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Clelia Piperno

What Does an Algorithm See When It Reads the Talmud?

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Abstract

To translate the Talmud in the age of algorithms compels a question that runs through all of my work: what does an automatic system “see” when it reads a text built to remain open? The answer is that translation is not a technical operation but an act at once ethical, political, and religious. The algorithm works by statistical accumulation; the translator works by decision. It is upon this distance – and upon what, within it, remains untranslatable – that I would like to build the pages that follow.

* Clelia Piperno taught Constitutional Law and Regional Law at the University of Teramo. She directs the Project for the Translation of the Babylonian Talmud into Italian, chairs the Fondazione Ruth, and is a member of the advisory board of the Nobel Sustainability Trust. This paper is a reworking of the oral address of 11 May 2026.

1. A Restitution Through Translation

The Talmud was burned in Rome, in Campo de' Fiori – beside what is today the statue of Giordano Bruno, where a *stumbling stone* preserves its memory – in 1553, and it was not printed again in Italy until 2016, the year of our first volume.¹ I direct this project, whose scientific responsibility lies in the hands of Rav Riccardo Di Segni, because a translation of this magnitude demands the highest possible validation.

When the project was presented to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, it was suggested to me that it might amount to a form of restitution, of reparation. I said no. In Jewish ethics, restitution is a relationship between individuals, and once the individual has forgiven, the matter dissolves; moreover, the Jewish conception of the hereafter admits no place of stasis – no limbo, no purgatory – and I do not speak in the name of the dead: each person has the right to utter their own words.

The only restitution this project accomplishes is of another nature: it is to give back, precisely in the form of translation, a text of law, of astronomy, of agriculture, of the sciences – to have omitted it from the Italian cultural landscape meant denying it to a portion of this country's citizens.

2. What an Algorithm Sees When It Reads the Talmud

Those were the years when artificial intelligence was not yet spoken of: in 2012 the term did not circulate as it does today. In 2015, at an Oxford conference devoted to antisemitism, I explained that the software and platform we had developed were already able to recognize the end of a string, the end of a sentence, and to assist the translator by suggesting translations already made and already contextualized. It was, to all intents and purposes, an early form of artificial intelligence.

The question I wish to pose, then, is this: what does an algorithm see when it reads the Talmud? It sees statistical foundations – the frequency with which a given word has been rendered in a certain way. What it does not see is the decision.

3. The Translator: Transformation, Restitution, Political Act

The translator carries out both a transformation and a restitution: two intellectual operations. The first is political. I know what is written, but I also know that in no language will I be able to carry that concept across exactly: with respect to what the algorithm hands me, I must perform an act of mediation. This is the

¹Project for the Translation of the Babylonian Talmud into Italian (TALMUD). The first volume appeared in 2016; scientific responsibility is entrusted to Rav Riccardo Di Segni. The Roman burning of the Talmud in Campo de' Fiori dates to September 1553.

sense Paul Ricœur gives to translation when he calls it a political act² – I choose. A mediation that carries with it *gravitas*, and together with it the lightness that comes from wisdom: it is accomplished a little through fortune and a little through the wish that God may accompany you, for it is a long road – the two senses enclosed in *bonheur*, in the *bonne heure*.

The translated sentence closes the translator’s journey with respect to that text and, at the same time, opens another: it is a leave-taking, but also the wager that those skills may find the good fortune of the text.

4. Study in Pairs and the Companion Who Will Not Flatter

The Talmud is a text that does not wish to be closed: so much so that it is studied in pairs, *b’chavrutà*.³ In assisted translation, who is the companion? On the table there are three terms: the translator, the machine, the text. How, then, is the rule of study in pairs to be honored – by way of the algorithmic instrument?

Today, artificial intelligence, the moment you open it, is condemned to please you: unless you go into the settings and change the prompt, asking it for a non-flattering, critical engagement, it will always tell you that you are young and good-looking – and you look in the mirror and conclude that the miracle has not yet occurred.

But the *chavrutà* demands a companion who will not flatter, for the Talmudic obligation is contradiction:⁴ “yours is the task of finding the arguments to contradict me; mine, the task of not letting your contradictions close the discussion.” In this sense the Talmud is a relational and open event: the debate never closes. Even the master who clashes with his own disciples does not close – and those bereavements we remember in the fasts of the Omer, between Pesach and Shavu‘ot, when one does not marry and does not hold festivities.

5. Statistics, Habit, and the Courage of Silence

The algorithm draws on statistical accumulation: the frequency with which a word has been translated in a certain way. My task, then, is to apply the rule of contradiction: not to settle for that accumulation, but to call it back into doubt, asking whether it might be the fruit of boredom, of fatigue, of habit. It is a thoroughly

²Paul Ricœur, *Sur la traduction*, Bayard, Paris 2004 (Italian translation: *Tradurre l’intraducibile*). The themes evoked here are Ricœur’s: translation as decision, mediation, “linguistic hospitality,” and the “work of mourning” with respect to the perfect and impossible translation.

