

Artikel erschienen in:

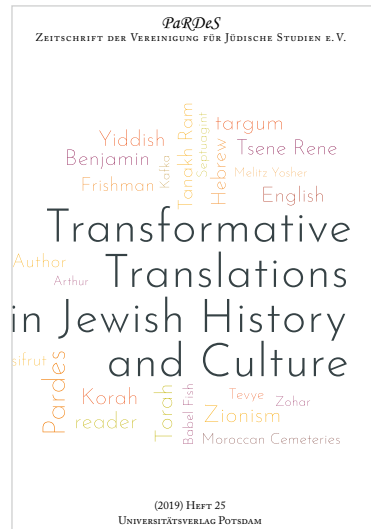
Markus Krah, Mirjam Thulin, Bianca Pick (Eds.)

**PaRDeS : Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für
Jüdische Studien Band 25.
Transformative Translations in Jewish
History and Culture**

2019 – 198 S.

ISBN 978-3-86956-468-5

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-43262>



Empfohlene Zitation:

Netta Schramm: Radical Translation as Transvaluation, In: Markus Krah, Mirjam Thulin, Bianca Pick (Eds.): PaRDeS 25, Potsdam, Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2019, S. 73–87.
DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-47137>

Soweit nicht anders gekennzeichnet ist dieses Werk unter einem Creative Commons Lizenzvertrag lizenziert: Namensnennung 4.0. Dies gilt nicht für zitierte Inhalte anderer Autoren:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Radical Translation as Transvaluation: From *Tsene-Rene* to *The Jews Are Coming*: Three Readings of Korah's Rebellion

by Netta Schramm

Abstract

Scholars of modern Jewish thought explore the hermeneutics of “translation” to describe the transference of concepts between discourses. I suggest a more radical approach – translation as transvaluation – is required. Eschewing modern tests of truth such as “the author would have accepted it” and “the author should have accepted it,” this radical form of translation is intentionally unfaithful to original meanings. However, it is not a reductionist reading or a liberating text. Instead, it is a persistent squabble depending on both source and translation for sustenance. Exploring this paradigm entails a review of three expositions of the Korah biblical narrative; three readings dedicated to keeping an eye on current events: (1) *Tsene-rene* (Prague, 1622), biblical prose; (2) *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh*, (Tel Aviv, 1973), a secular Zionist reworking of *Tsene-rene*; and (3) *The Jews are Coming* (Israel, 2014–2017) a satirical television show.

1. Introduction

Language, suggests philosopher Michael Oakeshott, as in the “language of poetry” or the “language of chemistry” is a world, a way of thinking and a substrate for a literary corpus. A literature corpus corresponding to the “language of chemistry” contains items such as chemistry textbooks, journal articles, and laboratory safety sheets.¹ Hence, production of literature by and for those speaking a foreign language or for the bilingual is an act of translation as adaptation. Translation in this sense is the subject matter of hermeneutics as philosopher of education Michael Rosenak pointed out:

¹ Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Liberty Found: Indianapolis, 1991), 193.

“Thus, any translation is an attempt, usually by an expert, to render a concept located in a mode of discourse that is incomprehensible to particular hearers, because they don’t know it or don’t take it seriously, into an idiom that does make sense to them and evokes interest in them, so that they are enabled to learn something from the (original) concept.”²

The term translation, as an idiom for the negotiation of conflicting languages, was adopted and expanded in scholarly works on modern religious thought and education. The collocation “language and literature” together with translation as interpretation stands at the core of Rosenak and his disciples’ theory of modern Jewish education. Jewish education is facing a secularized modernity which deems the language of the Jewish canon obsolete, with its values, legal code, and worldview not axiomatically true and binding. In writings on modern Jewish education translation became a lens and a standard.³ As a lens, it informs scholarly readings of Jewish works of contemporary literature, and as a standard, it gauges authentic continuity of works of literature with canonical sources.

