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## Agnon's Shaking Bridge and the Theology of Culture

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Rabbeinu HaGadol, Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak HaKohen Kook z"l . . . How close he drew me in! In his humility he was kind enough to read my story "Va-Hayah HeAkov LeMishor," which was then still in manuscript. When he returned it to me, he said in these exact words: "This is a true Hebrew/Jewish story, flowing through the divine channels without any barrier" [זהו סיפור עברי באמת נובע מן הצינורות בלא שום] [מהיצה].<sup>1</sup>

"Today's reader is no longer content with reading for pleasure. He expects to find a new message in every work." Hemdat replied: I didn't come to answer the question "Where are you going?" though I do sometimes answer the question "Where did you come from?"<sup>2</sup>

In discussing the consumption of literature from an Orthodox Jewish perspective, and the writings of the greatest modern Hebrew author, Nobel laureate S. Y. Agnon, as an exercise in examining the “theology of culture,” I assume Tillich’s notion of “the religious dimension in many special spheres of man’s cultural activity . . . [which] is never absent in cultural creations even if they show no relation to religion in the narrower sense of the word.”<sup>3</sup>

The writings of S. Y. Agnon (born as Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes in Buczacz, Galicia, 1887; died in Israel, 1970),<sup>4</sup> executed in a remarkably wide variety of genres, spanning an active career of over sixty years (with more volumes published posthumously than in his own lifetime), are exemplars of the religious dimension embodied in literary creation. This dimension, as I will argue, provides his readers not only with the aesthetic experience of encountering the best of fine literature, but for those committed to the notion that literature can serve as a positive element in the shaping of the religious person and his or her worldview, Agnon’s corpus is a treasure trove.

I take it for granted that (in the context of this Forum) I need not marshal the arguments for the validity and profit to the religious individual of an encounter with great literature. Well-nigh on fifty years, Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, while heroically championing the primacy of place and purpose of Talmud Torah as normative mitzvah, ennobled lifestyle, and medium to forge the divine encounter, “our life and longevity,” has also been Modern Orthodoxy’s most articulate spokesman and role model for the value of the humanities in general, and of literature particularly, to accomplish an array of goals necessary for living the life of a thinking, sensitive religious being. Among these: literature can help develop our spiritual personality; intensify our insight into basic problems of moral or religious thought; deepen our understanding of the human character; and provide a spiritual complement, rounding out the cardinal Torah component. T. S. Eliot, that keenest of religious readers, reminded us that reading literature “affects us as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence.”<sup>5</sup>

These considerations ought to draw our attention to Agnon’s writings in an even more urgent way, insofar as they are explicitly reli-

gious texts. I am not here referring to the question of Agnon's personal religiosity or observance. I am satisfied with the testimony of Agnon's daughter and literary executor, Emuna Yaron, who asserted that her father was deeply religious, punctilious in observance, with a deep and rich inner religious life.<sup>6</sup> We are concerned with his oeuvre and the canon of his works as texts bearing a religious meaning, with their ability to serve as windows into the religious experience, and triggers for reflection by the spiritually engaged individual.

As for Agnon's own spiritual biography, it is notoriously difficult to mine, as he was rarely transparent about his own inner life, and almost never about his prolific creative process. If asked a personal question he would respond with a story, which then needed to be interpreted by the listener. Even simple facts such as his own name, birthday, or date of aliyah, were subject to layers of "midrashicizing"—as if there were two men, Czaczkes of Buczacz and Agnon of Szybucz, Yaffo, and Yerushalayim. Even when he inserts himself into his own stories—most famously as the Guest in *Ore'ah Nata LaLun*, or his literary doppelganger Hemdat, who appears in numerous "cameos" throughout the stories—we can decipher little about Agnon the man and author. As if to complicate the problem, Gershom Scholem said of his friend Agnon:

He was unable and unwilling to have a conversation about abstract ideas—rather only in stories or metaphors (*meshalim*). You'd start to speak to Agnon conceptually, and he'd immediately change the subject to—"Let me tell you a story, let me tell you a *maiyses*." He thought in pictures. Agnon expressed everything, completely legitimately, as one who thinks in pictures.<sup>7</sup>

