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## Interview with Robert Alter

Leonard Stein

Robert Alter is a renowned biblical translator, literary critic, and professor emeritus of comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley. His contributions to biblical studies and the novel include *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age*, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, and *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*. As these publications suggest, Alter's serious engagement with both English and Hebrew literature has made him an accomplished translator. Accutely balancing the flourishes of English lyricism with a fidelity to the precise Hebrew texts, Alter's translations of the Hebrew Bible have been admired by many, including myself, in and beyond Jewish Studies. On November 14, 2016, Robert Alter gave the Pearl and Jack Mandel Lecture in Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto's Anne Tanenbaum Centre for Jewish Studies. Before his lecture, titled "The Challenge of Translating the Bible," I interviewed him for an hour, covering an array of subjects, from his youth, to his career in biblical translations, to his thoughts on new literary studies. Alter conveyed an easy affability throughout the interview, peppering his sentences with Hebrew idioms and a healthy dose of humor.

### **What was your initial encounter with the Bible?**

I've known Hebrew quite well since I was a teenager. It was happenstance. I got into a very good post-bar mitzvah class in Albany, New York and we learned Hebrew very thoroughly with classical grammar—everything you want to know about *shva na'*, *shva nah*, and even *shva merahef* [Hebrew vowel markers]. And then when I was a teenager I went to Camp Ramah in a period when it was entirely in Hebrew. It was like entering a foreign country. So by the time I was 16 I could speak fluently—at the time, a little incorrectly. Now I think I speak pretty correctly. And I went to Columbia College as my undergraduate and did courses in the evenings and on Sundays at JTS [Jewish Theo-

logical Seminary] in what was then called the Seminary College of Jewish Studies. So it was kind of like a liberal arts program in Jewish Studies. We studied Tanakh, Talmud, Jewish history, medieval poetry, midrash, modern Hebrew literature. I did four years of Tanakh, three of them with H. L. Ginsburg, who was one of the eminent philological critics of the Bible of his era. And by the way—this was my true interest at the time—I began reading novels in Hebrew, looking up every word I didn't know, and after a while I didn't have to look up things. But I would say by the time I was a senior in college I had a real mastery of Hebrew. I could write articles in Hebrew and I even wrote some poetry in Hebrew, which I hope no one will ever discover. And I knew biblical Hebrew quite well, too. I was fascinated with biblical narrative, but at the time I couldn't figure out why it was so great when it seemed to be so simple.

So I put it aside. I never imagined it would be a professional interest and I went on to do a PhD at Harvard in comparative literature, and fifteen years into my career—by then I had written three books on the novel—I had been invited to give a talk at Stanford about modern Jewish writers, but then the man who was teaching Bible there then asked, “Do you want to give a talk on the Bible?” So I said, “Okay, I'll put something together.” So I then realized I had some ideas about how biblical narrative works and maybe I could put them together in an article. So I wrote one article, which I thought was going to be a one-off thing, but it got quite a response. I figured, okay, I have some more ideas. I'll write another article. Before long, I had four articles on biblical narrative in print and so I was on the way to writing a book on biblical narrative. And I still innocently thought that since I'm not really a Bible scholar—I wasn't officially trained as a Bible scholar—I'll get this one book on narrative out of my system and stop. But then the book came out and it was quite well received. So I thought, well, how about a book on biblical poetry. So by that time I was sliding fast down a slippery slope and it became a major interest. I never relinquished my interest in modern literature in all these years that I've been translating the Bible.

**Was your relationship with the Bible part of your religious identity or was it simply a particular curiosity?**

Well, it was more than just curiosity. It certainly had something to do with religious identification. I was trying hard to be a religious Jew and a more-or-less observant Jew in those years of late adolescence. Maybe it seems peculiar now because of the cultural situation, but once I knew a fair amount of Hebrew, the Hebrew language and culture became a central element of my cultural identity. So engaging with all these texts—Tanakh, midrash, and a fair amount of *gemara* [Talmud]—was all part of that.