The following discussion is guided by notions of translation as adaptation coupled with an idiom of language as a substrate for a culture’s texts. I examine renderings of the biblical episode of the Korah rebellion in three works: (1) the pre-modern *Tsene-rene*; (2) *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh*, a secular Zionist reworking of *Tsene-rene*; and (3) *The Jews are Coming*, a satirical Israeli television show. Numbers 16 tells of Korah, discontented kin to Moses, who incites an unsuccessful rebellion aimed at revoking unjust priestly privileges: “You [Moses and Aaron] have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above the Lord’s congregation?”⁴ The biblical narrative begs for additions for it contains two inconsistent storylines regarding the identity of the rebelling coalition and the subsequent miraculous punishment. This literary perceptiveness

² Michael Rosenak, *Roads to the Palace: Jewish Texts and Teaching*, Faith and Culture in Contemporary Education; v. 1 (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995), 99.

³ Terms developed in the “language and literature” argot expand language to mean discourse and resonate with 20th-century translation studies. Gideon Toury saw translation as a norm-governed activity which involves “at least two languages and two cultural traditions, i. e., at least two sets of norm-systems on each level.” Gideon Toury, “The Nature and Role of Norms in Translation,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 200.

⁴ Num. 16.3 (JPS).

has been the basis for many creative midrashic works.⁵ Many sources depict Korah as an antihero, trickster, and a cunning rabbinic scholar.⁶ Furthermore, this biblical passage has been and still is a favorite with preachers; there is even a festive opening phrase for sermonizing on the Korah rebellion: “This section is beautifully expounded.”⁷ Korah is a favorite with preachers due to the ease with which a local twist may be read into the ancient source.⁸ My selections are adaptation-translations of the Korah rebellion who target not the scholar but the layperson, and are links in an exegetical chain. *The Jews are Coming* was created by screenwriters, not bible specialists. They are graduates of the Israeli secular school system, and their knowledge of scripture draws on that curriculum. *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh* is of the milieu which created the secular Israeli bible curricula and was modeled after the *Tsene-rene*.⁹ The *Tsene-rene* came to be thought of as the “women’s bible” targeting young children and unlearned adults. The three works are therefore suitable tracers for Jewish practices of translation and their trajectories of change.

2. Hermeneutics of Translation and the Jewish Canon

As noted above, translation is a prevailing paradigm in the field of Jewish thought and Jewish education. Of course, Jewish exegesis is nothing new; the communal reading of the Torah every Shabbat created, early on, a need to translate the Hebrew scriptures into the vernacular Aramaic.¹⁰ However, the function of the expositor-preacher quickly expanded such that a skilled expositor would link the biblical text with current events to offer guidance on

⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 233–235.

⁶ David Biale, “Korah in the Midrash: The Hairless Heretic as Hero,” *Jewish History* 30, no. 1–2 (2016): 15–28.

⁷ Based on Rashi Num. 16.1.

⁸ Early Reform thinkers reclaimed Korah to frame a debate with Orthodoxy. Biale, “Korah in the Midrash,” 27–28.

⁹ David Cohen, author of the book, was exposed as a child both to *Ein Yaakov*, a compilation of *aggadot* found in the Talmud, and to *Tsene-rene*. The first was taught by his father in the *beit midrash*, the second recounted by his mother at home. When Cohen wrote *derashot* for his secular Israeli audience, he chose the accessible *Tsene-rene* format. Furthermore, works like *Midrash Raba* were not even taught at Yeshivat Volozhin where he studied. David Cohen, *Asher Shamati Vesiparti* (Ein Harod: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’euchad, 1947), 5–6 (Hebrew).

¹⁰ The origins of Jewish preaching are unclear. Zunz and Bettan dated it back to the Second Temple, Heineman dated it to Hellenistic times.

contemporary issues.¹¹ This exegetical activity is guided by a theory of hierarchies between the expositor, the Divine author, and works of earlier sages, which shape hermeneutical practices he or she employs.¹² Shaun Gallagher in *Hermeneutics and Education* offers us a good, albeit simplified, distinction between four different approaches to hermeneutics termed conservative, moderate, critical and radical.¹³ Conservative hermeneutics may be mistakenly understood as limited to a literalist “word-for-word” approach. However, conservative hermeneutics includes “sense-for-sense” interpretations when coupled with an ethos of fidelity to the author’s intent.¹⁴ In Jewish hermeneutical traditions, Midrash is conservative in orientation yet far from literalist in scope. It is conservative due to the expounders’ self-perceived mission: not creating but exposing latent meanings. Pre-Enlightenment Jewish thought defined grounded exegesis as the application of the “proper hermeneutical key”.¹⁵ Talmudic texts are exemplary in their playful introduction of extraordinary ideas into the biblical verses. The Talmudic trope: “If it were not a written verse it could not be said” expresses this conservative orientation and, funnily enough, is evoked in cases of extreme non-literal readings.¹⁶ Hence introducing daring theology is possible when perceived as textually grounded. However, modernity called for a reassessment of the hermeneutical tool kit, with one response being moderate hermeneutics. Philosopher Ronald Dworkin claimed moderate hermeneutics to be an active dialogue between author and reader.¹⁷ Dworkin offered a test of truth which he believed to be subjective yet universal:

¹¹ Joseph Heinemann, *Sermons in the Talmudic period*. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1982), 7–10 (Hebrew).

¹² Philosopher Yohanan Silman advanced a model in which religious Jewish expositors harbor several philosophies of Torah and its transmission. If the Torah was perfectly transmitted, a disciple is forever inferior to sages of earlier generations. David Yochanan Silman, *The Voice Heard on Sinai: Once or Ongoing?* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1999, Hebrew).

¹³ Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 9–11.

¹⁴ See sources in: Jeremy Munday, *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*. 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 30. Moshe Halbertal claims this freedom was achieved by the process of canonization. Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 32–40.

¹⁵ Halbertal, *People of the Book*, 37.

¹⁶ List of appearances in: Moshe Halbertal, “If It Were Not a Written Verse It Could Not Be Said,” *Tarbiz* 68, no. 1 (1998): 39–59, note 1 (Hebrew).

¹⁷ Ronald Dworkin, *Law’s Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1986), 59.

“The interpreter’s judgment of what an author would have accepted will be guided by his sense of what the author should have accepted, that is, his sense of which readings would make the work better and which would make it worse.”¹⁸

Dworkin believed texts could be transformed by new idioms and concepts yet retain a meaningful connection with the source. If one took too much interpretive freedom, the result is a new work, rather than an interpretation of the original.¹⁹ Rosenak developed the concepts of “partial translation” for a moderate hermeneutic, and its counterpart, a reductionist “full translation.”²⁰ Modern works of Jewish thought such as *The Lonely Man of Faith*, *The Prophets*, and *The way of Man*, are partial translations.²¹ Critical hermeneutics includes a program for liberation from disparaged value and belief systems. Unlike the conservative interpreter, the critical one subjugates a canon to the framework of some critical theory.²² In Jonathan Cohen’s formulation, this entails a hermeneutic of suspicion in which the reader assumes a privileged position, which the author is denied.²³

It is radical hermeneutics that sings a different song: “Interpretation requires playing with the words of the text rather than using them to find truth in or beyond the text.”²⁴ An act of rebellion characterizes radical hermeneutics; it is not a value-free hermeneutic, yet any values it shares are hidden under layers of play and irony.²⁵ Unlike the truth-bearing critical hermeneutics,

¹⁸ Dworkin, *Law’s Empire*, 57.

¹⁹ Dworkin, *Law’s Empire*, 67.

²⁰ Rosenak’s “full translation” is similar to Gallagher’s “critical hermeneutics.” Michael Rosenak, *Commandments and Concerns: Jewish Religious Education in Secular Society* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 196, 206.

²¹ Joseph B Soloveitchik, “The Lonely Man of Faith,” *Tradition* 7, no.2 (1965): 5–67; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955); Martin Buber, *The Way of Man* (Greenwich, Conn.: Seabury Press, 1950).

²² Post-Colonial theories of translation as cannibalism flip the hierarchy between source and translation via a destructive act of consumption. De Compos’ use of translation as cannibalism pre-dates Post-Colonial sensibilities. It also transcends a single critical theory because it is a multifaceted literary trope. In his later cannibalistic metaphor, the translator ingests a text, and destroys its unitary identity. But the text becomes part of the cannibals’ subsequent texts and regains a Walter Benjamin-like “afterlife.”

²³ Cohen’s example is Freud’s reading of Exodus. Jonathan Cohen, “Suspicion, Dialogue and Reverence Leo Strauss Confronts Freud and Buber on Exodus,” in *Languages and Literatures in Jewish Education*, vol. 11, Studies in Jewish Education (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2006), 261–288.

