



"I Shall Descend to Egypt with You": Onkelos' Translation of Biblical Anthropomorphisms
By David Silverberg

Maimonides devotes a brief chapter in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1:27) to clarifying the Aramaic translation of Onkelos to a verse in Parashat Vayigash. Onkelos, a Roman convert to Judaism in ancient times, authored the first translation of the Torah, into Aramaic, and this translation is highly regarded by the Sages of the Talmud (see Masekhet Megila 3a-b). His methodology in translating difficult words and passages in the Bible is afforded considerable weight by later commentators, including Maimonides, who often enlists this translation in elucidating the Biblical text.

The verse in question describes a prophetic vision that Yaakov beholds in the city of Be'er Sheva, as he prepares to leave his ancestral homeland of Canaan and relocate in Egypt. His son, Yosef, had risen to the position of viceroy in Egypt and invited Yaakov and his family to settle in Egypt where he would support them during the devastating drought that ravaged the region. God appears to Yaakov in a dream to offer reassurance: "I am the Lord, God of your father. Fear not going down to Egypt, for I will make you a great nation there. I shall descend to Egypt with you, and I will assuredly bring you back up..." (46:3-4). Onkelos' translation of the clause, "I shall descend to Egypt with you" caught Maimonides' attention, for the simple reason that it is a precise Aramaic rendition of the Biblical Hebrew: "*Ana eichot imakh le-Mitzrayim.*" This literal translation of the Torah's description of God's "descent" to Egypt marks a deviation from Onkelos' general habit of obscuring anthropomorphic references to physical actions performed by the Almighty. Maimonides writes:

Onkelos the Proselyte, who was thoroughly acquainted with the Hebrew and Chaldaic [Aramaic] languages, made it his task to oppose the belief in God's corporeality. Accordingly, any expression employed in the Pentateuch in reference to God, and in any way implying corporeality, he paraphrases in consonance with the context. All expressions denoting any mode of motion, are explained by Him to mean the appearance or manifestation of a certain light that had been created [for the occasion], i.e., the Shekhina (Divine Presence), or Providence. Thus he paraphrases "the Lord will come down" (Shemot 19:11), "The Lord will manifest Himself"... This is his rendering [of the verb *yarad*, "he went down," when used in reference to God] throughout his version, with the exception of the following passage, "I will go down with thee into Egypt," which he renders literally.

Maimonides observes that throughout Onkelos' Biblical translation, he deviates from the literal meaning of references to God's motion. When God is spoken of as "rising" or "descending," for example, Onkelos routinely attributes the mode of action not to God Himself, but rather to – in Maimonides' words – "the appearance or manifestation that had been created...or Providence." Onkelos makes it very clear that God Himself does not "descend"; it is rather the physical appearance of His presence, which is a substance created specifically for this occasion, that experiences the given motion. Alternatively, these descriptions refer allegorically not to God Himself, but rather to divine providence, the Almighty's concern for and protection of people. In this way, Onkelos tried to prevent the misconception of God's corporeal essence. This issue, of course, is of supreme importance to Maimonides, who lists divine incorporeality as the third of his

famous "thirteen principles of faith" (Commentary to the Mishna, Sanhedrin, introduction to chapter 10; we discussed this subject in our *shiur* for Parashat Pekudei).

Here, however, in Parashat Vayigash, Onkelos appears to violate his own implicit rule of translation. He translates the aforementioned verse literally to mean that God Himself will descend to Egypt with Yaakov, thereby allowing for the possible misconception that God can experience motion. Maimonides points to this exception in Onkelos' general tendency as a "remarkable proof of this great man's talents, the excellence of his version, and the correctness of his interpretation." Through this very subtle deviation from his otherwise consistent pattern, Maimonides asserts, Onkelos "discloses to us an important principle as regards prophecy." He explains:

This narrative begins: "And God spake unto Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob, etc. And He said, I am God, etc., I will go down with thee into Egypt." Seeing that the whole narrative is introduced as a vision of the night, Onkelos did not hesitate to translate literally the words addressed to Jacob in the nocturnal vision, and thus gave a faithful account of the occurrence. For the passage in question contains a statement of what Jacob was told, not what actually took place, as is the case in the words, "And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai" (Shemot 19:20). Here we have an account of what actually occurred in the physical world; the verb *yarad* is therefore paraphrased "He manifested Himself," and entirely detached from the idea of motion. Accounts of what happened in the imagination of man, I mean of what he was told, are not altered. A most remarkable distinction!