**Did you have a chance to learn with the celebrated Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel during your studies at JTS?**

I took a course with him. All of his courses were in Hebrew, and he lectured perfectly effectively. I'll tell you, I know that Heschel has become an object of reverential speech. I did not particularly like him as a teacher. He read from the proofs of his book in print as his lectures in class, which I find unacceptable. As a teacher, I would never dream of doing that.

**The journal's theme this year is re-imagining and re-interpreting Jewish histories, experiences, and peoplehood. So, I'd like to ask you, for those without religious affiliations, why is the Bible worth reading today?**

Oh, that's easy! I would say there are two reasons. If the "those" means "those Jews," then even if you don't have a religious affiliation, the Bible is the matrix for everything that follows. Strictly observant Jews have moved very far from the Bible, even though the traditional Orthodox sense is, it's all *Torah mi-Sinai* [Torah as divinely revealed], and we're strictly following the Bible; but as we know, Abraham prepared a feast for the three vis-

itors that involved beef and something like yogurt [laughs]. But nevertheless, it is a matrix. So I would think a secular Jew who has the slightest interest in his Jewish identity might want to engage with the Bible. But beyond that, it is a collection of some of the greatest literary works in the Western tradition. I speak to you now because we are both in comparative literature. An educated person, even if he or she doesn't know Greek, would not want to have missed reading Homer or Sophocles. I think such a person should not miss reading Genesis or Samuel or Psalms or Job or the Song of Songs.

**But are you saying that beside its antiquity, its greatness lies in how it is written? What makes it so great?**

It's certainly great because of its fashioning of style and literary form. The Hebrew narratives are extraordinary, the Hebrew of the poetry of Job is astounding, and so forth. But it's not just the matter of stylistic achievement. I think that these texts confront timeless human issues in very profound and unblinking ways. The representation of Jacob and the representation of David are among the most probing images of a human life evolving in time, of someone who in one respect is a great man but then has great weaknesses, whose power is eroded through the aging process. I think that Job, even if not everybody is happy with the solution of the voice from the whirlwind, is one of the most unblinking inquiries into the question of divine justice or injustice, *tzadik ve-ra' lo* [the righteous person who suffers]. And *Kohelet* [Ecclesiastes] is, I think, the closest we have to a series of absolutely haunting philosophical texts. A philosophic meditation on the human condition. So here I speak beyond Jews to people in general that I think these are among the great cultural treasures of the Western tradition.

**Do you still think, as you claim in your work *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible*, that the “resonant language and the arresting vision” of the Bible “continue to ring in cultural memory?”**

Yes, but of course, less so than it once did. Actually, recently I ran across this statistic that in a survey taken in 2014 something like 53 percent of all respondents said that the version of the Bible they read was the King James Version, which actually surprised me.

**Why?**

I would imagine that the language was too archaic and they would go to a modern translation. It's not likely to find an American writer who is permeating with the King James Version the way Melville was, but from time to time, you do find writers who respond imaginatively to that use of the English language. In the last chapter of *Pen of Iron*, I pointed to a couple of them.

**In John Updike's review of your biblical translation, *The Five Books of Moses*, he laments, “But who will read it? Fanciers of sheer literature will be put off by its bulk and its pedantic cross-weave, and the millions of believers, Christian and Jewish, already have their versions, with cherished, trusted phrasings.” How do you respond to this idea of inaccessibility?**

Ok, first I have to say that the tone of Updike's review—which, by the way, was made up for in the review of the *New Yorker*, in which James Wood reviewed my *Psalms*—there was something sort of querulous about it. A number of my friends said that they thought that in a way he was saying, “What are the Jews doing messing with our Bible? You know, we have the King James Version, that's all we need.” At one point—this kind of amused me—Updike said the book is so heavy, it's hard to hold. If not for

this interminable commentary! Why do we need a commentary for the King James Version? Which is a very Protestant thing to say. You may know that the reason there's no commentary in the King James Version was that there had been a commentary in the Geneva Bible, which was anti-monarchic, and King James wasn't having any of that.

