



The System of Gilgul and the Laws Governing Neshamos

The Divine Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai Teaches Us that Onkelos Was the Gilgul and Tikun of Eliphaz ben Eisav

This week's parsha is parshas Mishpatim. It is fitting to focus on the sacred words of the divine Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in the Zohar hakadosh (Mishpatim 94a) related to the opening passuk of the parsha (Shemos 21, 1): "ואלה המשפטים אשר תשים לפניהם"—**and these are the judgments (ordinances) that you shall place before them.** Targum Onkelos translates this as: **These are the laws that you should arrange before them.** It seems that the Targum is translating this passuk word for word as it is written. Yet, according to Rashbi, Onkelos is referring to the laws and regulations governing the reincarnation of neshamos—"gilgulei neshamos."

After quoting the opening passuk of the parsha and the related Targum, Rabbi Shimon says: "אלין אינון סדורין דאתדנו כל חד וחד לקבל עונשיה"—**this is the system of "gilgul" (reincarnation), the laws that govern souls; each one is judged accordingly, receiving its due punishment.** Understood in this light, HKB"H instructed Moshe Rabeinu to inform Yisrael that sometimes they will be held accountable and punished for transgressions they committed "לפניהם"—in previous gilgulim. In other words, they must return to this world to make amends for wrongdoings in their previous lives. According to this interpretation of Targum Onkelos, they can accomplish this tikun by abiding by these laws and judgments.

But what prompted Rashbi to interpret the Targum in this fashion—as a reference to the laws governing "gilgulei neshamos"? The Targum could have been understood simply as referring to the laws of the Torah. Undoubtedly, all of Rashbi's teachings in the Zohar hakadosh are aimed at teaching and revealing the deeper more esoteric meanings of the written word of the Torah. So, what prompted him to stray from the plain meaning of Targum Onkelos on this passuk?

Onkelos the Proselyte Merited Interpreting the Torah as It Was Transmitted to Moshe Rabeinu at Sinai

With the utmost awe and respect, I would like to present to our royal audience a novel idea that Hashem has been kind enough to show me concerning the profound message of Rashbi. In actuality, he is revealing to us a fascinating secret concerning the root of the neshamah of Onkelos HaGer (the convert, proselyte). It helps us comprehend how he managed to convert and was privileged to study Torah with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua. Ultimately, this enabled him to interpret the entire Torah in Aramaic, as the Gemara teaches us (Megillah 3a): "תרגום של תורה אונקלוס הגר אמרו מפי רבי אליעזר ורבי יהושע"—**the Targum (Aramaic translation) of the Torah was composed by Onkelos the proselyte, who learned it from Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua.**

This prompts the Gemara to inquire: **”ותרגום של תורה** וְהָאֵמֵר רַב אִיקָא בְרַב אַבִּין אִמְרַי רַב חֲנַנְאֵל אִמְרַי רַב מַאי אֲוֹנְקֵלוֹס הִגֵּר אִמְרוּ, וְהָאֵמֵר רַב אִיקָא בְרַב אַבִּין אִמְרַי רַב חֲנַנְאֵל אִמְרַי רַב מַאי דְכַתִּיב וִיקְרָאוּ בְּסִפְרֵי תוֹרַת הָאֱלֹקִים מִפּוֹרֵשׁ וְשׁוּם שְׁכַל וִיבִינּוּ בְּמִקְרָא, וִיקְרָאוּ בְּסִפְרֵי תוֹרַת הָאֱלֹקִים זֶה מִקְרָא, מִפּוֹרֵשׁ זֶה תַּרְגּוּם, וְשׁוּם שְׁכַל אֱלוֹ הַפְּסוּקִים, וִיבִינּוּ בְּמִקְרָא אֱלוֹ פִּיִּסְקֵי טַעְמִים, וְאִמְרֵי לֵה אֱלוֹ הַמְּסוֹרֶת.”

