

## **SHEMOT**

Thought of the Week – Onkelos

By Rabbi Shlomo Truzman

Our Sages of blessed memory instituted that every Jew must read the weekly Torah portion twice, together with the corresponding Onkelos translation once, so that we may become accustomed to and ultimately be proficient in Torah reading and knowledge.

Who was this second century C.E. Talmudic giant, that facilitated with his monumental work our better understanding of the Torah to countless scholars and laymen throughout 19 centuries?

Onkelos was a convert. The story as to how he turned to Judaism is related in the following manner. Onkelos (Aquila) was the nephew of Emperor Hadrian and wanted to become a proselyte because he greatly approved of the Jewish faith. But he feared his uncle and once he said to him “I would gladly engage in commerce.” Hadrian replied, “if you lack money, my treasury is always at your disposal.” But Aquila continued, “I want to journey throughout the world and meet many men; therefore, I want your advice as to what merchandise I should take.” To this Hadrian replied, “if you see merchandise fallen in price, deal in it, for it will surely rise again and you will gain thereby. ” Aquila then went to Palestine and began to study with the famed Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Rabbi Joshua ben Chananiah. Sometime later he returned to his uncle Hadrian. He asked – how did you fare in your travels “Onkelos answered”, I have learned the Jewish Torah and I have become a Jew.

Greatly shocked, Hadrian exclaimed, “Who permitted you to do so?” Onkelos answered, “You told me to do so. When I asked your advice as to what merchandise I should trade in, you told me to get all merchandise that is depreciated, for it would surely rise in value again. I searched among the nations for a people who had fallen lower than the Jews but I found none. I am therefore convinced that they are sure to rise again.”

Today we possess an Aramaic version of Onkelos’ s translation (Targum Onkelos) that has become sanctified almost to the same degree as the Torah text. Onkelos’ s scholarly contribution of Torah elucidation certainly gave rise to our better understanding of the Torah texts, and our elevation to greater heights of spiritual achievements, just as Onkelos had prophesized to his uncle Hadrian.

Shabbat Shalom

Source: Gershom Bader, The Encyclopedia of Talmudic Sages

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