Maimonides' explanation of Onkelos' policy is – at this point – abundantly clear. Onkelos distinguishes – logically enough – between narrated references to divine motion, and spoken references. When the Biblical narrative describes God in motion, Onkelos feels compelled to translate it in such a manner that will negate the possibility of divine corporeality. When, however, the Torah records somebody – such as God Himself, as in this instance – speaking about divine motion, Onkelos does not hesitate to translate the citation literally. Since he is dealing with a record of a spoken word, rather than an actual narration of what occurred in reality, Onkelos is not concerned about possible incorrect conclusions regarding the divine essence. Here in Parashat Vayigash, then, where God speaks of Himself as "descending to Egypt," Onkelos translates the phrase literally, whereas in translating the Torah's account of the Revelation at Sinai, he translates God's "descent" onto the mountain as, "He manifested Himself."

However, Maimonides then adds one more sentence, which has given rise to some confusion concerning his intent regarding this issue:

Hence you may infer [from this distinction implicitly drawn by Onkelos] that there is a great difference between a communication, designated as having been made in a dream, or a vision of the night, and a vision or a manifestation simply introduced with phrases like "And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying"; "And the Lord spake unto me, saying."

Here Maimonides very clearly qualifies his theory regarding Onkelos' approach, according to which spoken references to divine motion lend themselves to direct translation. Maimonides applies this rule only to certain types of prophecies, those which the Torah explicitly describes as having occurred in a dream or some other nocturnal vision. In other prophecies, which are introduced more simply with, "And the word of the Lord came unto me," Onkelos would adjust his translation to accommodate the doctrine of divine incorporeality.

In explaining this distinction, the commentary *Efodi* (by Isaac Ben Moshe, late 13th century) claims that Maimonides did not perceive the nocturnal vision to Yaakov as prophetic at all. Yaakov simply dreamt of the Almighty speaking with him, with his imaginative faculties, and for this reason

Onkelos felt at ease retaining the precise wording of the dream. Actual prophecy, however, must be treated like Biblical narrative, as describing reality, and therefore requires adjustment to negate the possible attribution of physical properties to God.

Don Isaac Abarbanel, in his commentary to the *Guide*, strongly and cogently objects to *Efodi's* reading, noting that Maimonides explicitly refers to Yaakov's nocturnal vision as a prophecy later in the *Guide* (2:41), in describing the different styles in Biblical accounts of prophecies. We might add that had this vision of God's promise of redemption been nothing more than an ordinary dream, it would hardly be worthy of mention in the Torah's account of Yaakov's experiences as he headed towards Egypt. Abarbanel therefore explains that Maimonides distinguishes between different categories of prophecies, which differ in terms of the degree of imagination required in decoding the prophetic message received. More direct prophetic revelations, which a prophet would introduce by declaring, "And the word of the Lord came unto me," are seen with clearer perception and must therefore be treated like narrated accounts in translating anthropomorphic allegory. Less direct prophecies, however, such as those which come in the form of a prophetic dream, involve the imaginative input of the prophet. Accordingly, Onkelos felt no need to adjust God's promise to Yaakov in a dream that He will "descend" to Egypt. Since this prophetic revelation entailed some imagination, its content does not directly correspond to reality, and hence the reference to divine motion would not be misunderstood as reflecting God's actual essence.

