Yalkut Shoshanim
by Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Sawilowsky

The Torah portion for this week, in which the Pirchei Shoshanim Shabbaton is being held, is Parshas Korach. In Chamishi (17:18), the Pasuk states, “V’es Shame Aharon Tichtov Al Mahtei Lavi – And the name of Aaron shall you inscribe on the staff of Levi.” Although the rebellion of Korach was resolved, the B’nai Yisrael were not yet ready to accept Aharon for the priesthood. The story of Korach only proved Moshe Rabeinu was the undisputed leader; perhaps, however, his choice of Aharon was nothing more than nepotism.

Therefore, HaShem spoke to Moshe, telling him to take a staff for the Av of each Shavet’s house, including Aharon as the representative of Lavi, and inscribe their names on each man’s staff. The staffs were then placed in the Ohel HaEidus (Tent of Testimony). The next day it was Aharon’s staff that had blossomed with a bud and ripe almonds. This was evidence Min HaShamayim that Aharon was the rightful heir to the Kehunah.

Why was such a major production necessary? Why didn’t Moshe, freshly proven to be the leader to the satisfaction of all, simply think of a number between 1 and 12 and ask each Av to guess a number? Obviously, the answer is that even though Moshe was now completely trusted, some things in life must be written down. If it wasn’t written, perhaps it never happened. Sometimes, things must be written down for people to read and understand what has happened.

This explains why in Nechemia (8:8) the Pasuk states, “Vayik’r’u VaSefer B’soras HaElokim B’Forash – the Jewish people had a Pirush, a written Aramaic translation of the Torah with commentary to help them understand the lesson that Ezra HaSofer was teaching. This took place in 3426 (or 335 BCE). The Talmud Magilah (3a) explains this translation was eventually lost, because when the Jews returned to Eretz HaKodesh after their 70 year Galus in Bavel, and Ezra reinstituted Hebrew Schools, there was no longer the need for a Babylonian translation.

However, not all of the Jews had returned to Israel, and over the centuries those remaining in Bavel again found the need for a translation. Therefore, the Gemara Megilah explains that Yonasan ben Uziel (a student of Hillel HaZaken) wrote a Targum (translation) of the Nevi’im (Prophets). Yonason based his translation on the Mesorah, the chain of tradition that had been handed down from the last three prophets, Chagai, Z’chariaih, and Mala’chee, who were the three compatriots of D’niel.

As soon as the translation hit the bookstores, Israel experienced a frightening earthquake. A Bas Kol was heard: “Who has been Chutzpadic and translated my secrets for mere mortals?” Yonason replied, “I did it!” But, he didn’t do it for glory. He did it so there will be no dissent in K’lal Yisrael over the meaning of Torah.

The Gemara Megilah (3a) explains that later, when Yonason wanted to translate the Kesuvim, another Bas Kol was heard: “You have done enough!” He was stopped, because the Abishter didn’t want him to translate D’neil which contains the secret of when the Mashiach Tzidkeinu will be revealed.

Later, around 3850 (the second half of the first century of the CE), Onkelus, a student of Rabi Eliezer and Rabi Yehuda, the main disciples of Rabi Yochanan ben Zakai, translated the Chumash into Aramaic.

The question arises: certainly these translations and commentaries were permitted because they were for internal consumption only. Is it permitted to translate the Torah and commit its teachings to writing if it will fall into the hands of Gentiles?
The *Talmud Megilah* (9a) reports about an Egyptian king of the line of Ptolemy. In 3515 (246 BCE) he gathered 72 elders and individually sequestered them into separate houses. He commanded them to translate the Torah into Greek. This document is known as the Septuagint. Miraculously, their translations were identical, including a number of deliberate mistranslations that served the purpose of not misleading or angering the King.

For example, they wrote *Elokim Bara B’rashis*, because otherwise the King might have thought *B’rashis*, the beginning, created G-d. This Gemara is well known because the last change they made. As the Gemara *Megilah* (9b) relates, the Sages changed “*V’es Ha’Arneves*” (the rabbit), an animal identified as being non-kosher in *Vayikra* (11:6), to “*Es Tziras Ha’Raglai’yim* – the short legged animal.” They did this because, phonetically, Ptolemy’s wife’s name was also pronounced *Arneves*. They didn’t want the King to think they were mocking his wife by putting her name amongst the list of non-kosher animals.

Unfortunately, it was not all laughs. The project was completed on the 8th day of *Teves*. Because the *Torah* was available to the Gentiles, who could now cite chapter and verse to support their agendas, regardless of how noble or crude, the Sages proclaimed that day to be a *Ta’anis* (a day of fasting).

