

(An important addition to the present edition)

## SOME FACTS ABOUT MARCUS JASTROW'S DICTIONARY

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TO SOME it may appear a strange undertaking to criticize a book nearly 70 years after its first publication. To others it may seem strange that an orthodox Rabbi should even notice this particular book. The answer to both points is the fact that many beginners in Talmud are using Marcus Jastrow's "Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli..." — a fact evidenced by at least two offset reprints in recent years.

It is not my purpose here to issue either an **issur** or a **hetter** on its use but rather to supply data useful to those who will ask or decide such a **shaalah** — and those who will not ask that **shaalah** should at least find cause for caution. I should also like to add that mistakes of the kind I am going to demonstrate are also to be found in most translations of Talmud, Mishnah, Bible and other Hebrew sources into English; these translations belong to an era in which serious Torah study was rare indeed in English-speaking countries. Had the translators envisaged the use of their books for serious study, they might have taken more care — or disqualified themselves for their tasks. There is also the inherent difficulty that the writer of a dictionary concentrates on the words in alphabetical order and cannot — unless he is a Gaon (like Rabbi Nathan of Rome, the author of the **Arukh**), — know clearly at the same time the **p'shat** in the passages from where his words are taken, so that the student learning the passage may be a better judge on their meaning in the context than the dictionary. These points may or may not mitigate the responsibility of the writers; they cannot make up for the defects themselves.

I have not gone through Jastrow thoroughly, so that I cannot say what percentage of his words are wrong. I had to leave out some samples because they would take too long to discuss. I shall try to arrange the mistakes under their presumed causes, but, in some cases, these causes interact.

### A) Misprint or Mis-spelling.

- 1) p. 324 **daras** דרס: "...floured". read "...flowered".
- 2) p. 450 **chaya** חייא: "luckless in" read "is".

- 3) p. 451 **chidduk** חידוק: "skull" read "skull".

Whether these are the fault of the printer or the author, it is worth reckoning with the possibility, when Jastrow uses a strange word, that it may be a misprint.

### B) Blur.

Jastrow can be careless to the point of self-contradiction on the meaning of a word he is not focussing on but brings in when quoting a passage.

- 4) p. 793 **melakket II** מלקט: "with pinchers (tweezers?) and razors", rendering **rehitni** as "razor", when on p. 1454 he knows well enough that whatever a **rehitni** may be, it is not a razor.

- 5) p. 370 **hashakah** השקה: "unclean liquid", giving the impression that **hashakah** is effective on any liquid, when in fact it purifies water only.

- 6) p. 1119 **'erech** ערך: "he whose person ... — on a passage contrasting **damim** and **'erech**, he renders both terms by "value".

### C) Pshat.

Even more than on word-meaning Jastrow is casual on the Pshat of quoted passages:

- 7) p. 364 **hekdesh** הקדש: he translates **sof hekdesh** as "final dedication" — which is not meant as a new interpretation of the significance of **semichah**, but comes simply from lack of concentration on **pshat**, for in the same context he calls **tchillath hekdesh** "a preliminary act of dedication".

- 8) p. 117, under **erusin** ארוסין: he gives us a thumbnail sketch of **kiddushin**, but makes it appear as if **kesef** were the only way to be **mekaddesh**.

- 9) p. 1218 under **prozbol** פרוזבול: he manages to contradict not only the **pshat** but also himself. Whilst rendering the "body of a **prozbol**" correctly as "any debt that I may have outstanding" (i.e. already in existence), he gives his own definition of **prozbol** as "a

declaration made... before the execution of a loan" (possibly by confusion of **prozbol** with the **tnal** of **Makkoth 9b**) and finally in the same vein renders **mukdam** and **me'uchar** as "written out before the loan" and "after the loan" (instead of "dated before the day of writing" and "after the day of writing"), so that he contradicts the law on both counts, making **possul** what is **kosher** and vice versa.

#### D) Surrender to anti-Jewish scholars.

10) p. 1371 **kla illan** קלא אילן: He calls it "an imitation of the genuine purple-blue", i. e. he half-surrenders to the speculations of 19th century protestant scholars, setting aside the evidence of the Jewish eye-witnesses who say (**Menachoth 43b**, **Ilullin 89a** etc.) that **tkhalleth** looks like the sea and the sky and the sapphire; later on while discussing the same word, he goes the whole hog and says "purple" for **tkhalleth**. Now since **kla illan** imitates **tkhalleth** he cannot accept **Arukh's** identification of **kla illan** as indigo, although he quotes the Greek **kallainon** in support of it. — So far he has not been original, but now he lumps together **kal'ilin** קלעילין: with our word, without drawing our attention to the fact that the letter is spelt with 'ayin. He could have done a real service to science now by noticing that **Arukh** (under **kal'ilin** קלעילין) informs us that "in the commentary of **Mayence** it is written (**Me'ilah 13a**) **mal'in** and explained as a species of legume (this fits the printed commentary of **Rabbenu Gershon**; **Rashba**, **Gittin 39a** quotes "ma'alim" מעלין, and this reading may be discernible in **Rashi Me'ilah 13a**).

