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Don't dumb down the Bible

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SHIRA LEIBOWITZ SCHMIDT, THE JERUSALEM POST

Millions of Americans learned reading using Dick and Jane books. Here's the text on a typical page, where Dick says to his dog, "Come, come. Come, Spot, come. Run, run, run." If the children pictured do any running, it is away from reading. They're outdoors with balls, dogs, bicycles. Nary a book in sight.

The psychoanalyst Dr. Bruno Bettelheim pointed out that not only is the text boringly inane, but the story and pictures convey one clear message: reading is not important, playing outdoors is. Although Bettelheim was a non-practicing Jew who gave religion short shrift, he contrasted the anti-reading message of Dick and Jane with the meaningful way Jewish children learned to read for an purpose - to share in the adult world of the Bible and prayer book.

As soon they mastered the alphabet they were on to something more significant than balls and dogs: creation. Although the teacher taught those cosmic verses from Genesis for the umpteenth time, each time he read those words with a child, they both sensed they were engaging in something sacred and essential. Just holding real adult Bibles in their hands, children understood they were touching eternity. If the Bible would be dropped accidentally, it would be picked up and kissed.

Israeli children today will be robbed of this experience if the new RAM Bible translated into everyday Hebrew becomes standard in schools. The RAM Bible (the publisher's initials are RAM) is one of the topics which will be discussed in a Bar-Ilan University conference tomorrow that will be open to the public on Bible translations.

THE WORKBOOK-LIKE soft-covered compendiums look like ordinary school books. Inside, each page has the original Hebrew biblical verses in the right column, and Avraham Ahuvia's modern Hebrew translation on the left. If dropped accidentally, I doubt anyone would reverentially kiss it.

That is the problem - lack of reverence. The RAM Bible conveys a message: The Bible is nothing special; it's not important enough to learn the sometimes difficult language so we are converting it to child-talk. It is not a cosmic experience. Children in the non-religious school system won't be privileged to hold an authentic Bible in their hands at an impressionable age.

A second problem is that widespread use of RAM will exacerbate the fragmentation of Israeli society into those in touch with the Jewish book shelf, and those cut off from our wellsprings. Not only are traditional Jewish texts informed by the Bible, but the script of modern Jewish and Israeli life is suffused with Scripture. In his novel *Black Box*, Amos Oz expresses the disappointment of a pioneer crestfallen when he comes on aliya to the Promised Land, by using the phrase from Genesis 29:25 "*Vayehi vaboker vhonei hi Leah*" (And it came to pass, that in the

morning, behold, it was Leah!). I was crestfallen when I read the RAM version, which flattens and overtranslates this poetic exclamation: "*Uvaboker hitgaleh l'Ya'acov shehinei zu Leah v'lo Rahel.*" (In the morning Jacob discovered it was Leah and not Rachel.)

At the conference honoring Amos Oz's 70th birthday last week, I asked him whether his Hebrew books will have to be translated into Hebrew for readers unfamiliar with the Bible. He responded that the poet Haim Guri recently used the expression from II Samuel 1, "Tell it not in Gath" meaning: Don't broadcast our bad news to the enemy. The young audience was clueless about the idiom, and asked why he was invoking the city of Kiryat Gat.

IF DIFFERENT segments of Israelis now have trouble understanding one another, how much more so will be the gap if biblical language is changed beyond recognition. Sometimes I wonder why the RAM Bible changed simple verses such as the dictum from Leviticus, "*V'ahavta l'reaha kamoha*" (Love your neighbor as yourself) to "*Aheiv et reaha kamoha*" (You should love your neighbor as yourself). Why the need for translating this, unless it is change for change's sake.

Prof. Ghil'ad Zuckermann claims that Australian-born children of Israelis living there speak the "Israeli" language with their parents but cannot understand biblical Hebrew. Contrary to his claim that the Israeli language is a different creature from the Hebrew language is the fact that scholars immersed in biblical Hebrew can converse with Israelis when visiting Israel.

Another example from Amos Oz demonstrates this. In *Panther in the Basement*, set in 1947 Jerusalem (the movie version is *The Little Traitor*), a gentile British sergeant who had studied biblical Hebrew in England arrests the grade-school hero of the book. He and the sabra youngster communicate well, the sergeant asking in biblical cadence: "Whither dost thou hasten?" and warning, "Let not the lad go astray in the darkness." The boy observes that the sergeant "spoke in Hebrew. Not in our kind of Hebrew, though." If an Israeli boy could understand a Bible-speaking non-Jew, he can understand written Bible-speak.

There are some achievements in the RAM Bible, especially the attention to grammar (*vayomer* is correctly translated "he said" rather than "and he said"). But the translator of RAM prints the Torah's words and his words side-by-side in almost the same size and typeface. Does this imply that they are equal?

We are now in the period counting the Omer, seven weeks from Passover to Shavuot, the holiday called "the giving of the Torah." We don't have a countdown as in a rocket launch; rather we increase the count until number 49, hoping that our spiritual striving will accordingly increase. In teaching Torah to children we should encourage them to aim high and elevate them to the Bible's level. By lowering the Bible to the level of school children, we are substituting ersatz for the sublime and diminishing an essential component of our identity. We are gutting the Bible.

Now don't tell that in Gath!

The Conference on Bible Translations takes place tomorrow, May 19, at Bar-Ilan University, Feldman Bldg, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and is free to the public. Info: 073-255-0220.

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