So what I would say is I wasn't thinking about an audience when I did the translation. I was thinking that I had related to these texts since I was a teenager in their original language and the original language speaks profoundly to me. And I wanted to see if I could get something of the quality of the original language into English. I wasn't sure that it was going to work, but I wasn't particularly thinking about an audience, whether Jewish, Gentile, religious, or non-religious. Since I started writing for print in the pre-e-mail age, I can now attest that now that we have e-mail, readers are much more prone to write authors. I've gotten many hundreds of e-mails since I started this big project and I would say that almost all of the e-mails belie or refute what Updike wrote. One thing he wrote is right: the fervent believers, such as evangelical Christians in the Bible belt, have no interest in what I've done. But the sales of the book Updike reviewed have been quite respectable. That is, I think it sold over 40,000 copies in hardcover, which is pretty good for any book from an academic writer. And it continues to grow every year, several thousand every year.

But my favorite e-mail was a denunciation, which I can quote by heart. It reads like this: "Professor! I am appalled at your arrogance in translating the Bible. There is only one guide to translating the Bible and that is Jesus Christ our Lord." Ok, that takes care of that. But I get fan letters from Orthodox Jews—obviously not *Haredi* [ultra-Orthodox] Jews—but Orthodox Jews, from Baptist ministers, from Presbyterian organists. I got one from an Episcopalian nun who said that my translation had changed her spiritual practice. I don't know what she meant by that, but I think there's empirical evidence that Updike's wrong.



**What was your opinion of comic artist R. Crumb's 2009 book, *The Book of Genesis*, an illustrated version of your translation of Genesis?**

Well, we actually made a deal. As you know, he's a peculiar guy. He lives somewhere in rural France—ok, if that's the way he wants to live, as we say in Hebrew, *she-yevusam lo* [i.e., *good for him*]. He wrote me by hand, in pencil, and he said that he was contracted to do this verse-by-verse comic book version of Genesis. He sent me some Xeroxed pages, maybe the first 11 chapters. And he wanted my permission to use my translation in conjunction with the King James where the spirit moved him, going back and forth. So we came to an agreement.

There was one thing I was a little unhappy about, which is that he also kind of tinkered with my translation where he thought that he could fix it. I wasn't too thrilled with that, but as far as the work was concerned, it was fun. Some things are witty. My favorite one is how he did the Tower of Babel where there are these guys wandering around dazed and they have speech bubbles: one is Hebrew, another is cuneiform, and another hieroglyphics. I thought that was really good. The representation of God draws heavily on Blake. I'm not so interested in an old guy with a long, white shirt.

**You know, in the recent *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, one of the first things they present is selections from the Bible. They use his illustrations, explaining that Crumb gives a face to each of Ishmael's sons.**

It was very bold of him to illustrate the *toledot* [genealogies] and so forth. I'll tell you my big reservation. As we both know, the Bible is full of mystery and realms of purposeful ambiguity. When you put things in an image, the text then becomes one definite thing and not a range of things. So when Noah's generation does evil, Crumb shows a couple of evil acts, which closes

the door on other possibilities. *Ya'akov ve-ha-malakh* [Jacob and the angel], which is so haunting, are basically two somewhat overweight, middle-aged guys. That's basically the Trump body image—[laughs at the slip]. The *Crumb* body image of wrestling, and it's not magical at all.

**You sound like Auerbach in *Mimesis*, contrasting the beauty of the imagery of the Bible with Homer in terms of ambiguity.**

Right, the “freight of background” that he talks about.