Was the translation of the Torah really composed by Onkelos HaGer? Didn't Rav Ika bar Avin say that Rav Chananel said that Rav said: What is the meaning of that which is written (Nechemiah 8, 8): **“And they read in the book, the Torah of G-d, distinctly** (with clarification); **and with the application of wisdom, they caused them to understand the reading”?** **“And they read in the book, the Torah of G-d,” this is the text of the Torah; “distinctly,” this is the Targum; “and with the application of wisdom,” these are the divisions into pesukim; “and they caused them to understand the reading,” these are the cantillation notes** (which help clarify the meaning of the text). **And some say that these are the traditions** (with regard to how each word is to be written and pronounced). This passuk indicates that the Aramaic translation already existed at the beginning of the Second Temple period, well before the time of Onkelos. The Gemara answers: **”שכחום וחזרו ויסדום”—it was forgotten and then it was restored.** In other words, in subsequent generations, the Targum was forgotten until Onkelos HaGer came along and composed it anew based on what he was taught by Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua.

Now, from Rashi's commentary (Kiddushin 49a), we learn that the commentary of Targum Onkelos was actually transmitted to Moshe Rabeinu at Har Sinai but was ultimately forgotten with the passage of time. However, it was resurrected by Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, who conveyed it to Onkelos. For, a Baraisa there disparages those who deviate from the commentary of Targum Onkelos: **”זהמוסיף עליו הרי זה מחרף ומגדף”—and one who adds** (his own explanation to a passuk when translating it) **is a reviler and a blasphemer.** Rashi explains that Onkelos did not originate (compose) his translation and interpretation; it was actually given at Sinai and subsequently forgotten, as we learned from the Gemara in Megillah cited above.

Accordingly, the commentary of the Targum is an inseparable part of Torah she'b'al peh and must be

reviewed weekly. As we are taught (Berachos 8a): **”לעולם—a person should always complete the Torah portion** (of the week) **with the congregation, reading the (Hebrew) text twice and the Targum once.**

This is what compelled the divine Tanna Rashbi to address this surprising phenomenon—how Onkelos, the nephew of Hadrian, the Roman Emperor, succeeded in converting during one of the most difficult periods in Jewish history, during the Roman exile. And, furthermore, he was privileged to restore the Targum, an integral part of Torah she'b'al peh, that had been forgotten during the galuyos. This is what is revealed by the first passuk of this week's parsha— **”ואלה—as we shall explain.**

Onkelos Consulted with Several Reshaim as to whether or Not He Should Convert

To truly understand how Onkelos achieved this greatness, we need to examine his life. He was born into an aristocratic, royal Roman family. Yet, he developed an intense desire to study Torah. When contemplating the difficult decision of converting and becoming a part of the Jewish people, he resorted to necromancy; he raised the impure spirits of Titus, Bilam, and Yeshu the Christian—may the names of the wicked rot—from the depths of Gehinnom to consult with them. Despite their consensus opinion not to convert, he decided of his own volition to convert and to be circumcised, so that he could learn Torah with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua.

We will begin this inquiry with a fascinating story told by Chazal in the Gemara (Gittin 56b):

”אונקלוס בר קלוניקוס בר אחתיה דטיטוס, בעי לאיגורי, אזל אסקיה לטיטוס בנגידא, אמר ליה מאן חשיב בההוא עלמא, אמר ליה ישראל, מהו לאידבוקי בהו, אמר ליה מיליהו נפישין ולא מצית לקיומינהו, זיל איגרי בהו בההוא עלמא והוית רישא, דכתיב היו צריה לראש וגו', כל המיצר לישראל נעשה ראש.”

Onkelos was the nephew of the Roman Emperor Titus; he wished to convert. Using sorcery, he raised Titus from the dead. He asked him who is important in that world.

