



## **The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible**

*Aviya Kushner*

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For readers of Bruce Feiler's *Walking the Bible* and Kathleen Norris's *The Cloister Walk* comes a powerful exploration of the Bible in translation.

Aviya Kushner grew up in a Hebrew-speaking family, reading the Bible in the original Hebrew and debating its meaning over the dinner table. She knew much of it by heart—and was therefore surprised when, while getting her MFA at the University of Iowa, she took the novelist Marilynne Robinson's class on the Old Testament and discovered she barely recognized the text she thought she knew so well. From differences in the Ten Commandments to a less ambiguous reading of the creation story to a new emphasis on the topic of slavery, the English translation often felt like another book entirely from the one she had grown up with.

Kushner began discussing the experience with Robinson, who became a mentor, and her interest in the differences between the ancient language and the modern one gradually became an obsession. She began what became a ten-year project of reading different versions of the Hebrew Bible in English and traveling the world in the footsteps of the great biblical translators, trying to understand what compelled them to take on a lifetime project that was often considered heretical and in some cases resulted in their deaths.

In this eye-opening chronicle, Kushner tells the story of her vibrant relationship to the Bible, and along the way illustrates how the differences in translation affect our understanding of our culture's most important written work. A fascinating look at language and the beliefs we hold most dear, *The Grammar of God* is also a moving tale about leaving home and returning to it, both literally and through reading.

## Praise for *The Grammar of God*

“The highest praise for a book, perhaps, is tucking it into a slot on your bookshelf where you’ll always be able to effortlessly slide it out, lay it across your lap and soak it up for a minute or a long afternoon’s absorption. *The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible*, Aviya Kushner’s poetic and powerful plumbing of both the Hebrew and English translations of the Bible, now rests in just such an easy-to-grab spot in my library. In a word, it’s brilliant. And beautiful.”—Barbara Mahany, *Chicago Tribune*

“Aviya Kushner has written a passionate, illuminating essay about meaning itself. *The Grammar of God* is also a unique personal narrative, a family story with the Bible and its languages as central characters.”—Robert Pinsky

“Kushner is principally interested in the meanings and translations of key Biblical passages, and she pursues this interest with a fierce passion. . . . A paean, in a way, to the rigors and frustrations—and ultimate joys—of trying to comprehend the unfathomable.”—Kirkus Reviews

“A remarkable and passionately original book of meditation, exegesis, and memoir. In Kushner’s redemptive vision, the Bible in its many translations is a Noah’s ark, and her book, too, does a work of saving. When I put it down, I wept.”—Rosanna Warren, author of *Stained Glass*

“What a glorious book! From Sarah’s laughter to the idea of Jewish law being a dialogue and not a rigid set of rules, this is a book not only to learn from but to savor.

## **The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Grammar of God: A Journey into the Words and Worlds of the Bible for online ebook**

### **Christina Dudley says**

I loved this book! Could hardly put it down, in fact.

Raised in an Orthodox household, speaking Hebrew at home and school, Kushner first encounters the Bible in English in graduate school, and is repeatedly surprised by the translations and how they impact understanding of the text. She deals mostly in nuance, not in deal-breakers, but her discussions greatly enriched this English-speaker's appreciation. I found her treatments of creation in Genesis, the ten "commandments," and Isaiah 40 especially wonderful. And I actually felt, on the whole, the English translators made some pretty decent choices. The King James is occasionally objected to, but since so few people read the KJV any more (except for "Bible as Literature" classes), I found that kind of a straw-man argument at times. Anyway, I'd love to get my hands on some of the translations she cites!

The book is half memoir, and, like the best memoirs, a window into a culture and world you wouldn't otherwise experience. I was in tears during the last chapter about her grandfather.

Highly recommend.

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### **Moshe Mikanovsky says**

I really liked the combination of a book highlighting differences between the original Hebrew bible and it's many translations which the author researched for years, woven with her own memories of her childhood, family, studies and the city and faith she was brought up in.