Maimonides then proceeds to suggest a second explanation for Onkelos' direct rendition of this verse in Parashat Vayigash: "According to my opinion, it is also possible that Onkelos understood *Elohim* in the above passage to signify 'angel,' and that for this reason he did not hesitate to translate literally, 'I will go down with thee to Egypt.'" This theory boldly asserts that it was not God who spoke to Yaakov in this prophetic vision, but rather an angel. Although angels, too, are incorporeal (see *Guide*, 1:49 and 2:6), nevertheless, Onkelos felt it unnecessary to alter the literal reading of the text to preclude misconceptions concerning the nature of angels. Later in the *Guide* (2:41), Maimonides elaborates upon this concept of prophetic communication through the medium of angels, which is a common form of prophecy. Maimonides' claim that the word *Elohim* in the context of Yaakov's vision refers to angels must be understood in light of his comments elsewhere in the *Guide* (2:6), where he cites several instances of this word where it denotes angels. In that chapter he associates the Jewish concept of "angels" with Aristotle's "intelligences," which are, as Maimonides describes them, "intermediate beings between the Prime Cause and existing things, and that they effect the motion of the spheres, on which motion the existence of all things depends." In other words, the natural forces through which God governs the earth are referred to as "angels," and this would include as well the media through which God communicates with a prophet.

Nachmanides' Objections

In his commentary to this verse in Parashat Vayigash, Nachmanides devotes a very lengthy section to disputing Maimonides' general approach to Onkelos' system of translation. Nachmanides rejects the notion that Onkelos made a point of deviating from the literal rendition when translating allegorical references to physical actions or attributes associated with God. He cites many examples which demonstrate – in his view – that both Onkelos and Yonatan Ben Uziel (author of the Aramaic translation to the *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim*) felt perfectly at ease translating anthropomorphic references literally. Nachmanides ultimately concludes, "But these topics are matters in *Kabbalah* [mysticism] that were well-known to Onkelos and Yonatan Ben Uziel, and their secret [is known] to those familiar with the hidden wisdom." Thus, Nachmanides assigns this entire issue of translating anthropomorphic descriptions of God to the realm of *Kabbalah*. Rationally, Nachmanides argues, there is no reason why Onkelos would on some occasions insist on adjusting his translation while in others feeling comfortable retaining the anthropomorphic image in his translation. He must have therefore reached his decision in each specific instance based on abstruse Kabbalistic ideas. Rabbi Chayim Dov Shevel, in his annotation to Nachmanides' commentary, refers us to two writers who

attempt to identify the Kabbalistic principles to which Nachmanides alludes: the work of Rabbi Meir Abusaula on Nachmanides' commentary (published around the year 1300 C.E.), and the mystical work *Tziyoni*.

This debate perhaps provides a classic example of the clash between Maimonides' rationalism and Nachmanides' mystical orientation. Nachmanides could readily accept the notion of God "descending" in some mystical sense, and for this reason would find no difficulty in Onkelos' literal rendition of the term. Indeed, Nachmanides interprets this verse describing Yaakov's vision as referring to the concept found in Midrashic literature of the Shekhina (Divine Presence) accompanying *Benei Yisrael* in exile. God's "descent" to Egypt means that He, too, is driven into exile along with *Benei Yisrael*. In the rationalist world of Maimonides, of course, the notion of God's "descent" must be taken figuratively, since his rationalist philosophy outright rejects any possible attribution of motion to the Almighty.

Let us now turn our attention to some of Nachmanides' specific arguments against Maimonides' theory regarding Onkelos' translation. We will briefly present a selection of his arguments together with Abarbanel's refutation, in his commentary to the *Guide*.

Nachmanides' first – and perhaps most compelling – argument pertains to Onkelos' literal translation of verbs related to speech ascribed to the Almighty. Throughout the Torah, Onkelos routinely retains the literal meaning of verbs such as *a.m.r.* ("say"), *d.b.r.* ("speak") and *tz.v.h.* ("command"). According to Maimonides' theory, Onkelos should have adjusted his translation in accordance with the doctrine of divine incorporeality. As Nachmanides notes, Maimonides himself devotes a chapter in the *Guide* (1:65) to the concept of divine "speech," and asserts that this term can refer only to God's willing or desiring, or thinking, but not the physical act of speech. Why, then, did Onkelos not alter his rendition of terms signifying speech in reference to the Almighty?