²⁴ Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education*, 10.

²⁵ Kafka on Abraham’s journey with his son is an example of a ludic reading of scripture; Abraham is afraid of morphing into Don Quixote. Franz Kafka, *Letters to Friends, Family and Editors*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Schocken, 1977), 285.

a radical translation can therefore never replace the original for it provides no definitive answers. Additionally, radical hermeneutics deems the attempt to reach the author's intent futile. Even if it were possible to reach the author's intent, it would be an unsophisticated philological pursuit. Radical hermeneutics thus reverses Dworkin's test, yielding a translator who admits that the author would not accept the translation, even more so, *should* not accept it. This paper wishes to describe a radical position termed here translation as transvaluation.²⁶

My use of the Nietzschean term "transvaluation" does not mean adherence to any particular interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy.²⁷ The term is nevertheless linked, by way of literature professor Dov Sadan on Micha Yosef Berdyczewski (the "Hebrew Nietzsche"), to a theology of Jewish secularization: "Just as Nietzsche called for a re-assessment of the values of European culture, Berdyczewski, following him, called for a transvaluation of Jewish culture."²⁸ However, claims Sadan, while Nietzsche favored Paganism over Christianity, Berdyczewski, embraced dualities and contradictions in modern Jewish existence rather than discarding inherited culture.²⁹

3. Conservative Hermeneutics: *Tsene-Rene*

Tsene-rene, the most popular Yiddish work of Torah exegesis, was first published in 1622. The author, Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac of Yanov (died 1623), was an esteemed Polish rabbi from the city Yanov near Lublin.³⁰ His text assumes readers are familiar with the *peshat*, the plain meaning of the text; a typical

²⁶ Compare with de Campos' "transcreation": "in the limits of any translation that proposes to be a radical operation of 'transcreation,' something sparkles [...] the mirage of converting, at least for an instant, the original into the translation of the translation." (Haroldo de Campos, "Mephistofaustian Transluciferation (Contribution to the Semiotics of Poetic Translation)," *Dispositio* 7, no. 19/21 (1982):181–187, here 182.)

²⁷ The subtitle of Nietzsche's book *The Will to Power* is "An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values."

²⁸ Dov Sadan, *Orchot Ushvilim*, vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1977), 87 (Hebrew).

²⁹ Berdyczewski was called the Hebrew Nietzsche by proponents and opponents of his philosophy. Avner Holzman, *Ha-Sefer vehachayim: Masot al Micha Yosef Berdyczewski* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2003), 200–223 (Hebrew).

³⁰ A common alternate to "of Yanov" is "Ashkenazi;" not all biographical details are clear. See Morris Failerstein, "A Guide to the Ze'enhah U-Re'enhah: Correcting Some Misconceptions," *In Geveb: A Journal of Yiddish Studies*, February 2019, <https://ingeveb.org/articles/a-guide-to-the-zeenah-u-reenah>, accessed May 1, 2019; Morris M. Failerstein, *Ze'enhah u-Re'enhah: A Critical Translation into English*, vol. 1 (Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 10.

section begins with two words out of a Hebrew verse and then expounds on it in Yiddish. The author merged multiple sources into a narrative and illuminated the inner life of the biblical characters.³¹ Except in the apothegms, the author drew entirely on earlier sources to compose his work.

The Korah rebellion in the *Tsene-rene* covers many available midrashic sources. Of course, Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac enjoyed the freedom to choose how much weight to give available themes.³² We can detect these conservative hermeneutics in the narrative of Moses' reactions and thoughts:³³

“He fell on his face’ [16:4]. Moses fell on his face. He thought that prayer was not good or appropriate. This was the fourth sin. For the first, the Golden Calf, he prayed and by the complainers, who spoke evil against God, he prayed. By the spies, he also prayed. However, with Korah, he was very frightened. He thought to himself. How long should I exert myself to forgive their sins?”

Opening with the biblical verse, then paraphrasing Rashi, the *Tsene-rene* tells of a pained, righteous leader troubled by a possible credibility crisis with God, not with Man. The discussion then distinguishes between the two leaders-brothers: “why did Moses fall alone and not Aaron? The explanation is that Aaron did not want to get involved in the conflict.”³⁴ Aaron's shunning away from politics goes only to enhance his holy stature, again strengthening a theocentric voice.