On the other hand, if I had to rate just the audio book that I listened to, I would have maybe given it 1 star. Do yourself a favour, do not listen to the audio version! Pick up the book and read it. Two main reasons for this. First, in each section there is an original Hebrew verse and about 5-6 different translations from different sources. It is very hard to compare their differences in your head while listening to them be read one after the other. It would have been much easier to see them laid out on the page one next to the other. But, and even more importantly, although Kristen Potter does a great job with the English portion of the book, she butchers the Hebrew! Her reading of the Hebrew words is so wrong and so bad that it defeats the entire purpose of the book, where the author grew up with Hebrew as her mother tongue, where the subject of the book is grammar and is about translation from it to English. It is such a shame, and I feel that probably Ms. Kushner didn't listen to this version, otherwise she would have cringe, roll her eyes and shake violently like I did whenever the narrator uttered an Hebrew word.

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### **Shelly says**

This book is not for everyone. But if, like me, you geek out on biblical Hebrew grammar and the finer points

of translation, you will love this book. Part memoir, part biblical commentary, it is well written and not at all dry. (As an aside, it makes me wonder if there is a particular style that can be traced to the Iowa Writers Workshop, because there's something here that reminds me of Ann Patchett.) Just as history is written by the victors, Scripture is written by the translators. Each English translation of the Bible - Kushner compared many different ones - makes choices that subtly (or sometimes not so subtly) diverge from the sense of the Hebrew. If you've ever wondered how the study of Torah can encompass so many layers of meaning, this book is a good place to start looking for the answer.

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### **Aryeh says**

This one was a disappointment, mostly because I was expecting something completely different. The book is billed as 'a journey into words and worlds of the Bible,' and starts off strong discussing the issues with translations, but ends up really being nearly completely a memoir. The author writes aesthetically pleasingly, but content is seriously lacking. Kushner mentions time and again the intensity of her research and the revelations she's had over the past 10 years while compiling this book...but other than a few very brief passages glossed over at the beginning of each chapter, she shares almost nothing of the actual research with the reader! The book might be good for a book group, or to get one interested in real research, but if you're looking for a scholarly work and not just a feel good memoir, look elsewhere.

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### **Marlee Pinsker says**

Sometimes a good book changes the way you see the world for a few days, and sometimes a really good book changes the way you see the world for a long time. This book knit some important things together, and in so doing, slipped me an important puzzle piece of understanding which I will carry with me.

One reviewer wrote that this book does not frame quarrels to win them. It points out different roads to travel in understanding writings that were originally written in Hebrew and later changed somewhat as they made their ways into other languages. So I now understand them a bit differently, reading them in both the Hebrew and the English and looking in a more nuanced way.

Aviya takes us into her own family in the US and then to her grandfather's house in Israel. She takes us to Germany with her twice. I am grateful for all of these trips and thank her for everything she has shared with me.

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### **Judy says**

I wanted so much to love this book, and there is much to greatly admire here: Kushner's writing is lovely, often poetic, and her goal to read the Bible in various English translations to see what she could learn based on her fluent knowledge of Hebrew was a daunting task. Perhaps too daunting -- in laying out the literal translation from the Hebrew next to selected translations in English, she shows how often, the Hebrew is translated inaccurately. Often this is because a single word covers a concept, or is simply so nuanced as to defy simple translation. This is where the book shines, where she discusses the nuances of the Hebrew, and shows how much is lost, not only in the words but also in the pacing of the narrative, through translations.

However, the book falls short in key areas. In trying to make this part memoir (a very understandable goal), I felt that some of the personal stories she tells to match the theme of the chapter simply were a stretch, didn't have enough connective tissue to really work. She writes lovingly about her family, but many of those passages simply didn't seem to fit.

I was also frustrated that Kushner seemed to be almost coy in stating what religious perspective she was writing from now, because it strongly affects how she herself interprets many passages or even entire books of the Bible. For example, when she discusses Psalm 42, which she does at length, she completely ignores what the major commentators agree was the overarching theme, which was the longing for the return to the Temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed. Yes, it is about longing for God, but in a very particular fashion. Readers unacquainted with the context about this psalm will therefore miss out on a crucial motif.

Additionally, in describing her family's life in Monsey, New York, readers could easily get the (wrong) impression that her family might be one of the only non-Hassidic families living there. I don't diminish or question her unpleasant experiences with some Hassidim there, but it was really unfair and misleading not to say that there are thousands of other non-Hassidic Jews also living in Monsey, and also unfair to define them only through very select anecdotes that show them in their least appealing traits. The Hassidim also perform great charitable works and contribute to the community in many other ways. I was sorry to see Kushner jump on to the popular Hassidim-bashing sport so common among Jewish writers today.

