

# LEHRHAUS

Over Shabbat

## Korah

Vol. 8, Issue 43 • 29 Sivan 5784 / July 5, 2024

CONTENTS: Butcher-Stell (Page 1); Lockshin (Page 2)

*Amidst the war unfolding in Israel, we have decided to go forward and continue publishing a variety of articles to provide meaningful opportunities for our readership to engage in Torah during these difficult times.*

Lehrhaus Over Shabbat for the month of Sivan is sponsored by Lauren and David Lunzer to commemorate the 27th yearzeit of David's mother, Beila Raizel bas HaRav Binyamin, on 28 Sivan.

Sponsorships for future editions of Lehrhaus over Shabbat are available at <https://thelehrhaus.com/sponsor-lehrhaus-shabbos/>

### **I AM STIRRING THE CHICKEN SOUP IN CIRCLES AND THINKING**

*Hannah Butcher-Stell is a Writing MFA candidate at Sarah Lawrence College, holding a bachelor's degree in English from Rollins College.*

#### **I am stirring the chicken soup in circles and thinking**

about how Abraham bought Sarah's burial place  
from a stranger.

How much weeping he must have done,  
palms up, suddenly  
without a place for her body.  
Surely he knew the saying

that G-d creates the cure  
before the ailment.

Coriander, sea salt, onion powder, I cannot prove  
that this chicken soup  
will cure your headache or your cough.

But if you've ever stepped  
into our apartment and found the windows  
already opened and the soup already warmed  
and my shoes already flung  
beside the couch—have you wondered  
how many acts of love  
you've forgotten to measure?  
I ask because Sarah's bread  
was always baking, her candles were always lit  
and the Sages say her days were perfect.

Did Abraham count them?  
I ask because he re-married and re-fathered  
children but before all that he bought  
her burial place from a stranger.  
Where will you go when I go?  
Will you buy me a cave or some  
grass under a tree? A stone from the city?  
Carrots and parsnips and chicken  
shreds and sticky notes on the fridge—all of it  
is the same, all of this  
is what I'm thinking about today.

---

### **SHOULD THE BIBLE BE TRANSLATED IN A GENDER-SENSITIVE WAY?**

*Martin Lockshin is University Professor Emeritus  
at York University and lives in Jerusalem.*

#### **Review of [The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition](#), edited by David E. S. Stein et al. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023)**

It was probably inevitable that increased interest in gendered language would lead to something like [The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition](#), also known as “Revised JPS” (*RJPS*). Edited by David E. S. Stein in consultation with other scholars, *RJPS* reworks the “New” Jewish Publication Society translation (*NJPS*) of 1985. Until recently, *NJPS* has been the authoritative English translation used by many Jewish homes and synagogues in the English-speaking world and by most Jews (and many gentiles) in academia.

*RJPS* was completed in partnership with Sefaria, the popular and extremely useful website that brings thousands of Jewish works in Hebrew, English, and other languages to anyone who can access the internet. On the Sefaria website, the default English version for many biblical books is now *RJPS*, making it the first experience of the Bible for many non-*Haredi* English-speaking Jews.

As language is always changing, new translations of the Bible are needed. The King James Version of the Bible, published in the 17th century, was for centuries the gold standard for English-language Bibles (particularly for Christians). In the 20th century, its usage was felt to be archaic, driving the creation of many new translations in both the Christian and Jewish worlds.

The introduction to *RJPS* argues that English-language sensitivities and conventions about gendered language have changed considerably since 1985 when *NJPS* appeared. The original Hebrew readers of [Exodus 21:12](#), a law against murder, understood that its masculine verb (*makkeh*) and noun (*ish*) did not mean that the law applied only to males. *NJPS* translated, “**He** who fatally strikes a **man** shall be put to death,” expecting the reader then to understand that “he” implied “he or she” and that “man” implied “man or woman.” But in 2024, *RJPS* argues in the [preface](#), “Such usage has since been swept away—largely disappearing from everyday parlance.” So *RJPS* reads: “One who fatally strikes another shall be put to death,” a reasonable

translation.

But Hebrew readers know that often when we encounter the word *ish* in the Bible, we simply don't know whether it is referring only to men or to both men and women. The gender-sensitive translator has to go out on a limb every time. Sometimes, *RJPS*'s decisions are surprising. Almost all translations of [Exodus 21:7](#) read: "When a man (*ish*) sells his daughter (*bitto*) as a slave..." *RJPS* reads: "When a parent sells a daughter as a slave..." Based on the masculine language of the verse, the rabbis in the Talmud taught that only a father and not a mother can sell a daughter as a slave (*m. Sotah 3:8* and [Sotah 23b](#)). While a modern Jewish translator of the Torah need not follow Talmudic tradition, we might wonder why *RJPS* is attracted to this reading, especially when the traditional understanding imposes greater limitations on the institution of female slavery.