Abarbanel answers for Maimonides by claiming that these verbs signify communication, and not necessarily the particular physical means of communicating with which we generally associate them. When the Torah records God "speaking," it employs this term literally, not allegorically, because the word denotes simply direct communication, and not the physical act of speech.

Nachmanides' second challenge involves Onkelos' frequent literal translation of the Hebrew verb *r.a.h.* ("see") in reference to God. Nachmanides here refers us to Maimonides' discussion of Onkelos' method in translating the verb *r.a.h.*, later in this section of the *Guide* (chapter 48). Maimonides establishes that the Aramaic equivalent of this verb, *ch.z.a.*, "denotes mental perception as well as the sensation of sight." More precisely, Maimonides writes, this Aramaic word "denotes complete apprehension and reception of the object in the state in which it has been perceived." Therefore, since this term refers not only to the visual mechanism, but also to mental perception, it can apply to God literally, and not just metaphorically. There are, however, as Maimonides observes, instances where Onkelos nevertheless deviates from the literal meaning of this verb, and translates some references to God's "seeing" as "it was manifest before the Lord." Maimonides theorizes that Onkelos does so specifically in contexts involving sin or catastrophe, such as the verse, "for the Lord has seen my affliction" (Bereishit 29:32), which Onkelos translates as, "for my affliction was seen by the Lord." Onkelos felt it inappropriate to describe God as directly "perceiving" evil, and therefore, as a measure of respect towards God, speaks of evil as being "manifest before the Lord," rather than God actually "perceiving" it.

Nachmanides objects to Maimonides' theory concerning Onkelos' rendition of the verb *r.a.h.* in reference to God because it should apply equally to the verb *sh.m.a.* ("hear"). As Maimonides discusses in that same first section of the *Guide* (chapter 45), this verb, too, can refer to both the physical experience of hearing as well as mental perception and understanding. Yet, Onkelos consistently employs the non-literal translation of this verb when it is applied to God. For example, in Bereishit 21:17, Onkelos translates the phrase, "The Lord heard the lad's voice" as "The lad's voice was heard before the Lord." Why, Nachmanides asks, would Onkelos find it necessary to deviate from the literal rendition with regard to *sh.m.a.*, but not in translating *r.a.h.*, if both have the dual connotation of a physical experience and mental perception?

The obvious answer, as mentioned both by the Ritva (famous Spanish Talmudist, 1250-1330) in his *Sefer Ha-zikaron* (a work devoted to defending Maimonides from Nachmanides' challenges in his Biblical commentary), and Abarbanel, is that the Aramaic verb *sh.m.a.* perhaps differs from its Hebrew counterpart in this respect. Whereas regarding sight the Aramaic *ch.z.a.* is equivalent to the Hebrew root *r.a.h.* in that both denote physical sight as well as mental perception, the Aramaic *sh.m.a.*, unlike the corresponding Hebrew verb, refers only to the physical experience of hearing. Onkelos therefore could not ascribe this verb to the Almighty in his translation.

Nachmanides further challenges Maimonides' theory on the basis of Onkelos' translation of a verse in the Book of Devarim (31:3), where Moshe offers *Benei Yisrael* reassurance in anticipation of their battles against the Canaanites, and promises, "The Lord – he is crossing [the Jordan River] before you." Despite the verse's implication of God's physical crossing of the river ahead of *Benei Yisrael*, which would, according to Maimonides, warrant a non-literal rendition in Onkelos' translation, Onkelos translates this phrase literally.