**One of the things I notice about your translations is how conscious you are about the experience of the English language when translating the Bible. There's a part in your translation of the Song of Songs, when you look at the line *ki hōlat ahavah ani*, and you go with “I am in a swoon of love.” You explain in your notes that “The literal sense of the Hebrew is ‘lovesick,’ but that sounds too pathetic, or adolescent, in English. The King James Version ‘sick of love’ sounds like a blunder, or at least has become that for twenty-first-century usage.” And so, mindful of how the word will reach contemporary English speakers, your translation seeks to make readers swoon. Is that accurate?**

Yes, but I can qualify that a little bit. If you look at the horrible translations done by scholarly committees in the second half of the twentieth century, they all transpose everything into contemporary English idiom. And somehow the biblical quality of the Bible gets lost. So my rule of thumb is this: if it sounds ridiculous to represent the Hebrew more-or-less literally, as my note suggests, then you have to go with something that's natural in the target language, which is a little bit different from the source language. But wherever I can, I try to preserve the qualities of the source language.

For example: *zera'*. In biblical and modern Hebrew, it means the seed you plant in the ground; it means semen; and then it

means, by metonymy, the product of semen. So in all the modern translations, the best they do is “offspring,” which is not as offensive, but then there’s “posterity,” “descendants,” and so forth. I hate using polysyllabic Latin words, because I think it violates the tonality of Hebrew. And I think the King James sets a precedent, that you can say “seed” and a mildly intelligent modern reader will understand that seed means descendants. So I do that all the time in all kinds of biblical idioms.

**But are you thinking of the experience of the audience?**

I would say that biblical Hebrew is very concrete and very physical. And I want to get that across to the contemporary English reader.

**You mentioned that you’ve even tried your hand in Hebrew poetry.**

[hesitatingly] Yes.

**Maybe this is the role of every translator, but I’m thinking about the immense responsibilities of translating the Bible and, most recently, of translating Israel’s greatest poet, Yehudah Amichai. Wouldn’t such work demand a poet on the other side of the page?**

Well, I have to confess that this is under the rubric of *ḥatot ne’urai* [the sins of my youth], but my very first publications were maybe three poems written in Hebrew which I published in *HaDoar* [*The Post*]. A magazine that was still alive but not kicking when I was a graduate student. So I did think of writing poetry in Hebrew, but I didn’t go on with it. I think those poems are *genuzim* [hidden away] and I’d probably be a little bit embarrassed by them. I was pretty affected at the age of twenty-two. Most twenty-two-year-olds are, especially if you’re interested in literature, because then you have literary affectations. So I thought about that, I even had fantasies, but I never got to the point of preliminary implementation of writing a novel in Hebrew.

### **Did it continue?**

Not much. What I've found is that I'm able to be a kind of ventriloquistic poet.

**When you republished *The Pleasures of Reading* in 1996, you offered a new preface that emphasized the contemporary relevance of your thesis, that of scaling down the primacy of theory in literature departments' discourse and exploring the "insight, experience, and enjoyment that literature can provide." Two decades later, how does the current direction of literary studies compare with your original vision?**

I think that there are certain kinds of renewals of close reading. There are some hopeful developments. Certainly, grand theory doesn't have the grip over North American literary studies that it did twenty, even ten years ago. There's still a fair amount of politically-driven literary criticism in the academy. I guess mostly now, since Marxism has by and large receded—even though Frederick Jameson is still around and wrong-headed about a lot of things—we have postcolonialism, feminism, and a variety of gender studies. I don't entirely reject all that. It all depends on how it's done. If it's done in a way that there's an ideological agenda that's driving everything, then it's not good.

I sometimes wonder, let's say you got your PhD at Yale in the mid-1970s and you became a card-carrying deconstructionist and you were convinced that was the only way to talk about literature, and you have your long-standing job, let's say, at the University of Minnesota in the English department. What do you do now? You're kind of high and dry. There's not much of a constituency, I don't think.