While *RJPS* provides no explanation for this specific translation decision, Stein published an earlier version of a gender-sensitive translation of the first five books of the Bible back in 2006 ([The Contemporary Torah](#)). There, in a [footnote](#), he writes that the selling parent is "typically but not necessarily male" and cites [2 Kings 4:1](#) as alleged proof. The story there is of a poor widow who is afraid that a creditor might seize her children as slaves; it hardly proves that a mother has the legal right to sell her daughter into slavery.

*Ish* is not the only word that forces a gender-sensitive translator to take a stand. The Hebrew word *ben* (plural *banim*) often means "son," but

already the classical rabbis realized—and said explicitly—that sometimes *banim* means "children" and not sons. When [Deuteronomy 11:21](#) asserts that we should observe various *mitzvot* "to the end that you and *beneikhem* may endure," certainly males and females are included, and the appropriate translation is "your children." As the Talmud ([Kiddushin 34a](#)) asks rhetorically, "Do men require life while women do not?"

But when *ben/banim* refers to young priests, *NJPS* and *RJPS* agree that the reference is to sons, not daughters (e.g., *benei Aharon ha-kohanim*; "Aaron's sons, the priests" [[Leviticus 1:5](#) and frequently]). But [Leviticus 10:14](#) (in the *NJPS* translation) merits an exception:

But the breast of elevation offering and the thigh of gift offering **you** (*attah*), **and your sons** (*u-vanekha*) **and daughters** (*u-venotekha*) with you, may eat in any clean place, for they have been assigned as a due to **you and your children** (*banekha*) from the Israelites' sacrifices of well-being. [emphasis mine]

On the *peshat* level and as understood by the classical rabbis, this passage teaches that some priestly gifts (*mattenot kehunah*)—here specifically, the breast of elevation and the thigh of gift offering—may be consumed by males or females from the ranks of the *kohanim*. It seems obvious then that, when the verse finishes by saying that they were assigned as a due to you and

to *banekha*, it has a non-gendered force: “your children,” not “your sons.” Everett Fox adds a helpful [footnote](#) to his translation of *banekha* as “children” at the end of the verse: “The Hebrew can be read as ‘sons,’ but surely both sons and daughters are meant here, as earlier in the verse...”

*RJPS*, though, opted for a gendered translation of [the verse](#):

But the breast of elevation offering and the thigh of gift offering **you** [and your wife], and **your sons and daughters** with you, may eat in any pure place, for they have been assigned as a due to you and your **sons** from the Israelites’ sacrifices of well-being. [emphasis mine]

The addition of “[and your wife],” which is not in the Hebrew, conforms with Jewish law (see [m. Zevahim 5:6](#)) and with logic (although we can still wonder whether this type of addition is in the purview of a translator). But the end of the verse in *RJPS* seems strange: you and your sons and your daughters may eat these gifts since they were given to you and to your sons? Considering that *RJPS* frequently renders *banekha* as “your children,” why not here?

The editors of *RJPS* claim not to be rewriting the Bible to reflect more palatable modern values; their [stated goal](#) is “to render the Hebrew text as they believed the original author of that text

meant it to be understood’ by the original audience.” But this worthy goal may not be the strongest factor at play. For example, [King James](#) translates Ecclesiastes’s disturbing line in 7:28: “one man among a thousand have I found; but a woman among all those have I not found.” [NJPS](#) softens it somewhat: “I found only one human being in a thousand, and the one I found among so many was never a woman.” [RJPS](#) goes even farther, implying that Ecclesiastes’s problem wasn’t misogyny, only the failure to find a compatible mate: “I found only one [true] human being in a thousand, and among all these I did not find a [truly compatible] woman.” We may not like it, but of these three translations, the most accurate rendering of how the text was understood by the original audience is probably King James.

*RJPS* sometimes elegantly accomplishes the goal of making the English less gendered. For example, nothing is lost when *NJPS*’s reference to God as “The Rock!—His deeds are perfect,” becomes in *RJPS* “The Rock!—whose deeds are perfect” ([Deuteronomy 32:4](#)). At other times, *RJPS* substitutes clumsy prose for gendered language. It renders [Exodus 22:25-26](#): “If you take your neighbor’s garment in pledge, you must return it before the sun sets; it is the only available clothing [*NJPS*: ‘his only clothing’]—it is what covers their skin [*NJPS*: ‘his skin’].” In the story of creation, in order to avoid using a masculine word to translate “*ha-adam*,” *RJPS* offers strange formulations including “the two of them were naked, the Human and his wife” ([Genesis 2:25](#)), perhaps

implying that only one of the two was human.