Titus replied that Yisrael are important. Onkelos asked if he should join them. Titus replied that they have many mitzvos, and his nephew would be unable to abide by them. Instead, torment them in this world, and you will become a leader, as it is written (Eichah 1, 5): **“Her tormentors have become leaders etc.”**—i.e., all those who torment Yisrael become leaders.

The Gemara continues (ibid. 57a): **“אזל אסקיה לבלעם בנגידא, אמר ליה מאן חשיב בההוא עלמא, אמר ליה ישראל. מהו לאידבוקי... מהו לאידבוקי... So, Onkelos went and raised the spirit of Bilam from the dead by means of necromancy. Once again, he inquired, “Who is important in that world (Olam HaBa)?” Bilam replied, “Yisrael.” So, Onkelos asked him if it is worthwhile to join them. Bilam told him to never seek peace or benefit from them . . .**

אזל אסקיה בנגידא לפושעי ישראל, אמר ליה מאן חשיב בההוא עלמא, אמר ליה ישראל, מהו לאדבוקי בהו, אמר ליה טובתם דרוש, רעתם לא תדרוש, כל הנוגע בהן כאילו נוגע בבכת עינו.”

Then, Onkelos proceeded to raise the spirit of a particular Jewish sinner through necromancy. (According to an ancient text, prior to censorship, it specifically mentions Yeshu the Christian.) Onkelos asked him who was prominent in the next world. He answered, “Yisrael.” So, Onkelos asked, “Should I join them?” The sinner answered, “Seek their benefit; do not seek their harm. Whoever touches them is like one who touches the pupil of the eye”—i.e., whoever harms Yisrael harms himself.

The Gemara concludes: **“תא חזי מה בין פושעי ישראל לנביאי—come see, what a difference there is between the sinners of Yisrael and the prophets of the idol-worshipping nations of the world.** The sinners of Yisrael transgressed in Olam HaZeh; nevertheless, they advised Onkelos to seek benefit from Yisrael and not to harm them. Yet, the prophets of the other nations, upon whom the Shechinah rested during their lifetimes and endowed them with prophecy, nevertheless—even though they suffered in Gehinnom—they still advised Onkelos to harm Yisrael.

It is noteworthy that even Yeshu the Christian, who was originally a Jew, did not advise Onkelos to convert. He

did advise him to seek benefit from them; but he advised Onkelos not to try to harm them only so that he himself would not incur any injury or harm.

Now, we find a fascinating insight in the Ben Yehoyada here, authored by the brilliant Rabbi Chaim Yosef of Bavel, ztz”l. He writes that while Yeshu advised Onkelos not to convert, he actually advised him to exert his influence with the government to benefit Yisrael in order to corrupt them spiritually. Here is a summary of his sacred insight:

Yeshu advised Onkelos to entice them by offering them freedom. This would induce them to commit many iniquities. Whereas if he treated them badly, he would never succeed in causing them to abandon their religion. So, when Yeshu advised him to “seek their benefit,” here is what he actually meant: If you wish to harm them, seek to benefit them; this will cause them to stumble and fall into your hands.

We will continue to explore the journey of Onkelos. He decided to convert and not to heed the counsel of Titus, Bilam, and Yeshu, because he desperately wanted to learn Torah. To do so, he had to be circumcised, as we are taught by the Midrash on this week’s parsha (S.R. 30, 12):

“פעם אחת אמר לו עקילס לאדריינוס המלך, רוצה אני להתגייר ולהעשות ישראל, אמר לו לאומה זו אתה מבקש, כמה בזיתי אותה, כמה הרגתי אותה, לירודה שבאומות אתה מבקש להתערב, מה ראית בהם שאתה רוצה להתגייר. אמר לו הקטן שבהם יודע היאך ברא הקב”ה את העולם, מה נברא ביום ראשון ומה נברא ביום שני, כמה יש משנברא העולם ועל מה העולם עומד ותורתן אמת. אמר לו ולמד תורתן ואל תמול, אמר לו עקילס, אפילו חכם שבמלכותך וזקן בן מאה שנה, אינו יכול ללמוד תורתן אם אינו מל, שכן כתוב מגיד דבריו ליעקב חזקיו ומשפטיו לישראל, לא עשה כן לכל גוי, ולמי לבני ישראל.”