The intentional ambiguities and literary reticence leave readers and interpreters of Agnon with a large, blank canvas on which to construct their own interpretation, as well as with the dangerous temptation of projecting their own worldview onto the author and his work. In that light, I find Amos Oz's reading of Agnon as an author with a disguised antireligious agenda to be either tone-deaf or cynical, and

either way inaccurate, revealing the “hermeneutics of suspicion” at work today in Israeli literary criticism, even concerning Agnon. Yet I appreciate his capturing of Agnon’s multidimensionality as depicted famously in the Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem. In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.<sup>8</sup>

Oz comments:

These words, so well known to readers of Agnon, are certainly true. But, strangely, their exact opposite is also true. Had Agnon chosen to say, more or less, the following: “As a result of the historic catastrophe, that Eastern European Jewry disintegrated, I became a Hebrew author in Jerusalem. But always I regarded myself as one who was born and destined to be a rabbi in one of the towns of Galicia”—such words would also have been completely true and right on target.<sup>9</sup>

Oz is correct, that this dialectic (he calls it a paradox) lies at the heart of Agnon’s creativity. All of his great characters are held between

crime and consequence, sin and guilt, action and responsibility, and always—tradition and modernity. If Oz is similarly correct that there is “no way back,” that the world of tradition, the innocence of Reb Yudil Hassid, the righteousness of Tehilla, the “new” *kloyz* in Szybucz of “three or four generations ago,” the key to the Beit Midrash visited by the Guest for a night, or even the fervor of secular Zionist ideologues: our “brethren in Merhavva” of *Tmol Shilshom* are all lost or destroyed from without or from within—this does not render Agnon’s fiction agnostic. On the contrary, it causes the contemporary reader to confront the essential questions of religion in the modern world, a world marked, of course, by a dominant culture which is not religious but secular in its very nature. This cultural reality, however, colors much of modern literature, including, of course, modern Hebrew literature, and the reason for this is a diminution in the sense of *ol malkhut shamayim*—God’s immanence.<sup>10</sup> However, this is decidedly not the case in Agnon’s writing. Even when characters sin, steal, lust, or fail tragically, it is precisely within the context of *malkhut shamayim*. To be clear, he is not writing a *mussar sefer* or a guide to the perplexed, but modern literature, so there will be eros and passion and even adultery (although it is likely that this is what suppressed the completion of the novel *Shira* for decades). After all, in literature, unlike in life, character flaws are precisely what instruct and entertain. *Tzadikim* and flawless role models rarely make for very interesting characters in novels.

Rather, Agnon paints on a canvas of larger questions which the reader, if so oriented, is well served to be confronted with. When we consider the tragic Menasheh Haim of “VaHayah HeAkov LeMishor,” a man whose flaws, errors, and sins destroy him until he becomes the embodiment of his name, which means “forgotten alive,” we are reminded of Nietzsche’s quip that “The Greeks blame the gods, the Jews blame themselves”—and we encounter the severest questions of moral responsibility.

Much attention has been paid to Agnon’s naive or “unreliable” narrator—a pious storyteller that some readers assume is a mouthpiece for Agnon himself. Others see him as a decoy for a surreptitious agenda. Both of these positions make the error of confusing Agnon the author with his narrator (who admittedly shares many biographical

similarities).<sup>11</sup> Agnon is neither a shill for tradition nor attempting to undermine it. The proclivity of an author to adore or alternatively satirize a worldview does not, in and of itself, indicate his stance vis-à-vis that worldview. In the case of Agnon, it is neither one nor the other, but a desire to simultaneously skewer and sacralize, and in so doing to ask what the past has to say to the present and future. This makes him both the most modern of Orthodox writers and, as well, the most Orthodox of modern writers.

By helping us understand the question of where we came from, Agnon invites his readers to do the heavy lifting of working through the question of where we are going, even if his characters themselves are not always able to make that journey forward.

