaning altogether?

This is more than an academic discussion. Our translations - or mistranslations - of sacred text are often used to advance a personal value or a learned value. But are we advancing a Torah value? This season of introspection demands that we answer this question with honesty and integrity if we hope to carry a light of faith and a purity of spirit in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach and Chodesh Elul Tov
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