Communications

TALMUD TRANSLATIONS

To The Editor:

I was delighted to see Rabbi Feldman’s articulate comments on translations of the Talmud (Editor’s Notebook, Tradition, 28:3, Spring 1994). They were accurate, insightful, and precisely what rabbanim and rebbeim have been thinking and saying since these publications first began to appear.

While these are remarkable works of scholarship, they should be reserved for serious students, both to preserve the kedusha of sifrei kodesh and to protect against the damage resulting from the incorrect usage to complex Talmudic concepts and dinim taken out of context. In a weekly shiur we hold primarily for baalei teshuva and others who are new to gemara study, we have insisted that only the standard Soncino translation and dictionaries be used as aids.

The Jewish public finds the study of gemara and halakha fashionable, and these new translations make that study independently possible. However, the unfortunate result is often to create instant ersatz talmidei hakhamim out of well-meaning people, many of whom have no knowledge whatsoever of even lashon hakodesh, let alone Humash or Mishna, but who then think nothing of speaking with an assured confidence and authority that is staggering, ignorant of their own limitations in true Torah judgment.

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To the Editor:

The opening editorials in Tradition are invariably written with wit, grace, and unobtrusive style, poking gentle fun, exposing foibles, issuing calls to conscience, and lots more.

The most recent essay, “Talmud Happily Ever After,” was one of the most clever such pieces, but it was also alarmingly unjust. Rabbi Feldman quotes, critiques, criticizes, and then—graciously—finds redeeming features in some of the English-language translations of the Talmud. Nice, neat, and even-handed. But unjust.
He lumps together all the advertisements for the various translations without betraying which hype is whose. And he allows that “the publishers and translators of the various Talmud editions have by and large done excellent and in some cases impeccable work,” but again he fails to identify the “some cases.” All of a sudden the editor is brand-name shy, and Steinsaltz, Soncino, and Mesorah are all equal in the editorial homogenizer.

Now we all know that that is just not the case. The article says it very well: “Talmud is not for dabblers.” And, indeed, some of the ads made it appear as though a volume of gemara (go ahead take one, any one) is a cozy tome to curl up with. But this sort of message does not appear in every publisher’s advertising copy.

Then, in dealing with the actual works at hand, the author fails to discriminate between the various translation efforts—and not all translations are created equal. I would look for four elements in such a work: that the translation be uniformly authoritative (not erratic, whimsical or arbitrary), prepared by universally respected scholars (although not necessarily celebrities), comprehensive (drawing on classic meforshim), and accessible. Each of the translations available has its own identifiable features, recognized by all users and perusers. I personally find Mesorah’s gemara a knowledgeable, articulate chavrusa and Rebbe rolled into one, that respects my intelligence, yet indulges in my unfortunate, shameful lapses of information. And its layout and typography are both ingenious and user-friendly. But that is purely subjective. All, I believe, would agree, however, that only ArtScroll/Mesorah’s Shas can answer affirmatively to the four criteria that I submitted. As for the others, they speak for themselves.

Perhaps it wouldn’t have been in keeping with the column’s elegant, yet flippant style to have analyzed each of the three major publishers’ advertising and actual products, and compared them with the crisp ideal it offered. In that case, the subject could have been consigned to some other department, where justice could have been done. But not left fuzzily vague—and ipso facto unfair.

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