Actually, there was an earlier incident with the Ptolemy Kings that is not so famous, but in many ways was far more instructive. This incident occurred in 3454, 61 years earlier, with the Ptolemy who ruled immediately after the death of Alexander. It is mentioned in *M’seches Sofrim* (1:8), “*Ma’aseh B’Chamisha Z’keinim Sh’Casvo L’Salmei HaMelech Es HaTorah Y’vanes V’Haya Oso Ha’Yom Kashra L’Yisrael C’Yom Sh’asu bo Yisrael Es HaEgel* – An incident occurred with five Sages who were approached by King Ptolemy to write a Greek translation of the Torah. And that day was as difficult as the day that Israel made the calf of molten gold.”

At first glance, the minor tractate seems to say that to translate the *Torah* would have been wrong. However, a closer examination indicates the opposite. Note that the quote doesn’t refer to the day the calf was *worshipped*; instead it refers to the day the calf was *made*. Worshipping the calf was *Avodah Zorah* – the sin of idol worship. The calf was worshipped in the 17th of *Tamuz*, but it was made the day before.

*Aharon* was trying to stop the *B’nai Yisrael* from following the *Erev Rav*, the mixed multitudes, from committing idolatry. As *Rashi* explains, he was trying to delay them until the next day when surely *Moshe* would return, which would then be a “festival to G-d.” *Kabbalistically*, the calf could have been used in the context of the *Mercavah* (chariot) in *Yechezkial’s* vision, which had an ox as one of the four attendant beings. Hence, the calf potentially could have been used as part of a festival to G-d. Thus, the day in which the calf was made was a hard day for Israel, because they had before them an act that could go in either direction: for good or for evil.

This is the meaning of *Mesches Sofrim* when it says the five elders had a hard decision to make. A translation could be used to enlighten Jews and Gentiles alike; everyone has the right to understand G-d and be taught what G-d wants the person to do. But, the translation could just as easily be used for nefarious purposes.

Faced with this hard decision, the five Sages balked and told Ptolemy “no.” Ptolemy retaliated, and exiled over 100,000 Jews. It was a high price to pay, but a decision that was certainly the correct one at that time.

Centuries later, as is well known, *Rabi Yehudah HaNasi* redacted the *Mishnah*, the Oral Law, into its written form. He reasoned that the Jewish people’s survival was at stake, and if the Oral Law was not written, it might have been lost. *Rabi Chiya* and *Rabi Hoshaiya Rabah*
committed the Tosefta to writing, bar Kapara and Levi ben Sisi each wrote Ba’rasisos, and D’Bei Rav wrote the Sifrei, Sifra, and a Mechitta.

Then, Rabi Yochanan began the redaction of the Talmud Yerushalmi and the task was completed by Rabi Manah and Rabi Yose ben Rabi Bun. Later, Rav Ashi and Ravina II began the redaction of the Talmud Bavli, and the task was completed by Mar bar Rav Ashi and Rav Yose.

Today, it is not only permitted to write down B’iturim and Chidushim on Torah, but each generation since Talmudical times has accepted upon itself the obligation to commit its scholarship to writing. And this is a lesson for us from Parashas Korech, of Moshe’s writing the names of the Avos on their staffs, of what must be done when things must be written.

I have had the pleasure of editing the Shabaton journal for three years. I take this opportunity to ask those of you here this Shabbos who are in the middle of your studies to consider capturing the highlights of your journey with D’yo Al HaClaf. Those of you who have graduated and received S’micha should consider capturing the highlights of the early stages of your Rabbinical career in dealing with Sh’ailos V’Teshuvos. Those of you who are among the first graduating classes of Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshonim, beginning some ten years ago, should accept the responsibility of committing your advanced scholarship to writing.

Many suggestions were received regarding the formal naming of the Pirchei Shabbaton journal. A discussion was held by the publications committee of Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim, and they informed me that they accepted the suggestion of R’ Moshe Fuksbrumer. His inspiration is based on the Pasuk in Shir HaShirim (6:2):

שׁוֹשַׁנִּים וַלְּהַלָּתָם בְּגַנָּו לַעֲרֻגוֹת הַבֹּשָׂם לִרְעוֹת בַּגַּנִּים וְלִלְקֹט שׁוֹשַׁנִּים

Thus, on behalf of Yeshiva Pirchei Shoshanim, I am pleased to announce that the journal’s name is Yalkut Shoshanim. Mazel Tov, Mazel Tov! I look forward to receiving your manuscripts in time for volume 6 next year.