We invited four scholars to comment on the challenge of teaching texts in translation as part of our mission to focus on teaching in Jewish studies. We divided the task by the literature and time periods, and by areas most likely to be taught in universities. Our colleagues offer interesting reflections well beyond the pedagogical issues involved. Their insights about the possibilities and impossibilities of translating the subtlety of language and the challenges inherent in teaching about the cultural contexts of texts, whether they are from the seventh

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century or the twenty-first, are contributions to understanding our enterprise. In addition, each brief essay offers a useful review of the best resources for teaching about these literatures and periods. While our colleagues do not deny that much is lost in translation, they also reflect on the ways that translation is, for our students as well as for ourselves, central to the endeavor of scholarship in Jewish studies.

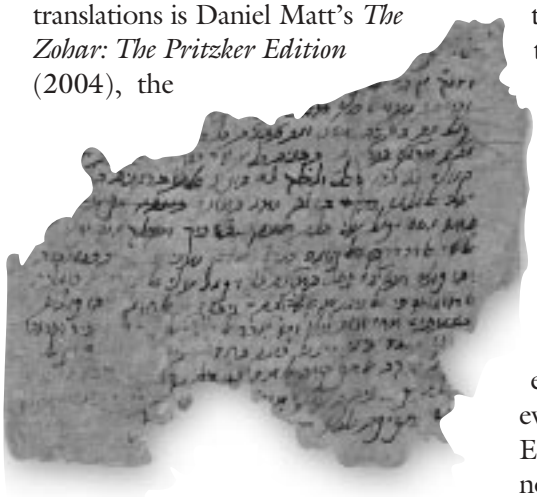
Above Right: Title page from the *Polyglot Psalter* (Genoa, 1516), printed on paper. Courtesy of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania.

Teaching Classical Jewish Literature in Translation

David Stern

Never before have so many translations of classical Jewish literature of the Rabbinic and medieval periods been available in English. The great Soncino editions of the Babylonian Talmud and Midrash Rabbah—unrivalled for the last three-quarters of a century—have now been supplanted. For the Talmud alone, there have been three new translations— Jacob Neusner's in the Brown Judaic Studies series; the Schottenstein Talmud produced by Mesorah/Art Scroll, and several volumes of Adin Steinsaltz's Hebrew edition with his commentaries. Neusner has also produced new translations of the Mishnah and, for the first time, of the complete Tosefta and the Jerusalem Talmud. The same with midrash: in addition to the indefatigable Neusner's re-translations of the classic collections, several other new translations have appeared, including Reuven Hammer's *Sifre Deuteronomy* (1986) and Burton Visotzky's *Midrash Mishlei/Proverbs* (1992). Hayyin N. Bialik and Yehoshua H. Ravnitzky's *Sefer Ha-Aggadah/The Book of Legends*, an invaluable textbook of Rabbinic lore—is also now available in English (1992), as is Micha Yosef Berdichevski/Bin-Gorion's *Mi-Mekor Yisrael*, the other great modern anthology of ancient Jewish legend (1976).

Even Geonica is beginning to make its way into English, e.g. Nosson Dovid Rabinowich's *The Iggeres of Rav Sherirah Gaon* (1988), the classic tenth century history of Rabbinic literature. Medieval Hebrew literature—particularly philosophy, historiography, and Spanish-Hebrew poetry—has long been amply represented in translation, and continues to be replenished with new, more contemporary renditions. Yet even the literature of Jewish mysticism—an area one might have expected to be resistant to translation—has been extensively translated; the crown jewel of these translations is Daniel Matt's *The Zohar: The Pritzker Edition* (2004), the first two volumes of which have just appeared. The one area still seriously undertranslated is medieval halakhic literature—both codes and responses—though it's probably only a matter of time before this literature will be translated by scholars.



Moreh Nevukim [Guide to the Perplexed] by Maimonides, *genizah* fragment, 1190. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Twenty years ago, the challenge facing an instructor wishing to teach Rabbinic or medieval Hebrew literary texts to students who did not know Hebrew was to find translations; this is clearly no longer the case. The challenge today is in knowing how to use these translations to convey to students the remarkable character of classical Jewish literature, its literary, religious, and intellectual excitement, and everything else these texts can teach us—about their authors, about the world in which they lived and within which these texts came into existence, and about the formative, canonical role that these texts have played in Jewish culture virtually since the time of their composition. Our understanding of classical Judaism, of the early Rabbinic period in particular, and our appreciation of the complex literary nature of these texts qua literature have both undergone massive revisions over the last two or three decades. Our reading of these texts has also been reshaped by new methodologies and theories. How does one use these translations to expose students to these new currents and to cut through the conventional pieties with which classical Judaism has too often been taught in the past?