Abarbanel initially responds by questioning the validity of the text of Onkelos' translation to which Nachmanides refers. According to Abarbanel, in authentic texts of Onkelos' translation, this phrase is indeed rendered, "the word of the Lord your God is crossing before you," clearly an intentional deviation from the literal reading. (Prevalent texts of Onkelos' translation nowadays conform to Nachmanides' version.) But even according to Nachmanides' text, Abarbanel convincingly argues, this verse hardly poses a challenge to Maimonides' theory concerning Onkelos' methodology. As mentioned, this verse is spoken by Moshe; the Torah here records Moshe's remarks to the people prior to his death. Now Maimonides had established that Onkelos found it necessary to adjust the translation of anthropomorphic references only in the omniscient Biblical narrative, but not in citations. Onkelos felt it would be obvious to the reader that Moshe here speaks only in figurative terms of God's crossing of the river, and therefore – just as in our verse in Parashat Vayigash – he adhered to the exact, literal meaning, despite the anthropomorphic image.

Yet another objection raised by Nachmanides concerns the Torah's famous description in Parashat Vayetze of Yaakov's dream of the ladder. The Torah tells, "And behold, the Lord was standing above it" (Bereishit 28:13), which Onkelos translates as, "And behold, the Glory of the Lord was standing above it." According to Maimonides' theory, that anthropomorphisms in accounts of prophetic visions do not require adjustment, Onkelos should have had no reason to render "the Lord" in this verse as "the Glory of the Lord." Since the Torah here merely records Yaakov's dream, rather than depict an actual event, Onkelos should not have been concerned that this depiction would be taken as proof of a physical divine essence.

Abarbanel responds that Onkelos accepted the literal rendition only in recording spoken words. In this verse, the Torah itself narrates that Yaakov beheld God "standing" atop the ladder, and this description therefore required adjustment in Onkelos' translation. Furthermore, as noted by the commentary *Shem Tov*, Maimonides' own explanation of Yaakov's dream (which we discussed in our *shiur* for Parashat Vayetze) negates Nachmanides' argument altogether. Earlier in the *Guide* (1:15), Maimonides approaches Yaakov's dream of the ladder as a representation of the prophetic process, whereby the prophet ascends the "ladder" of knowledge and understanding of the universe, until he fully comprehends that "the Lord is standing over it" – that God fully controls all elements in the universe. Accordingly, the depiction of God "standing" over the ladder is indeed a depiction of reality, and not merely a secondhand account, thus warranting its adjustment in Onkelos' rendition.

Abarbanel's response to this argument would apply as well to another objection raised by Nachmanides, concerning two dreams recorded earlier in the Book of Bereishit. The Torah tells of God appearing in dreams to the Philistine king Avimelekh (20:3) and to Yaakov's father-in-law, Lavan (41:22), in both instances describing the Almighty as "coming" to the person in a nocturnal vision. Onkelos, in both contexts, deviates from the literal reading by writing, "A word came forth from the Lord..." Rather than describing God as "coming" to these men, Onkelos opted against the anthropomorphism and chose to speak of the word of God coming to them. Once again,

Nachmanides argues, since we are dealing here with a vision, Onkelos should not have been concerned about the possible implication of corporeality. Here, too, we would respond that the Torah's description in these instances is indeed that of the Biblical narrative, rather than a recorded citation. Therefore, since the Torah itself speaks of God as "coming" to these men, Onkelos followed his usual practice of adjusting the anthropomorphic reference.

In truth, however, as Abarbanel comments, this argument by Nachmanides in any event is hardly a compelling one. Maimonides explicitly addresses Onkelos' translation of these verses, amidst his discussion of prophecy in the second section of the *Guide* (chapter 41). He cites Onkelos' non-literal translation of these phrases as proof that the Torah in these two instances does not refer to actual prophecy. Neither Avimelekh nor Lavan was worthy of prophecy; God merely caused them to dream the information recorded in the respective contexts. Thus, Onkelos deviated from the literal meaning of the Biblical text not as a safeguard against possible conclusions of divine corporeality, but rather for an entirely different reason – to indicate that God did not actually speak to these men, but rather caused them to dream the messages recorded in the Torah.

Nachmanides raises numerous other challenges to Maimonides' theory, as well; we have limited ourselves here to some of his main arguments and how Maimonides would respond.