Once Aquilas (Onkelos) said to the Emperor Hadrian, “I wish to convert and to become a Jew.” He (Hadrian) said to him, “You seek a relationship with this nation?! How much have I degraded it! How many of its people have I killed! To this lowliest of nations, you wish to be part of?! What did you see in them that makes you want to convert?”

He (Aquilas) replied to him, “Even the simplest of them knows how HKB”H created the world; what was

created on the first day; and what was created on the second day; and how many years have elapsed since the world was created; and what sustains the world; and that their Torah is the truth!" He (Hadrian) said to him, "Why don't you learn their Torah but do not get circumcised?" Aquilas said to him, "Even the wisest person in your kingdom, and even if he is a venerable man of one hundred years, he is unable to study their Torah if he is not circumcised. For it is written (Tehillim 147, 19): 'He relates His words to Yaakov, His statutes and His judgments to Yisrael. He did not do so for any other nation.' And to whom (did He relate the Torah)? Only to the Children of Yisrael."

The reason the Midrash chose to tell this amazing story about Onkelos the proselyte specifically in relation to the opening passuk of this week's parsha— "ואלה המשפטים אשר" –is to emphasize the point Rashi makes in his commentary on this passuk based on the Gemara (Gittin 88b): "לפניהם, ולא לפני גוים"—before them and not before the goyim. Onkelos understood that the reason for this is because they are uncircumcised; hence, they are incapable of attaining the kedushah of the Torah.

Onkelos the Proselyte Was a Gilgul of Eliphaz the Son of Eisav

In this manner, we will explain how Onkelos, a member of the royal Roman family, managed to convert despite the obstacles before him. We will refer to what the divine kabbalist, the Rama of Pano, presents in the sefer Gilgulei Neshamos (1, 12). This is based on what he was taught by his Rav, Rabbi Yisrael Sarug, who learned it from our illustrious teacher, the Arizal. Here is what he writes:

"אונקלוס הגר עיבור של אליפז, שלא רצה להרוג את יעקב במצות אביו, ולקח לו הזהב ועזב לו הגוף, ואמר אליפז מזה אעשה לצווי של אבא, אמר לו קח לך הכסף והזהב והנפש תן לי והעניי חשוב כמות, וכן נתייעץ עם טיטוס כשבא להתגייר, ואמר לו לך והצר להם היו צריה לראש, ולא שמע לו ונתגייר, והעניי טיטוס הוא עשו".

Onkelos HaGer was an "ibur" (a form of gilgul) of Eliphaz, who did not want to kill Yaakov as his father had commanded. He took his gold and left his body . . .

since a pauper is thought of as a dead person. Also, he sought advice from Titus when he went to convert. He told him to go and torment them, because those who torment them have become leaders. He did not listen to him and converted. It is because Titus is Eisav.

Thus, we learn from the Rama of Pano that Onkelos HaGer was a reincarnation of Eliphaz ben Eisav. Instead of obeying his father's orders to kill Yaakov, he spared Yaakov's life by rendering him a pauper without any possessions. Let us refer to Rashi's comment on the passuk (Bereishis 29, 11): "וישק יעקב לרחל וישא את קולו ויבך"—"Yaakov kissed Rachel and raised his voice and wept," because he came empty-handed. He (Yaakov) said, "Eliezer, my paternal grandfather's servant, had in his hands nose-rings, and bracelets, and delicacies; whereas I have nothing in my hands; because Eliphaz, Eisav's son, pursued him at his father's command, to kill him. He overtook him; but since Eliphaz grew up under Yitzchak's influence, he withdrew his hand. He said (to Yaakov), "What should I do concerning my father's command?" Yaakov replied to him, "Take that which is in my hand; for, a poor person is considered to be like a dead person."