**What is your opinion of the way technology has influenced our engagement with texts, not just in the devices we use to read texts, but in the emerging disciplines like the digital humanities?**

Here I'm going to dodge behind the words of the prophet Amos. That is, *lo navi anokhi ve-lo ven navi* ["I am neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet," cf. Amos 7:14]. That is, I suspect that some really productive things may emerge from the application of computer-based analyses and literary studies. Obviously, you can do terrific things in generating *ad hoc* concordances and following the use of a particular syntactic pattern in a writer you're studying, and that's all for the good. I think that—I'm going to say something very old fashioned—I'm old enough to be old-fashioned, but I don't think this is ever going to entirely replace the imagination of the critic reading the text.

I'm going to give you a very old personal anecdote. Before there were personal computers, early in my career, I was invited to give a talk to the Department of Comparative Literature in Madison and I was writing a book on Fielding then. I gave the talk, analyzing the passage in *Tom Jones* in which Tom comes to Molly Seagrim's room. Mr. Square has been having it on with Molly, who has it on with oldcomers, and so he hides "behind the Arass" in Molly's bedroom. At a certain point, Tom suspects that someone is hiding there, so he yanks back the curtain and there's this long periodic sentence which ends, "where among other female Utensils appeared...the Philosopher Square," which was just dazzling. I talked about that for a minute, showing how style was used to maneuver satiric perspective. So then a guy came up to me, who was a faculty member at Complit there, who was working on a computer analysis of style in the English language, and he said, "That business of 'among other female Utensils was the Philosopher Square,' I don't see how I can get that out of my computer." [laughs]

**Do you think e-readers like the Kindle or iPad will affect our experience of reading a text?**

Not necessarily. I've read maybe eight or nine novels on Kindle because I was traveling. I have a nostalgic attachment to turning the physical page, but I don't think that I experienced the novels differently from reading them on Kindle.

**I know people always ask you if you're going to complete your translation of the Tanakh.**

Well, I have an easy answer to that. I've completed a whole draft, and I'm sort of cleaning out the last few books. I have to say, I write by hand. I've always needed to write with a pencil, so I have somebody who translates my scroll into an electronic text. He just finished *Trei 'Asar* [Twelve Minor Prophets], and I just gave him *Eikhah* [Lamentations] and Ezra, and then he'll have left to do *Neḥemiah* and *Divrei Ha-Yamim* [Chronicles]. So I hope in maybe six months to get it all off to Norton. Because it is such a bulky thing—and I shudder to think of proofreading—they figure they need a year-and-a-half of production. So their plan at the moment is to bring it out in the Fall of 2018.

**What are some of the important contributions you think would be offered by translating the more obscure, perhaps less accessible texts, like the minor prophets or Chronicles? Your recent work has renewed our attention to ancient love poetry, wisdom literature, the carnivalesque. What could we expect from the remaining books?**

*Eikha* is different because it's actually rather powerful poetry. It's interesting that it's powerful poetry because all but one chapter are alphabetical acrostics and the ones in Psalms tend to be boiler plate. Ezra and *Neḥemia* have a certain interest. They're not

my favorite books, so maybe my strategy of translation will make them a little bit more accessible and interesting to the readers. *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, I have to say, the first nine chapters are nothing but lists of names. So go do that. [laughs] And of course, the retelling of the grand biblical narrative is in many ways so much less interesting than the original telling. The David story, which is so amazing in Samuel—all the human interest is taken out of it. It's like when my translation of the Torah came out: I ran into a distant friend of mine during the Yom Kippur break at our shul, who says, "Tell me, do you think your translation is going to put new zip into Leviticus?" And I said no. [laughs]

**Finally, are there any modern Jewish writers today who you are particularly impressed with and why?**

I'm a big fan of Saul Bellow. I have a deep admiration for a lot of Philip Roth, but not all of Philip Roth. I think that David Grossman is a wonderful novelist. I'm friendly with him. He's a remarkable person.

**Do you think Bob Dylan deserved the 2016 Nobel Prize for literature?**

Mixed feelings. [laughs] I think that if you're talking about songwriters as poets, that Leonard Cohen, *menuhato 'eden* [may he rest in peace], is a better poet. Don't you agree?

**There's no question.**

*This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.*