*RJPS* makes the debatable claim that ancient Israelites, the original readers of the Bible, may have understood God as beyond gender. So *RJPS* never refers to God as “He.” In *RJPS*, the moving poetry of [Psalm 78](#) contains 25 awkward uses of “[God]” in square brackets to avoid writing “He.” For obvious theological reasons, *RJPS* never uses the pronouns “They” or “Their” about God. For the purpose of gender sensitivity, it sometimes does use those plural pronouns when referring to one human being.

Clumsiness aside, *RJPS* unfortunately distorts the meaning of many biblical texts in its quest to rid the Bible of gendered language. Here are just two examples, one about God and one about people.

*NJPS* translates [Deuteronomy 28:45](#): “because you did not heed the LORD your God and keep the commandments and laws that He enjoined upon you.” In order to avoid using “He,” *RJPS* has: “because you did not heed the ETERNAL your God and keep the commandments and laws enjoined upon you,” removing the clear reference in the Hebrew to God as the one who commanded the laws. An important nuance is thus lost. Throughout that chapter, the speaker, Moses, refers to God in the third person, as the one who blesses or curses people depending on their allegiance to the law. Moses, speaking in the first person, portrays himself a few times as the source of the laws. For example, in [verse 1](#): “...to observe faithfully all the commandments that I [= Moses] enjoin upon you” (*RJPS*); and [verse 14](#): “do not deviate... from any of the commandments that I

[= Moses] enjoin upon you” (*RJPS*). The decision of *RJPS* in [verse 45](#) not to translate using an active verb about God (“the... laws that He enjoined”), but instead to refer impersonally to “laws enjoined,” makes the reader miss the fact that verse 45 is the first time in this chapter where God, not Moses, is named as the one who “enjoined” or commanded these laws.

As mentioned above, the Hebrew word *ish* (plural *anashim*) in the Bible is not always a gendered reference to men; sometimes, though, it is. *RJPS*’s dedication to minimizing the use of the words “man” and “men” leads to some strange results.

[Genesis 19](#) relates the disturbing story of a mob of *anashim* in Sodom surrounding Lot’s house and demanding that Lot hand over to them the *anashim* who had taken refuge in his home so that they could “be intimate with them.” Shockingly, Lot tries to dissuade them by offering his two virgin daughters to the mob.

Anybody reading the story in Hebrew, or in any reasonable English translation, understands that a male mob thinks that male guests are inside Lot’s home; the mob wants to rape them homosexually. (We, the readers, know that the guests are divine messengers or angels. The mob does not know that.) The problem with *RJPS* here is that it studiously avoids using any masculine noun or pronoun to describe the guests in Lot’s home! How is the reader to understand this central point of the plot? Another recent (2004) Jewish translation of the Bible of much higher quality, Robert Alter’s [The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary](#) makes sure that we

understand. It uses the word man/men consistently in the translation, adding a helpful [note](#): “Throughout this sequence there is an ironic interplay between the ‘men’ of Sodom, whose manliness is expressed in the universal impulse to homosexual gang rape, and the divine visitors who only seem to be ‘men.’”

Translation problems continue. After Lot and his daughters are miraculously saved from God’s destruction of Sodom, the daughters decide they must get their father drunk so that he will impregnate them, since, they mistakenly claim, there is no other *ish* alive from whom they could conceive ([Genesis 19:31](#)). *RJPS* gratuitously changes *NJPS*’s reasonable “there is not a man on earth to consort with us” (i.e., to impregnate us), to “there is nobody left on earth to consort with us.”

Translations can have many purposes. This one’s main goal is neither elegance nor accuracy; it is to give English-language readers of the Bible a more gender-sensitive experience than the experience of reading the Bible in the original Hebrew. Even granting the debatable wisdom of this goal, it could have been executed with more skill and common sense.

Managing Editor:  
**Davida Kollmar**

Editors:  
**David Fried**  
**Chesky Kopel**  
**Yosef Lindell**  
**Tamar Ron Marvin**  
**Chaya Sara Oppenheim**  
**Tzvi Sinensky**

Consulting Editors:  
**Miriam Krupka Berger**  
**Elli Fischer**  
**Miriam Gedwiser**  
**Chaim Saiman**  
**Jeffrey Saks**  
**Jacob J. Schacter**  
**Sara Tillinger Wolkenfeld**  
**Shlomo Zuckier**

Please contact us at [editors@thelehrhaus.com](mailto:editors@thelehrhaus.com)