4. Moderate Hermeneutics: *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh*

Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh is a small and forgotten volume of biblical homilies authored by David Cohen (1894–1976). Cohen was a key figure in *HaNoar HaOved*, the youth organization affiliated with *Mapai*, the Israel Worker's Party. The work was first published locally in kibbutz Alonim as a weekly column. Dov Sadan, an old friend of Cohen's, then edited and published the book. This work of homilies is striking both in content and form; Cohen's works are primarily compilations of Hasidic legends with a Zionist and

³¹ Faierstein, *Ze'edah u-Re'edah*, 19.

³² Korah's wife is mentioned but her role is not emphasized whereas in other cases the work elaborates on the role of wives. Hananel Mack, “Male and Female in the Aggada on Korah and his Company,” *Jewish Studies* 40 (2000): 131–143.

³³ Faierstein, *Ze'edah u-Re'edah*, 767.

³⁴ Faierstein, *Ze'edah u-Re'edah*, 768.

socialist orientation. The decision to produce a work of biblical commentary suits some of Cohen's generation who embraced a Zionist selective use of the Bible.³⁵ However, *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh* conforms to the rhythm of the weekly Torah portion, which for most secularists was lost together with the Shabbat communal reading. Cohen also diverged from his peers by privileging the Torah over the rest of the biblical canon and fashioning it after the traditional Yiddish *Tsene-rene*. Cohen loved the language of his Eastern European Jewish upbringing. The homilies were his attempt to transmit adapted content in a received form.³⁶

Tsene-rene, read by generations every Shabbat, shaped and enforced cultural norms, values, and practices. Cohen remembered sitting on his mother's lap while she, a *Zogerke*, entertained and educated the women of the community.³⁷ However, the new society of the kibbutz, secularized with a vengeance, produced radically different narratives and didactic intentions. The good, the honorable, the pious, and more, were transformed by the secular socialist milieu in which Cohen lived and wrote. Still, the biblical homilies composed in the kibbutz, which broke with longstanding interpretive traditions, were, from Cohen's perspective, an authentic reading of scripture.

While Korah is first mentioned only in Numbers 16, Cohen weaved Korah into the narrative of Numbers 1 where, among other things, Levites are exempt from military service. Cohen comments:³⁸

"And when Korah the son of Yitzhar met Dathan and Abiram the sons of Eliav, they spoke among themselves about the census taken by Moses and Aaron, and that the tribe of Levi was not enumerated along with the other tribes of Israel and not included in the military duties. Korah said: 'This must not be!' We will stir up all the tribes of Israel and demand the same law for all of us, and there will be no advantage for Moses and Aaron and the sons of Levi. And that was the start of the rebellion by Korah, Dathan, and Abiram."

³⁵ Anita Shapira, *The Bible and Israeli identity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2005), 1–33.

³⁶ Cohen adapts the decree not to be a hastener or forcer of the End (*Dohek Ha-Kets*), not by nulling the dictum and all its theological backdrop, but by reframing Zionism as a mission to draw the End near (*Mekarev Ha-Kets*). David Cohen, *Shomrim LaBoker* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad, 1963), 105–118.

³⁷ Eliezer Yerushalmi, *Pinkas Navaredok* (Tel Aviv: Ahdut, 1963), 205 (Yiddish and Hebrew).

³⁸ Cohen, *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh*, 63. I would like to thank my father Lenn J. Schramm for all original translations cited in this work.

Cohen skillfully presented an issue of Israeli reality – compulsory military service for all – in terms of the Levite exemption to endorse Korah’s position.³⁹ This imitates midrashic procedures and creates a storyline with unprecedented agendas.⁴⁰ Notice however that in Cohen’s reading, the Levite exemption is the doing of men, who are themselves Levites, not of God. Cohen could not replace the biblical text – he would not “uproot the mountain”.⁴¹ Instead, he revisited the Korah rebellion and drew upon a well-known Midrash which also appears in the *Tsene-rene*. Korah of the Midrash bluntly lies to mock Moses, whereas Cohen’s Korah is a socialist voicing his due criticism:⁴²

“And in fact, men of the tribes came to them and told about the ploys used by several priests. And one widow came and said: I had only one ewe. When my daughter fell ill the priest-physician told me to feed her lamb. The priest came and slaughtered the lamb, and took the choicest pieces of meat for himself, leaving only the bones for me and my daughter.”