Unfortunately **Jastrow** does not choose to tell us, even in brackets, that **Arukh**, **Rashi** and **Tossafoth** differ from his **alef-ayin** identification. If he were less ambitious in his innovation, he could at least have taken the "threshing of **Kal'ilin**" to refer to the crushing of the plant (indigo or not). Instead he understands that wool dyed with **kla illan** was "stamped" in the field of **hekdesh** (**Me'ilah 13a**) — surely a startling piece of realism, particularly since the **sugya** tells us that the loose dust improves the product.

This is not, however, the end of **Jastrow's** voyage of discovery. He now finds a **Tosefta** (**Kilayim V,26**) from which he derives that "threads of **kla illan** (used in place of **t'khalleth** — **Jastrow**) are not subject to the laws of

**Kilayim**". At last he has arrived at the plain opposite of the law — but what a feat: he is unaware of **Menachoth 10a**, he lacks the boldness or commonsense to suspect that an imitation of **t'khalleth** cannot be a fulfilment of the **mitzvah** of **t'khalleth** so as to rate as **asseh docheh lo taasseh**, he has not seen the **Vilner Gaon's** emendation of the **Tosefta** to read **kela' uvilon**, "a soil and a curtain" (the **Vilna** edition was completed 5646 1886, **Jastrow** in 1903), and his own sense of context has not shown him that the passage refers to uses of materials, not to kinds of colours.

It is a general tendency of **Jastrow** that he follows 19th century "discoveries", however ill-fitting they may be, against traditional identifications.

#### E) Over-reliance on "Scientific" information.

11) p. 837 **marde'a** מרדע: he informs us in brackets that the commentaries identify our word as an ox-goad and also quotes the **Pesikta** identifying **marde'a** with **darvan** and **malmed**. He even quotes **Baba Bathra 27b** (where branches overhanging a neighbour's field must be removed up to the height of a **marde'a** over the plough — indicating to anyone but **Jastrow** that it is an implement which when raised in the course of normal use exceeds the height of the ploughsman himself). He might have added **Shabbath 16b**, where the **marde'a**, carried over the farmer's shoulder, projected over a wayside grave, and where the diameter of the **marde'a** is less than a handbreadth but its circumference more than a handbreadth. We clearly see a long and slender implement. From these and other sources the evidence is all for ox-goad and none against, but for undisclosed reasons **Jastrow** decides that it is not that at all, but the handle of a plough, with some hard-to-imagine metal attachments. However, he says so only under **marde'a**; under **malmed** (p. 793) he says "ox-goad", whilst under **darvan** (p. 820) he gives us both goad and plough, linking them by "also" as if the word had two meanings rather than a "disputed" one. Here, at last, he also refers us to **Smith's Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities** (New York 1858), which he presumably takes to be more trustworthy on **Mishnah Hebrew** than indications from the **Mishnah** itself.

## F) Unwarranted conclusions.

Jastrow is quite capable of creating new meaning without the assistance of Smith.

12) p. 579 **yam** ים he gives us several special meanings of the word **yam**. Of these, the first is a "cosmetic paint bottle". And where has he found that very special meaning? He refers us to a Midrash and to his own explanation of **zachruth** זכרות: (p. 400). There he quotes the Midrash and translates it as "dipping the point of the painting-staff into the paint-bottle". However, anyone who knows from the Talmud that the "painting-staff", which is **makhol** מכחול, always appears with a container called **shfofereth** שפוּפֵרֶת will be suspicious enough to look up the Midrash (Shir I,20), where he will find that **yam** is in fact the sea, for all the **tan-naim** are giving examples of minute proportions and dipping the tip of a **makhol** into the sea, fits the context exactly.

It is in fact incomprehensible how Jastrow should come to invent a new **yam**, unless something compelled him to give the statement in the Midrash the same translation as that of **shfofereth** in a similar (but not identical) statement in Sanh. 68a.

A combination of faults can be seen in the following, where Jastrow a) follows "science", b) learns pshat out of context, c) contradicts his own pshat in the same passage:

13) In Shabath 59b, Rabbi Nechemiah clearly refers to five implements made of more than one material and lays down for each of them which part of it decides its classification as wooden or metal implement. Of the five, **kulav** (p. 1327) and **shlyvah** (p.1582) are explained correctly, so is **arsl**, but only under **adasha** (p. 1046) (he gives us no cross-reference under **arsl** or even **arsa** which he claims as the printed reading). Under **tabath** and **chotham** our passage is not quoted. This leaves **simlon**, and on p. 1002 Smith's Antiquities pop up again. In this one case out of five, Jastrow can no longer believe Rashi or Arukh, or his own sense of context, that the **simlon** is a metal peg inserted into the yoke, but — presumably from Smith — takes it that the **simlon** is a projection carved from one piece with the yoke. This forces him to "learn pshat" that "going by the **simlonim**" does not mean going by their material, but that if they are broken off the yoke is no

longer susceptible to uncleanness (actually the yoke envisaged by him would be **pshutey klei etz** and therefore never susceptible in the first place). The pshat may not fit the context, it may contradict Jastrow's own pshat in the other cases, but at least it fits Smith. In this case he not only omits to tell us that Rashi and Arukh are against him, but by quoting Arukh (really only for a reading) he gives us the impression that Arukh agrees with him.