The Rama of Pano adds that Titus the wicked, who destroyed the Beis HaMikdash, was a reincarnation of Eisav, Eliphaz's father. This explains why Onkelos, the gilgul of Eliphaz, raised the spirit of Titus, the gilgul of Eliphaz's father, by means of necromancy to consult with about converting. He thought that perhaps now that he was suffering in Gehinnom, he would encourage him to convert. Clearly, this was not the case; he persisted in his wickedness and advised Onkelos not only not to convert but to harm Yisrael.

Eliphaz Who Grew Up on Yitzchak's Lap Merited the Presence of the Shechinah

With pleasure, we will now attempt to substantiate this premise. It appears that Eliphaz was rewarded for not following through on his father's orders and refraining from killing Yaakov Avinu. For, we find that among the friends who counselled Iyov regarding his complaints

about the suffering HKB”H subjected him to was someone identified as Eliphaz HaTeimani (Iyov 4, 1): **”ויען אליפז—Eliphaz HaTeimani then spoke and said.** Rashi comments: **This was Eliphaz the son of Eisav, and because he grew up under the tutelage of Yitzchak, he merited having the Shechinah rest upon him.**

It seems that Rashi’s comment is based on the teaching in the Gemara (B.B. 15b) that Eliphaz HaTeimani was one of the seven neviim who prophesied to the nations of the world. This is what Rashi means when he says that the Shechinah rested on him. Clearly, this is related to the fact that he grew up under the tutelage of Yitzchak. We find a wonderful corroboration for this in the Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni 947) on the passuk (Mishlei 11, 30):

”The fruit of a tzaddik is a tree of life.” Our Rabbis said that all of the children that Sarah nursed . . . they all converted. Do not be surprised by this; for, you find that Eliphaz, because he grew up under the tutelage of Yitzchak, became a tzaddik and merited being imbued with “ruach hakodesh.”

Furthermore, we learned from the Rama of Pano that not only did Eliphaz merit being a prophet of the nations of the world upon whom the Shechinah rested, but he also merited reincarnating into Onkelos, who was willing to sacrifice his life to convert. After all, it was very likely that his uncle, the Emperor Hadrian (according to the “girsah” of the Gra), would kill him for converting and joining the Jewish people, whom he despised. He did all this for the sake of learning Torah with Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua; and he merited translating the entire Torah just as it was transmitted to Moshe Rabeinu at Har Sinai.

Eliphaz Who Spared Yaakov Avinu the Pillar of Torah Reincarnated into Onkelos Who Interpreted the Entire Torah

Based on what we have learned, we will endeavor to explain why Eliphaz ben Eisav was rewarded to such a degree. Let us refer to the interpretation in the Zohar hakadosh (Vayeitzei 146b) of the Mishnah (Avos 1, 2): **”על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות**

”חסדים, התורה דא יעקב, העבודה דא יצחק, גמילות חסדים דא אברהם.”
”The world stands on three pillars—on the Torah, on religious service and on the performance of acts of kindness.” Yaakov is the pillar of Torah; Yitzchak is the pillar of religious service (avodah); Avraham is the pillar of acts of kindness.

Let us elaborate. Since Avraham Avinu went to great lengths to welcome guests, he is the paradigm of “chesed.” Since Yitzchak Avinu was bound as a korban atop the mizbeiach, he represents the pillar of “avodah”—which focuses on the korbanos. With regards to Yaakov Avinu, the Torah attests (Bereishis 25, 27): **”ויעקב איש תם יושב—ויעקב איש תם יושב—אהלים—and Yaakov was a wholesome man, abiding in tents.** Rashi explains that this refers to the tents of Shem and Eiver. Afterwards, when he fled from Eisav, instead of going directly to Charan, Yaakov spent fourteen years studying in the Beis Midrash of Eiver without sleeping in his bed—as per Rashi’s comment on the passuk (ibid. 28, 11): **”וישכב במקום ההוא—and he lay down in that place.**