Even though the wrongdoings are ascribed to “several priests” and not to Moses and Aaron in person, the homily is critical, diachronic, and divergent.⁴³ Still, Cohen had some fidelity to scripture, so he realigned his second homily with the known outcome. This time he abandoned the critical reading and returned to a traditional theme which rules Korah envious and therefore insincere in his demands. Now the function of the draft exemption homily becomes clear – it is a link back to a midrashic tradition:⁴⁴

“Is it not enough for you, sons of Levi, that you serve in the Tabernacle and are exempt from military duty, that you also demand the priesthood? [...] And it was transmitted from generation to generation: envy, lust, and honor are lethal for a man.”⁴⁵

³⁹ To the best of my knowledge, no other source associates the Levites’ exemption from army duty with Korah’s appeal.

⁴⁰ Cohen’s generation imitated midrashic procedures. Uriel Simon, “The Place of the Bible in Israeli Society: From National Midrashic to Existential Peshat,” *Modern Judaism* 19, no.3 (October 1, 1999): 217–239.

⁴¹ Babylonian Talmud, Horayot, 14a.

⁴² Cohen, *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh*, 66.

⁴³ In the desert the only priests are Aaron and his sons.

⁴⁴ Cohen, *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh*, 66–67.

⁴⁵ Quoted from Mishna Avot 4, 21. Korah is envious in many sources, such as the popular Mishnah commentary, the Bartenura.

Cohen's use of the biblical narrative was bilingual. In the first homily, he expressed his set of socialist Zionist beliefs, but in the second he adopted the traditional critique against conflicts "not in the name of heaven."⁴⁶ Notice that while reckoning with the traditional teachings, he also tenuously expanded heaven to incorporate socialism. The new didactic message he created claimed a sincere socialist, just like the pious Jews, must acknowledge his fallibilities and take heed not to succumb to lust, honor, and envy in the name of ideology.

Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh holds a liberating socialist ideology but is not a critical translation; the criticism of the priestly politics is a skillful non-reductionist homily. Cohen produced a sermon of moderate hermeneutics – a work of partial translation – informed by a selective loyalty to core values in Jewish tradition.

5. Radical Hermeneutics: *The Jews Are Coming*

The Jews are Coming by screenwriters Asaf Beisar and Natalie Marcus, was produced for Israel's Channel 1 and screened between the years 2014–2017. The show featured themes from Jewish history from biblical times to recent events. It was not an educational text however the producers discovered teachers in Israel incorporate skits in their curriculum.⁴⁷ The Israeli public broadcast network first banned the screening of the show for its alleged political leftist views. When they finally aired the show, after agreeing to produce a counter right-wing comedy, it was an immediate controversy and prize winner. The same network executives then renewed the show for two more seasons.

The book *Bible Now* (Hebrew), authored by Meir Shalev and published in 1985, is a link between Cohen's work and the televised skits.⁴⁸ Shalev freely read into the text contemporary issues with a critical anti-theistic tune. He often made remarks on the character traits of biblical heroes and the God

⁴⁶ Mishnah Avot 5, 17.

⁴⁷ *Bar Siach #36 Natalie Marcus talks about The Jews are Coming* (Tel Aviv), accessed October 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=io2ulhGm2Uw>, (Hebrew); Itay Stern, "Creators of Jews Are Coming connect Tanakh to Current Satire," *Ha-Aretz*, February 18, 2016: 8.

⁴⁸ Meir Shalev, *Tanach Achshav* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1985, Hebrew). Shalev, unlike Cohen, didn't present his writings in a traditional parashah by parashah setup, nor did he focus on Mikrah.

of Israel which he found to be lacking. In this work a vision of Korah in the Knesset is conjured:⁴⁹

“The Knesset debated a no-confidence motion. [...] ‘Mr. Speaker, honorable Knesset, I ask all of you to move away from the Opposition benches so that you won’t be harmed!’ [...] There is great commotion, as Knesset members leap in every direction.”