I found it increasingly difficult to get through the book because it so often seemed to lose focus through many of the anecdotes, and I couldn't help but get the feeling that just as the author noted her dozens of moves from city to city over the years, she is still perhaps looking for a comfortable place within the faith that she loves to really call home.

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### **Tim Larison says**

The English Old Testament is a source of inspiration for millions of people. But what if the English translation deviates from the original Hebrew meaning throughout the text? That's the premise of Aviya Kushner's new book *The Grammar of God: a Journey Into the Words and Worlds of the Bible*.

Kushner grew up in a Jewish household and was raised reading the Bible in its original Hebrew language. When she started reading the English translation of the Old Testament "many times (I was) saddened at what had been misrepresented or obscured in moving the words from the Hebrew to the English, from the ancient to the more contemporary," she writes.

I liked the examples Kushner gave of subtle differences in meaning between the Hebrew and English verses. "The commandment 'Thou shalt not kill,' is not nearly as straightforward in Hebrew as in English," she says in one instance. "In biblical Hebrew, there is a gaping difference between the verb 'to kill' – *laharog* – and the verb 'to murder' – *litzoach*; the Hebrew word used in the Ten Commandments is 'murder', yet the commandment is frequently mistranslated as 'Thou shalt not kill.' This word choice matters because there are acceptable forms of killing in the Bible (such as self-defense)."

Kushner recalls her mother's interpretation of the original Hebrew in other parts of the book. Take the first verse in the Bible. "It all comes down to how you read that one word," her mother says. "Do you read the verb in the first line as *bara*, in the past tense, so that it means 'In the beginning God created,' or do you read

it as bro , the infinitive, so that it reads ‘In the beginning of God’s creating’?” The message of God creating all the time, including now, is quite different than a God who created heaven and earth eons ago and then was His work was largely done.

Kushner is sympathetic to the translator’s task. “It is not easy to make a language come alive for someone who does not speak that language; it is a challenge to rename the seemingly familiar and name the unfamiliar. The effort often results in clumsiness and misunderstanding,” she says. Grammar of God is not meant to be a new version of the Old Testament based on the original Hebrew language. Rather, with a few strategic examples, Kushner made me aware of how Biblical translation is not an exact science. If the Bible (specifically the Old Testament) is an important part of your faith tradition, I recommend reading The Grammar of God for new insights into this sacred text.

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### **Amy Rae says**

A really beautiful book, holy cow. Aviya Kushner mixes together a delicious take on semantics and word-by-word analysis of a few Bible verses with related stories from her life. The result is something that, I think, is both fascinating and powerful.

Kushner makes thousands of years of Jewish thought accessible and chooses really fascinating verses to focus her attentions. I think many people, Christian and otherwise, are aware of the shortcomings of some English translations of the Bible, but Kushner doesn't focus on obvious points like *Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live*. She asks questions I've never thought to ask--like *how did Sarah laugh?*--and makes it easy to explore the answers Jewish theologians have offered over the centuries.

I'm not sure how much this book would add for other Jews who engage regularly with the material covered - I can picture my sister reading it and going "yes, I *know* who Rashi is, you don't need to tell me *again*" - but for Christians, I think it's both eye-opening and inspiring. By the time we'd finished listening, I wanted to dig deeper into everything from Rambam to Everett Fox's translations.

I listened to the audiobook, and Kirsten Potter read it well. I can't speak to whether her pronunciation of the Hebrew was accurate, but I think she gave a moving performance, especially when the narrative touched on Kushner's experiences with her grandfather. The downside to the audiobook experience was that listening to Potter read each chapter's epigrams - the Hebrew verses with literal, word-by-word translation, and several English-language translations - was a little hard to follow. I think it would have worked better on the page.

One thing that was funny to me, though, was that she sounded a little like January LaVoy, and so it was like having Princess Leia read to me about Biblical translations. :D Overall, it was a really lovely experience.

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### **Simcha Wood says**

By the author's own admission, Aviya Kushner's *The Grammar of God* was written as a personal rather than an academic work. And the result, while it is unquestionably learned, gains a lot of power from the author's emotional relationship to the study of the Hebrew Bible and her experiences with it in English translations. *The Grammar of God* is a thoughtful and engaging exploration of what is lost or transformed when Tanakh is translated from Hebrew into other languages, including English. It provides a glimpse of what happens when

the nuances of meaning of particular Hebrew terms and the untranslatable ambiguities of Hebrew grammar that have played critical roles in how these ancient texts are read are rendered into another language.