³*Chavrutà*: Talmudic study in pairs, in which each is bound to question and contradict the other so that the meaning of the text does not close.

⁴*Machlokèt*: controversy as method. Tradition links the mourning of the Omer period – between Pesach and Shavu‘ot, during which neither weddings nor festivities are celebrated – to the death of Rabbi Akiva’s disciples.

contemporary theme, because our very relationship with this “little thing” – habit, boredom, loneliness, or incapacity – is identical to the one the translator has before the text.

The Talmud places you before silence and teaches you not to fear it: it is the most important thing I have learned in this work. Silence, like melancholy, like stillness, frightens us; when the soul comes to rest we almost always fall into panic, and in the whirl we have believed we found a solution. But the whirl does not resolve the inner doubt to which the human being – and the translator – is condemned: by dint of denying it, that doubt becomes a gigantic black hole. It is the same one that produces the adolescents who no longer leave the house.

Before a text of such profound hermeneutics, destined to produce existential anguish – the most fertile ground of human thought – what is one to do? Woody Allen suggests lying down on the couch and waiting; a person to whom I often turn in difficult moments told me he had learned only one thing in life: that one must stay still, and it is the hardest thing of all. The translator, shut in a room, has as interlocutor a machine destined to please him, and must produce the translation all the same. The best translation will be the one that has somehow passed through that phase of anxiety, knowing it has resolved only that moment and that ahead there remains the vastness of knowledge. We are facing a difference in kind and not in degree: the machine does not lower the degree of anguish before the text; it resolves only that moment, that nature.

6. Symbol and Allegory

On this, Gershom Scholem⁵ said words that are still timely, still at the foundation of the intellectual’s reflection – because in some measure every intellectual is a translator, every teacher is a translator, anyone who transfers another’s thought through words is a translator. In studying the Kabbalah, Scholem distinguished the symbol from the allegory. The symbol is immutable; the allegory is a rhetorical figure – I say A to mean B – and it is the form Dante uses *par excellence*.

The irreducibility of the symbol, its resistance to paraphrase, is central to understanding where the translator’s activity stops and where it may proceed: within allegory I can work – in editions of Dante the longest notes are precisely there – whereas before the symbol I come to a halt. The stone that falls and drags the man back down again: the stone is the symbol, the toil; the man becomes allegory, and the instrument becomes the symbol of the punishment.

⁵Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. The distinction between symbol (irreducible, refractory to paraphrase) and allegory (saying A to mean B) runs through his studies of the Kabbalah.

7. The Breaking of the Vessels and the Birth of the Computer

On these themes, in the 1940s and 1950s, no one was joking. The computer is born conceptually during the war, in answer to the Enigma machine: in England an apparatus was built to sift through all the variables – and you cannot imagine the space it required; it was an entire wing of a university. Drawing on a biblical image, a “breaking of the vessels”⁶ takes place there: all the words are split into a series of fragments, themselves recomposable, until a synthesis is reached. This is exactly how the algorithm works.

The fundamental text on these themes was written by Ricœur, and it is precisely on translation. Ricœur brings to synthesis the theories of Buber, of Scholem, and in part of Levinas, and gives translation the form of a dynamic – while the computational sciences advanced and what we today call the *digital humanities* was being born. The Talmud Project belongs to it on every count.

8. Ethical, Political, Religious: Translation as Decision

The real question is not how to place the translator and translation within the context of the philosophical sciences, but how to place the process of translation within an ethical, political, and religious context: political insofar as it is religious, and religious insofar as it is political.

One need only think of Sigonella:⁷ a problem of translation. The translator, instead of rendering a word one way, rendered it in such a way that the decision could fall as it seemed expedient to someone – and what happened, happened: the terrorists were put on a plane and placed in a position to escape. It was an error of translation, and it shows how far translation is a political event. The dear friend who was then its protagonist – recently passed away – became an exceptional political scientist, but he lived out his whole life atoning for the guilt of having served his own State.

And consider conflict. I take the “easy” one – Ukraine and Russia – and not the immensely complicated Middle East. We who live in Rome have the translation of reality: every gesture is a translation of symbol and of paradox. We took the paradox, the war of aggression, transported it there, and decided who the good ones are and who are not. The same procedure, exactly, is applied to the Middle Eastern conflict. To this incapacity for synthesis in politics we must grow accustomed.

We have lost the best of our tradition: the political formation that the great parties – the Christian Democrats, the Communist Party, in part the Socialist Party – were obliged to guarantee to their own ruling

⁶*Sheviràt ha-kelím*, the “breaking of the vessels” of Lurianic Kabbalah: the original fragmentation from which every recomposition sets out.

⁷Sigonella, October 1985. The reading proposed here – a misunderstanding in the rendering of a word that conditioned the political decision – is the author’s own.

class. Today the party schools, where they exist, are regarded as a nuisance, because we think anyone is capable of governing: exactly like saying that anyone can translate without knowing the language. People want to set out on a path without knowing how to stay still, to think, to reflect; without the lucidity to erase the prompts that were inserted in us during our formation and to create our own. The labor, as Buber said, of setting oneself to study: because the translator, in order to arrive at translating, must first build a foundation of competence – and it is not analogical. What the computer gives you is everything that is on the network, which is never everything that has been written on that subject.