After the comic relief, the biblical narrative is reviewed and denounced:

“For the first time, a democratic note sounds in the radical theocracy imposed by Moses and his family. Did the government relate to the Opposition on the basis of the facts? No! Moses preferred to take hold of the tried and true weapon, the weapon of miracles.”

Shalev’s critical tone is not replicated in *The Jews are Coming*, for the comical televised genre never ends in an apothegm-like editorial. When talking about the series, creators Asaf Beisar and Natalie Marcus mentioned three key motivations: (1) “reclaiming biblical texts,” (2) comedy with social critique, and (3) history as therapy.⁵⁰ Their first aim was to rescue the text from contemporary Orthodox readers who believe secularists cannot access the texts. The second role they took on themselves is that of the Jesters. Fittingly, the screenwriters did include a few silly sketches with no critical aims but did not include sketches with a sharp message but no entertainment value. The familiarity of the viewers with biblical realia and their conflicting emotions towards the bible nurtured the show’s comical and critical ends. Marcus even coined the name “*muakaton*” for sketches which aim at being simultaneously disturbing and hilarious.⁵¹

Televising biblical sources was not motivated only by theatrical considerations, it was conceived of as a therapeutic endeavour. Marcus coupled this pathos-loaded argument with ambivalent and ironic hyperbole: “it’s like going to a psychologist to talk about how our parents ruined our life.” The

⁴⁹ Shalev, *Tanach Achshav*, 119.

⁵⁰ Joshua David Holo, “Natalie Marcus and Asaf Beiser: Humor Across the Divide,” mp3, accessed April 29, 2019, https://collegecommons.huc.edu/bully_pulpit/natalie-marcus-asaf-beiser.

⁵¹ “*Muakaton*” is a blend word formed from *Muaka* “distress” and *Maarchon* “skit.”

patriarchs, being “collective parents” are charged with “messing up” the Jewish people, and the show gives vent to these emotions.⁵²

These three contradictory motivations pose a hermeneutical conundrum. “reclaiming” is moderate in orientation. “The jester” corresponds with radical hermeneutics for his love of play and hidden value claims. Finally, “therapy” conforms with critical hermeneutics with its recipe for redemption. Careful consideration reveals playful critique to be more dominant than the other two motivations.⁵³ No single contesting ideology such as feminism, democracy, or humanism, takes over the interpretive game, even though these are all values the screenwriters hold. I would add that while the screenwriters referred to themselves as jesters, *leitsanim*, the televised work functions perhaps more like the traditional *Badhan*.⁵⁴

The Korah rebellion demythologizes the scriptures, but unlike Shalev’s reading mere profanation of the sacred does not exhaust the message. In this skit, which is worth quoting extensively, Moses, an exhausted leader, is also carrying the burden of the middle manager suffering from a capricious super-manager – a God – no one but Moses can hear:

[Moses] What now?⁵⁵

[Korah] No, we’re resting now.

[Moses] Yes, but I’m the leader and want to keep going, so let’s keep going, okay?

[Korah] Who decided that you’re the leader?

[Moses] God decided that I’m the leader.

[Korah] Maybe God will decide that I’m the leader?

[Moses] If you speak with God and that’s what he decides ... That’s fine, I totally accept it.

[Korah] How can I speak with him?

⁵² Marcus discusses *The Jews are Coming*, interview by Netta Schramm, phone, October 23, 2018.

⁵³ Reconstructing translation norms from extra-textual sources is tricky. The translated texts are more telling of applies translation norms. Toury, “Norms in Translation,” 206–7.

⁵⁴ Historical records show that the *Badhan*’s function included merry-making with moralist aspects. Therefore, “only people with some learning took to the calling of *badkhn*” E. Lifschutz, “Merrymakers and Jesters Among Jews,” *Yivo Annual of Jewish Social Science* 7 (January 1952): 43–83, here 49. See also Tsafi Sebba-Elran, “The Intertextual Jewish Joke at the Turn of the Twentieth Century and the Poetics of a National Renewal,” *HUMOR* 31, no. 4 (September 25, 2018): 603–621.

⁵⁵ Yoav Gross, “The Jews are Coming” (Israel: IBA Channel 1, March 4, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p9D1eztTwk8>.

[Moses] You can't speak with him.