There are two main challenges a professor faces in using these translations. First, while nearly all the translations I've mentioned are reliable—and some are truly excellent, philologically sound, and even stylistically felicitous in English—many of them simply do not capture the vitality of the originals. Most of us are familiar with the stilted, archaic deadliness of the Soncino translations, but the more recent renditions are equally flawed by pedestrian prose; they convey little of the pithiness or paradox of Rabbinic language, or the ruckus of the Rabbinic academy. The Schottenstein Talmud presents a verbose and virtually Targumic paraphrase that overwhelms the original text. Steinsaltz's Talmud has a comparable (though less verbose) paraphrase, as well as a somewhat superfluous "literal translation," and reproduces the traditional Talmudic page layout, with the core text in the center surrounded by a sea of commentaries, in order to make its reader *feel* as though s/he is "learning" the traditional text. This strategy has a certain pedagogical

advantage, though it is also somewhat misleading, since Steinsaltz's edition is *not* the traditional Talmud. Neusner's translations, though less archaic than the Soncino, lack its (albeit dated) charm.

Admittedly, Rabbinic language can be very difficult to translate, but few of the recent translations rise successfully to the challenge. Nor do they deal adequately with the other major problem in teaching Talmud or midrash in translation, namely, the fact that both kinds of texts are largely incoherent to the reader who is not already initiated into their world. It is simply not enough to render their words and their sense into English in order to make these works accessible to a contemporary reader; it is not even enough to paraphrase their argument. One needs to explain what these texts *mean*, that is, on the one hand, how they work and operate and, on the other, why we—the contemporary American reader—should ever care to know in the first place. To accomplish this "translation"—which is nothing other than to carry the text across the abyss lying between the text's original cultural context and our own—requires more than a mere rendering into English. Nothing less than a commentary—be it oral or written—will suffice.

There are few textbooks to help students. For Talmud, the only book even attempting to be a genuine teaching book is Jacob Neusner's *Invitation to the Talmud* (recently re-issued 1998) which works through the eighth chapter of the tractate Berakhot, moving systematically from Mishnah to Tosefta to the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds; while he provides the Hebrew texts, everything is also presented in translation, and the running commentary, though not perfect, is nonetheless extraordinarily helpful. There is no truly comparable book for midrash; the closest thing, Gary Porton's *Understanding Rabbinic Midrash: Texts and Commentary* (1985), has been out of print for a long time. Judah Goldin's *The Song at the Sea* (1971, 1990) is a masterful translation of an important midrashic selection, and Goldin's introductory essays serve some of the purpose of a commentary, but they do not replace one. James Kugel's *The Bible As It Was* (1997) is a marvelous teaching book and virtually the only one to capture the playfulness of ancient interpretation, but it is not so much about Rabbinic literature as it is a guide to how early Biblical exegesis (including midrash) developed.

Moreh Nevukim [Guide to the Perplexed] by Maimonides, translated into Hebrew by Shmuel Ibn Tibbon, 1399. Courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

The true exemplar for the type of translation which would serve the needs of both beginning students and non-expert instructors are the two volumes of medieval Spanish-Hebrew poetry that Raymond Scheindlin has written, *Wine, Women, and Death* (1986) and *The Gazelle* (1991). By doing a translation and essayistic commentary simultaneously—the commentary addressing both the original poem and its contexts, and on the translator's choices including what in the original Hebrew he may not have succeeded in conveying through his translation—Scheindlin has produced what is to my mind the most accomplished and important translations of his generation. It would be wonderful if some enterprising editor were to commission a series of similar books, each one devoted to a different classical text (or selection from one) with an original translation accompanied by an interpretive commentary-essay. This would make a perfect series of *text* books.

A final word about a different side to translation. Thanks to the remarkable growth of day schools throughout America, there is a growing population of undergraduates who come to Jewish studies classes in universities with good Hebrew skills and more than a little familiarity with the classical texts. For these students, the very act of translation can be the most valuable pedagogical tool. The great literary philosopher Walter Benjamin once wrote that ownership is the most intimate relationship a human can establish with an object. Along the same lines, one might say that translation is the most intimate relationship a reader can establish with a text, it constitutes the most intensive form of reading possible. Such reading is the goal of all education, and there is no better way to teach students how to read so intensively and intimately than to make them translate. Translate *and* explain their translation through an accompanying commentary—why they have chosen such an equivalent in English for the original word; why they had to change the original syntax in order to be faithful to the original passage's meaning; why they have had to diverge from the literal in order to preserve the life and energy of the original text. Who knows? They may even improve their English!

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