9. Artificial Intelligence in the Translator's Practice

To prepare this address I sounded out the various forms of artificial intelligence, and I enjoyed myself enormously. There are texts they do not know – but they tell you so. For one who translates an undertaking like the Talmud, one cannot do without a grounding in Western philosophy, and in part Eastern as well. The algorithm, by contrast, cannot do without: it processes only what you give it. Only what you give it. A text like this one can be written with artificial intelligence, provided one is willing to work at it for three weeks; but this one I wrote myself.

What support, then, does it give me? Two things. The first is the verification of sources: it is prudent to use three or four and cross-check them, and there are some that do this verification quite well. The second is formatting: for me, who have still not learned where the keys are, it is indispensable – I have emancipated myself from the typesetter, and as a cost that was no small matter.

I had also asked for summary bullet points of the address: aesthetically done very well and yet wholly incomprehensible – it had taken the quotations apodictically and left only those. Why? Because it was translating the already-translated. My thought is itself the synthesis of a series of intersections, of translations of thoughts; and translation is always an activity of synthesis – as Ricœur said, a political act: I choose.

Translating is an onerous activity. Consider how few translators there are from Yiddish – a language now spoken almost only in one neighborhood of New York. I must find, in the target language, the applicability and the capacity to render what is written. Most of the time writers write emotions; the Talmud writes rules. And the “colorfulness” of Jewish thought – a word I am inventing right now – is determined also by its manifold translations.

10. The Page, the Rule, the Language

A page of Talmud has a central column, and around it the commentaries, and beneath them the notes. What everyone has done so far is to translate only the central part. The roughly 5,600 pages of the Talmud unfold, in every language, into a number of volumes ranging from sixteen to thirty; and each *daf* – as the page is called – can unfold into four up to twelve pages.

There is then the choice of what kind of translation to make, because the Talmud is composed in Hebrew and in Aramaic, and the Mishnah and the Gemara pose different decisions to the translator. And it is not correct to say that the Talmud is a commentary on the Torah: it goes much further. One may say rather that the Talmud translates the Torah, because it introduces the rules that descend from it: in the Torah it is not written that you shall not eat fish without scales – it is written in the Talmud.

11. Education, Identity, Emancipation

Let us try to understand the context. Moses comes down from Sinai and finds before him a tribe – a people that felt itself privileged and at the same time asked what the privilege cost. How is the bond of identity to be given? What is the strongest bond of identity we have, as Italian citizens? The Constitution. The Ten Commandments give rules. And among these rules there is one that brings an advantage to women – perhaps the only one: to women falls the responsibility of educating the children, and so women must know how to read and write. Consequently, in the Middle Ages no Jewish woman was burned: they were learned, able to answer the Inquisition, and there is no record that a Jewish woman was ever charged with witchcraft.

The emancipation of a human being is born of education. The strongest instrument we have for raising ourselves from the condition of a tribe and becoming a nation is culture: a structured education. Italian Jews have two bonds of equal intensity – that with the Italian State and that with their own community – exactly like the citizens of other religions. Buddhism is not the religion destined to give us happiness, but it teaches a path: arduous, made not of the absence of trials but of training for trials, like every religious bond. To have the lucidity to translate one's own reality into data legible to the soul and to the mind, one needs instruments, and instruments are given by education: which depends in part on parents and on school, but in very great measure on oneself.

When my students ask me what will determine their success, the answer is always the same: five percent is what the Lord or your parents gave you; the ninety-five, my dear, is the work you will do for yourself sitting in the chair and studying. Nothing will give you what study can give you, because intuition, if it is not educated, remains rudimentary. Exactly as for the translator: before a problem one must always seek to understand what the other thinks – and here the *chavrutà* is fundamental. If I cannot listen to the other to

the point of being able to make him my own and work out a response – if, while he speaks, I do not listen to him – I will never be enriched by his translation: I will remain one-way.

12. The Leave-Taking: Silence, Listening, Openness

The best cure is silence. When my children were small I had them do a trivial thing: close your eyes and think of nothing. You will not manage it – but what is produced in the moment you tell yourself “think of nothing” is the most important exercise you can give your mind: in those moments you are giving it the most precious fertilizer, the capacity to communicate with yourself – as Buddhism, Judaism, and Catholicism teach.

I always cite Saint Paul and Saint John the Baptist, who spent years in the desert: not on an outing, but in order to be able to listen to himself, to the Lord, and to nature. The synthesis of these three elements gave him the dimension to translate thought. And let us remember that, at the beginning, they called themselves neither Christians nor Catholics: they were simply the followers of Jesus the Jew. Denominations come afterward, and they serve to close, not to define.

I have a great desire, and I have no difficulty in saying it: I want to go to Lourdes. “And what would you go there for? That is the place of Mary, the mother of God.” It is the place of Miriam, a Jewish woman. Why should I not go there? With this I take my leave of you.

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