[Korah] So only you can speak with him—what a great job you found yourself, Moses!”

Aaron is the opportunist, who just as in the sin of golden calf chooses again to side with the people and not with God.⁵⁶ The people of Israel he sides with, are an infantile mob.

“[Aaron] What's this, fellows? Have you gone totally out of your minds? Let me remind you, this man has been leading us in the wilderness for 20 years now. So what? Just because a young and charismatic leader arrived here, wearing an immaculate robe,⁵⁷ someone who could be a better leader than him, now you want to replace him?

[Mob] Yes! Yes!!

[...]

[Aaron] So you [addressing Korah] need to be very sure that everyone here, yes, all the people are standing behind you. You're all with him, aren't you?

[Mob] Yes! Yes! Yes!

[Aaron] Fine – the people have spoken.”

Korah is the young populist leader promising easy promises with no real knowledge of what governance takes.

“[Mob] Korah! Korah! Korah!

Speech! Speech! Speech! Speech! Speech! Speech!

[Korah] Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you.

Friends, we have come a long way. And the truth is that I have a few ideas for the rest of our trek through the wilderness. But, in two words: ‘Casual Monday.’”⁵⁸

This reading of the biblical texts plays with Sartre's existentialist logic: “Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn.”⁵⁹ Korah with his carefree vanity is the existentialist creating his code of fluff while Moses, bearer of a theistic logic, is a tragic and forlorn figure. For God exists, and is the sovereign, but is also capricious:

⁵⁶ Ex 32.21.

⁵⁷ Hebrew: *Tallit sh'kula tehelet*, a colloquial expression with midrashic origin. Numbers Rabbah 18.3.

⁵⁸ “Speech” and “Casual Monday” were spoken in English in the original.

⁵⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* (London: Methuen, 1948), 34. Marcus acknowledged a Sartre allusion in the Abraham skits. *Bar Siach #36 Natalie Marcus talks*.

“[Korah] Ask God – that’s the idea.

[Moses] You still haven’t noticed this recurring mechanism, that every time I ask God about something 3,000 people die? Haven’t you noticed that?

[Mob] Ask God! Ask God!

[Moses] I won’t ask him, I won’t ask him, I don’t want to ask him.

[Korah] He won’t ask him. Suddenly he’s become a coward. What happened, are you chicken?

[Moses] No problem.

[Announcer] ‘And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses and all the people that were with Korah ...’

[Aaron] I really liked the idea of Casual Monday—I’m just saying ...”

Moses breaks down and no longer protects the people who continuously nag him. In the next scene, a narrator reads out the biblical verse and shows Moses and Aaron throwing dead bodies into a pit. Korah is not the bearer of democracy; he has no values to campaign for. God is not Justice, and Moses breaks down and succumbs to the mob, knowing his choice to be vindictive. This zero-sum game rejects both moderate and critical readings; it breaks with Dworkin’s author’s intent and presents no ideological counter system. The screenwriters do not think their reading *could* be the right reading nor that it *should* be.

The Korah reading in *The Jews are Coming* is an ephemeral *derashah*; a dramatic sermon. It re-values or transvalues the philosophical substrates of the present by diachronically imposing them onto the past. The show submits to a position of literary and cultural inferiority vis-à-vis the canon. This reduces power struggles between source and adaptation and allows for a sassy portrayal of biblical heroes and dramas. Most importantly, it is a playful translation, never to be taken, even by the creators themselves, too seriously.

6. Conclusion

Comparing different readings of the Korah rebellion exposes the shift in hermeneutical attitudes in reading canonical texts. Even today the canon yields to new hermeneutical agendas and the next pages in the midrashic tradition are being written – or filmed. If a translation only paraphrases in the technical sense, the claim that *Yaldei Yisrael Kodesh* and *The Jews are Coming* are translations is problematic. However, new hermeneutical toolkits allow any

reading to qualify as a work of translation, or as the act of *darshanut* if it (1) negotiates with canonical sources and is (2) steeped in contemporary agendas. Critical hermeneutics is found lacking, for negotiation is supplanted by the subordination of canon to a critical theory. Translation in the radical form of *The Jews are Coming* playfully traverses the past and present value systems and only inadvertently conveys an ephemeral alternative to contemporary audiences.