And, while Kushner's discussions of the ways in which issues of translation often have an effect on the way the Bible is understood in English—sometimes in ways that diverge profoundly from readings of the work in Hebrew—is fascinating, much of the force of the book comes simply from the love and appreciation the author has for her subject matter and the anecdotes and family biography which she brings to the fore in order to help us understand how writings that are more than 2000 years old can continue to inform one's life and help us to make sense of a sometimes very dark world.

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### **Sarah Furger says**

This book is the author, Aviya Kushner's journey through the Bible, translation, Judaism, and family. I learned so much about how the way I have been taught about the Bible and what it says affects how I see life, and also how much is lost in translation from Hebrew. Kushner's incredibly personal story is beautifully written, but it is her scholarly information about the Bible, and grammar and the choice of words in translation that I found most interesting. I highly recommend this to anyone even vaguely interested.

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### **Nathan Albright says**

For many readers the thought of reading a book on biblical grammar and the importance of language in shaping how we view scripture would not be an appealing thought. Such readers would miss a truly lovely and thoughtful book, though, in that the author manages to make such subjects warm and inviting, gives a deeply personal discussion of matters many people find dull and wearisome, and manages to have some important insights in terms of how we wrestle with scripture. The book gains most of its warmth from being the exploration of the Bible in English from the point of view of a Jew who speaks Hebrew as a native language and who brings a certain poetic sensitivity to the task of biblical understanding, which allows her to grasp differences in how the Bible is read in different languages, and how the different languages shape the worldview and perspective of those who read it. The book is rich in biblical text as well as a worthwhile approach to the texts it deals with, and in showing how differently people deal with something because of how they speak and write and read and think, the book offers insights that are worthwhile far outside the field of biblical studies, even to the way in which we live our lives. As a work of biblical criticism [1], this book and this author have a lot to offer, and let us hope that she writes many more books of equal sensitivity and depth.

The roughly two hundred pages of this book are divided into nine chapters that deal with different matters: creation, love, laughter, man, God, law, song, memory, and how it never ends. The book as a whole begins with a story of how it began and how the author came to study the Bible in English given her Jewish background, and ends with acknowledgments and two appendices showing the different numbering of commandments and the different arrangement of the books of the Bible in different traditions. The chapters themselves are well-organized also, with the opening page of the chapter showing a page of the Tanakh in Hebrew, and then following with a word-by-word literal transliteration and translation of the Hebrew, and then a series of English translations in different translations to contrast the Hebrew with the English. The text that follows generally goes into further detail about the distinction between these passages in Hebrew and English, comments about the passages in Hebrew and English commentary and how they reveal differences

in the mindset between people using different languages. The result is not overdone but is instead is extremely touching and thought provoking.

What makes this book a special pleasure are a combination of two factors that other authors would do well to emulate where possible. For one, this book offers an insightful perspective in taking what many of its readers will find familiar yet viewed from an alien perspective, namely the original language of the Tanakh and how Jewish practice has often been shaped by the differences between Hebrew and other languages like Greek, Latin, or English. For one, the Hebrew is often highly layered and ambiguous [2] while the English gives an appearance of being sharply defined, which leads to differences in how these passages are often read. The Hebrew invites dialogue, conversation, and discussion as the ambiguities and possibilities are teased out, while the English tends to create the illusion that there is one way for these passages to understand rightly and a lot of wrong ways, which tends to lead to a less charitable view of one's conversation partners when there are disagreements about interpretation. The second particularly notable skill that the author brings to this material that really makes it an amazing book is the fact that the author includes so many thoughtful and intimate personal comments that make the text warm and friendly, and sometimes deeply melancholy given the author's family history in Hitler's Germany [3].

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

[2] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.wordpress...>

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[3] See, for example, the following comments:

"To my chagrin, I soon learned that this frightening and depressing combination of great knowledge and ugly death appears not only in the lives of the rabbis but also in the lives of Christian translators. William Tyndale, whose translation is the foundation of the King James Bible, was strangled and his body burned at the stake. The remains of John Wycliffe, who also worked on an early translation of the Bible into English, were exhumed and thrown into a river. Translation, like scholarship, has long been a life-threatening enterprise. Making something understandable to the general public has meant risking everything, even, as in the case of the great Rabbi Akiva, one's skin (xv)."