## G) Yiddishism?

The desire to depart from tradition for the sheer fun of it is never far under the surface.

14) Under **chathan** חתן p. 514, Jastrow gives us the novel meaning "affianced" regarding one source only, though he ought to know, if only from the sources he quotes, that nowhere except in Yiddish is anyone called a **chathan** until at least the stage of **kiddushin**. Apparently getting in a humorous explanation, and contradicting Rashi and Rashbam (without telling us) is more important than sound translation.

## H) Philosophy?

Sometimes one feels that a peculiar attitude to the Jewish religion is showing through.

15) Under **ner** נר p. 936, Jastrow tells us that into the **Ner Maaravi** "as much oil was put as all the others together contained", when the context shows clearly that it was miraculous that it burnt twice as long as the others whilst receiving only as much oil as any one of them. If deliberate, Jastrow's falsification is stupid as well as reprehensible, for who would put six times the normal amount into a light which, miracle or not, was going to burn only twice the normal time? If unintended, it is still significant on the question of his general reliability — apart from the psychological aspects of unintentional faulty actions.

## I) Private Etymology.

Few readers look at the small print containing Jastrow's etymological derivations, but if they do not take them seriously, he very much does so. His system is peculiar mainly to himself; it requires a highly speculative special **dikduk**, plus the ability to reject plausible foreign sources in favour of far-

fetched semitic ones as long as any are forthcoming, but cheerfully accept the foreign ones as soon as the supply of semitic ones run out.

16) For instance, **ushpez** אֲשֶׁז, p. 35, can easily be derived from **hospes** (see Benjamin Mosefia in Arukh on the word), but Jastrow must needs derive it from **neshef** נֶשֶׁף, "night", dropping and adding letters. For support of his system he points to **atlez** אֲטֵל, p. 43, (Benjamin again gives a Greek source) — where he points to **ushpez** for his support. So apparently we are to accept a general theory of "formative zayin" relying on two cases, each competing with a plausible foreign source. (In the Preface, Jastrow points to yet another specimen **katloza** קַטְלוּזָא, p. 1349, but there again Levy provides a Greek word fitting at least as well as Jastrow's semitic source).

The reader may think that etymology is a pursuit which if it does no good can at least do no harm, but, in the following example, Jastrow, using Greek etymology, departs from Gaonic tradition (Arukh on the word and R. Chananel, Shabbath 79b) as well as from Benjamin's innovation, to give a definition all his own.

17) This word is **duchsostos** דּוּכְסוֹסְטוֹס, p. 285. The Gaonic account of actual practice of splitting the skins into two layers, which fits the Greek **dixestos** or **duo xestos** (cited by Levy to mean twice split" or "split in two") is hesitantly rejected by Benjamin on the evidence of tanners who told him that splitting was impossible. Actually, on consulting a book on shoe manufacture as well as an encyclopaedia (Harmsworth) I found descriptions of the splitting of skins. Perhaps Benjamin asked about parchment, whilst the parchment of our ancients, which went through the complete tanning process (unlike the modern product which receives only lime treatment) should properly be called leather — or else his tanners did not know everything. Jastrow has the worst of everything: he has to transpose sounds to get a Greek word, which he renders as "hard to split, an inferior kind of parchment, opp. to **klaf**, a split parchment of superior quality" Thus he

opposes the Gaonim who say that **duchsostos** is produced by splitting, being one half of the skin with **klaf** as the other half, and opposes Benjamin's tanners by declaring that good parchment can be split — all, apparently, because he likes his Greek word better than Levy's, who himself agrees with Benjamin.

What I am trying to hammer home is that Jastrow is not to be treated as an authority. Even worse perhaps than his mistakes is the certainty with which he identifies things — tools, plants, places etc. — about which there is really much doubt; from the above and other samples, he does this on very slight evidence — to say the least. He should be used cautiously — if at all. The student does far better to work his way into understanding the Talmud by traditional methods — by tracing sources and parallel passages and comparing the commentaries there, judging from context and developing a "feel" for pshat, looking up the poskim and deducing what pshat they must have had, consulting Arukh but testing whether his tradition equates with Rashi's. To be sure this will leave him with considerable (though gradually narrowing) areas of doubt. The point is that honest and recognised doubt or ignorance is far nearer the truth than a false, pretended knowledge. For the first there is a remedy — for the second none. "Train your tongue to say 'I do not know'..." (Berakhoth 4a).

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