



## Pinhas

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### **SHOPPING FOR GRANDPA'S GRAVESTONE**

*Richard Rosengarten is an author and Pushcart Prize nominated poet living in Miami, Florida.*

Palacci was finished the way you want it,  
The salesman told us,  
With the rough top and sides  
In North American Pink.

Not like Levine—too modern.  
And the black is dramatic,  
Though the beauty of black is  
You don't need much design.

Most people do the grey  
Like Kolker.

But you don't want to settle for plain.  
Finkel is plain. Volker is plain.  
Years ago, there really were very few  
Colors to choose from.

Abraham has what we call  
"Frosted outline letters."

And there's the matter of size.  
The Stein family stone is an impressive  
Eight feet, Canadian Pink.  
The Goldstein job is a foot less,  
And look what a difference that makes.

Grandma said, "We have to  
Beat out the Steins."

But I knew what Grandpa wanted.  
He often, drawing  
In equal measure from  
His two inexhaustible wellsprings of  
depression and humor, said:

"I want to have an ATM installed  
So my children will visit me."

And I knew what I wanted.  
Soil from the Mount of Olives  
To scatter over his coffin so that  
When the dead rise, chances are  
He'll rise with them—

A tradition I don't believe in  
And yet, drawing  
Unevenly from my own two  
Limitless wells of faith  
And doubt, ultimately did.

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### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR: A REJOINDER TO THE REVIEW BY MARTIN LOCKSHIN

Readers of Prof. Martin Lockshin's recent [review](#) of [THE JPS TANAKH: Gender-Sensitive Edition](#) may be pleased to know that many answers to his puzzlement about particular renderings are readily available. The online essay "[Notes on Gender in Translation](#)," cited in the preface, addresses many of the professor's concerns. That essay, in turn, refers readers to my growing [online analysis](#) behind specific renderings, including examples discussed in the review, such as [Genesis 19:31](#), [Exodus 21:7](#), and Leviticus 10:14 ([on the priest's wife](#), and separately [on the offspring's gender](#)).

On the question posed by the review's title—as to whether a gender-sensitive translation has value—Prof. Lockshin implicitly appears to answer *yes*. If *NJPS* has deservedly been the authoritative English translation that he grants it to be, and if the English language has changed

considerably since its 1985 completion, as he likewise grants, then any attempt to restore its translators' original intent should be welcomed rather than begrudged.

Likewise, in a private conversation with the spokesman for a major American Orthodox umbrella organization back in 2006, I mentioned that I had recently produced a Torah translation (the pilot for the current *Tanakh* edition) that featured gender-neutral God language. His favorable response was expressed as a rhetorical question: "Well, who could object to that?"

Indeed, while today we cannot know for sure whether the ancient Israelites—the original audience of the Bible—understood their God as beyond gender, only a gender-neutral rendering of its God language allows for either a non-gendered or gendered reading. If readers wish to assume that ancient Israel's God was male, this new translation does not prevent them from doing so. In contrast, a translation that refers to God via He/Him/His/Himself hinders (if not precludes) a non-gendered understanding.

Granted, God language without pronouns can occasionally be less elegant and congruous. Pronouns do serve highly useful functions in English! Yet to many Jews, the cost of occasional paraphrasing and some loss of textual coherence is a small price to pay for the resulting gain in theological clarity.

As for the rendering of references to human beings, the act of interpretation that Prof. Lockshin called "going out on a limb" is surely

what every reader of the Hebrew text must undertake, to the extent that we care whether or not women are in view whenever it makes a reference to persons.

Moreover, the biblical text's *peshat* (plain sense) is what undergirds the classic halakhic *midrash* that Prof. Lockshin often cited. Consequently, a plain-sense translation like *THE JPS TANAKH* provides the baseline for grasping what our rabbis accomplished by their midrashic readings, and for appreciating their artistry. On these grounds, too, the new translation deserves to be welcomed.

When assessing what the *Tanakh* text's wording meant to its original ancient audience, scholars can (and should) differ "for the sake of Heaven," to use the rabbinic expression. Happily, in our contemporary striving for better understanding of the biblical text, the new translation—as the product of years of research into the conventions of the ancient Hebrew language, and into what went without saying for the composers of the Bible—will give today's students of the Bible a head start in that conversation.

David E. S. Stein  
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