"But the conflict between art and faith is not, I have gradually decided, just a Jewish issue. It is not about that line between graven images and an unseeable God. Instead, it is the very idea of belief that is a problem for a devoted artist. Belief implies acceptance. An artist is different--a questioner in the heart, not necessarily a believer. An artist does not accept first and do next, as the Jewish people supposedly did at Sinai (97-98)."

"With the snafu over the ad, my father taught me what he has always taught me: how to ignore the disapproval of the world, no matter how loud it is. He taught me how to listen to myself, and how to hear that same thing in other people and places: the quiet beating of the individual heart (138)."

"For as long as I can remember, he [the author's grandfather] has loved color and line, painting and sketching. Since no one else in my family does, I think this love of his went directly into me. I, too, am obsessed with color, moved and motivated by it. I sometimes cry in front of beautiful paintings, and like him, I need to look at them every so often to feel alive, connected to those who came before me (171)."

"What he was telling me was: I have a granddaughter; I alone, among my brothers, have lived. I have endured. And I know, as the oldest of five, that the last thing an oldest sibling wants is to be the last one left (186)."

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### **Bill Mattingly says**

Really enjoyed the book. I can't be too erudite as anything I write will be critiqued by my M.Div degree daughter. Of course I couldn't read the Hebrew, but I think it would be useful to many evangelical ministers who may have missed how our Bibles today were translated and in general came into being. A very readable history of the Old Testament, with the personal imput of a religious Jewish Woman of an Somewhat Orthodox Tradition.

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### **✿Aimee✿ Just one more page... says**

The book wasn't exactly like I expected, but I enjoyed it. While there certainly was discussion about Hebrew grammar and differences between the Hebrew and current versions, the book was much more than this.

This was also a memoir of the author's life and family. It was her musings on what faith means to her and those in her life. There was discussion about how translation often meant death for the translator throughout history.

The chapters each broach a different theme in the Hebrew Bible. She then starts with a discussion about the passage and how it differs from other translations. Then she goes into a discussion of what that verse has meant for her in the past and what she thinks now. Interwoven with these things are her memories of family and thoughts on faith. There is a lot of discussion of WWII and how it impacted her family specifically.

Themes discussed are: Creation, Love, Laughter, Man, God, Law, Song, Memory.

The book felt like a discussion with a friend - meandering and interesting. The journey was more important than the end result. I really would love to have a meal with the author and her fascinating family (and mother who studies archaic languages).

This actually inspired me to purchase a few of the books she references to get a new fresh read of the Bible I grew up with.

***Thank you Netgalley and Random House Publishing Group for a free digital copy in exchange for an honest review.***

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### **Andrea Stoeckel says**

[ I received this book free from the publisher through NetGalley. I thank them for their generosity. In exchange, I was simply asked to write an honest review, and post it. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising]

[Another disclosure: I am a retired ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. I hold 3 Masters degrees, have studied history, language and entymology most of my adult life. I collect many of the books

Dr.Kuschner cites both within the text and her endnotes.]

" The Grammar of God is not a scholarly work but a personal one, a Hebrew speaker's response to the Bible in English. It is a book I now realize, after more than a decade of wrestling with these texts, I had to write —because nobody else can write how you view your home except you."

This is a book about a subject most "gentiles" who are not detailed in scholarship might not be all that interested in. Dr. Kushner, a highly educated , well travelled author and poet encounters Marilynne Robinson, the author and educator when she begins graduate classes in Iowa. Her work on her thesis becomes this book: part memoir, part grammar study, part love song to her past and exploration of her future while being grounded in her present, as she talks about wanting to give English translations focus by locking her Hebrew Bibles in her trunk and how she, her brother and their Saba Shumel sing Isaiah 40 that echos all around them in the hills of Israel.

After Saba passes, Kushner states that she will "honor his faith by investigating it; I will respect his endurance; and I will let him teach me something— anything— one last time."

Part memoir, part grammar, this is the fulfillment of the promise she made. And as much as I avoid grammar as it tends to give me headaches, I understand that without the foundations, we really can't embrace the lives that are built upon them.

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### **Irena says**

This relatively short book is a peculiar mix of personal memoir, insights into what is lost or modified in the Hebrew Bible's translation to English, and the history of Hebrew Bible's translations to English and other languages. The story continuously jumps between these aspects, but lacks depth in all of them.

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