Now, we have an explicit passuk that states (Devarim 33, 4): **”תורה צוה לנו משה מורשה קהלת יעקב”—the Torah which Moshe commanded us is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov.** The Sefas Emes (Chukas 5651) interprets this as follows: **”The Torah which Moshe commanded us”** refers to Torah she’b’chsav; **”the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov”** refers to Torah she’b’al peh. We can suggest that this is because all those years that Yaakov Avinu was sequestered in the Beis Midrash of Shem and Eiver, he studied Torah she’b’al peh.

Thus, we can appreciate why Eliphaz was rewarded so generously. He defied his father by sparing Yaakov’s life knowing full-well that Eisav might kill him for disobeying him. In the merit of Yaakov Avinu, the pillar of Torah, all of Yisrael were privileged to receive Torah she’b’al peh at Har Sinai. Therefore, “midah k’neged midah,” Eliphaz was privileged to reincarnate into Onkelos HaGer, who interpreted the entire Torah in Torah she’b’al peh just as it was transmitted to Moshe at Sinai. As explained above, this was necessary, because it had been forgotten by later generations with the passage of time.

With immense joy, this illuminates for us the profound words of the divine Tanna Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Specifically here regarding the passuk: **“ואלה המשפטים אשר תשים לפניהם”**, he teaches us that when the Targum Onkelos comments: **These are the laws that you should arrange before them**—he is referring to the laws governing “gilgulei neshamos”—reincarnation. Moshe is being instructed to inform Yisrael that sometimes they will have to endure the judgments and punishments for their wrongdoings in previous reincarnations—i.e., **“לפניהם”**.

We saw above that the Midrash associates this opening passuk of our parsha with the passuk in Tehillim: **“מגיד דבריו לא עשה”**—**He relates His words to Yaakov**. Onkelos used this latter passuk to assert to the Emperor Hadrian, his uncle, that only a Jew who has been circumcised is capable of accessing and attaining the wisdom of the Torah. In other words: **“He relates His words to Yaakov,”** only to someone who is circumcised like Yaakov. He deliberately mentions Yaakov whose life he spared in a previous incarnation. But: **“לא עשה”** **“כן לכל גוי”**—**he did not do so for any other nation,** because they are not circumcised. The passuk also mentions: **“חוקיו לישראל”**—the “chukim” refers to His Torah and the “mishpatim” to His laws and judgments. Hence, he alludes to this phenomenon in Targum Onkelos: **“ואלה המשפטים אשר תשים לפניהם, ואלין דיניא דתסדר קדמיהון”**.

Thus, we learn from the story of Onkelos that HKB”H does not neglect to reward any creature. He rewarded Eliphaz for sparing the life of Yaakov Avinu by having him reincarnate into Onkelos—who restored the Targum and the teachings that had been transmitted to Moshe Rabeinu at Sinai but had been forgotten. We also learn that HKB”H does not ignore or forgo any person’s sins; if such a person neglects to perform teshuvah in Olam HaZeh, he will have to return as a gilgul to make amends for his wrongdoings.

This is the message Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai teaches us in connection with the opening passuk of this week’s parsha: **This is the system of “gilgul,” the laws that govern souls; each one is judged accordingly, receiving its due punishment.** This fact is evident here specifically, because of how Onkelos, the gilgul of Eliphaz, elucidated this passuk, and because we learn from this passuk that a goy is incapable of attaining the wisdom of the Torah. For this reason, Onkelos underwent “Bris milah” and converted, so that his life could be enriched by the Torah. This is the vital lesson to be learned from the system and process of “gilgulei neshamos”—everyone must make amends for his wrongdoings—past and present.



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