Clearly, reading Agnon is not Talmud Torah (except for his great anthologies of rabbinic literature, such as *Yamim Noraim* and *Atem Re'item*); but reading Agnon while attuned to the traditional bookshelf of the Beit Midrash is a type of engagement with both text and master-text, and an interpretive act that fosters a particularly rich and rewarding cultural activity. This, of course, is a type of engagement available to a diminishing audience indeed: those with literacy in Hazal, Midrash, Gemara, and Tanakh, on one hand, combined with the inclination and capacity to read modern literature, on the other. (Those of us so enabled and inclined are well served to remember the admonition of Eliot, who warned that “literary criticism should be completed by criticism from a definite ethical and theological standpoint. . . . In ages like our own . . . it is the more necessary for [religious] readers to scrutinize their reading, especially of works of the imagination, with explicit ethical and theological standards.”)<sup>12</sup>

To explore the intertextual Agnonian matrix is to enter a world of pseudo-Midrash, one which is no mere literary device, but the “very source of his creativity, perhaps its main subject,” according to the Israeli critic Gershon Shaked. “To a greater degree than that of any other writer in modern Hebrew literature, Agnon’s work is based upon intertextual connections. Indeed, Agnon conceives of an ideal addressee for whom the traditions of sacred literature are totally native, one who can discern the relationship between the fable and the holy canon.”<sup>13</sup>

And for those who “dwell in the Beit Midrash” there is another dimension to explore: that of *reconstructing* the midrashic imagination at work. For example, Sota 49a enigmatically states, “Two Torah scholars (*talmidei hakhamim*) who reside in the same town and cannot abide each other in the [study of] halakhah: one dies and the other goes into exile.” We imagine Agnon, who would rise before dawn to study a *daf gemara* or a chapter of Rambam, encountering this line and weaving it into his tale of the titanic clash between Reb Shlomo and Reb Moshe Pinchas in “Shnei Talmidei Hakhamim Shehayu BeIrenu”—an emotionally rich and intricately tragic tale. The great writer reads the line of Talmud and the wheels spin, as he asks himself: Who are these two sages that cannot dwell together? What scenario may have unfolded to cause the death of one and the exile of the other? What might the *amora* have been thinking when he stated his teaching? Or in another story, “Malakh haMavet vebaShohet,” we can imagine the genesis of the story at the Seder table, as the Agnon family sings *Had Gadya*, the patriarch wonders: What’s that encounter between the Angel of Death and the *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) really like? Out comes a tale with origins in that folkloristic holiday ditty, but which becomes an artistic reflection on the role of mitzvah observance in this world and our task as commanded beings.<sup>14</sup>

This places readers and interpreters of Agnon in the thick of one of the twentieth century’s great literary debates. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., a staunch formalist who argued for analysis centered on the text of a work, warned of the “intentional fallacy,” or the confusion between the authored text and its origins. One need not know *Shas* and *poskim* to read and appreciate Agnon, Wimsatt might have argued, were he familiar with the references and the author under consideration:

There is a gross body of life, of sensory and mental experience, which lies behind and in some sense causes every poem, but can never be and need not be known in the verbal and hence intellectual composition which is the poem. . . . But the text itself remains to be dealt with, the analyzable vehicle of a complicated metaphor. . . . Eliot’s allusions work when we know them—and to a great ex-

tent even when we do not know them, through their suggestive power. But sometimes we find allusions supported by notes, and it is a nice question whether the notes function more as guides to send us where we may be educated, or more as indications in themselves about the character of allusions.<sup>15</sup>

This brings to mind Avraham Holtz's impressive work of scholarship, his annotated edition of Agnon's first major novel, *Hakhnasat Kallah*, cleverly laid out like a page of Talmud, with marginal commentary, supercommentary, and illustrations, whose footnotes have excursions of their own.<sup>16</sup> It is an invaluable resource for research on the novel, but only once the reader has entered the novel itself, encountering plot, theme, and character for himself. It is an example of the type of distraction Wimsatt warned of when he stated that

understanding is derived not only from historical documents but also from our own living and thinking of the present. . . . to understand the heroism of Henry or the irony of Pope and Dryden we have to draw upon historical information and linguistic glosses. But we have to draw equally upon the modern world and our own experiences. We find the meaning of heroism and of irony ultimately in the objects of our own experience and in our own minds.<sup>17</sup>

Contra Wimsatt, Walter J. Ong argued that "the very genesis of works of art is often—perhaps always and necessarily—derivative from personal relations and tensions . . . [With] our gaze on the object [of art; e.g., an urn], we peep anxiously from the corners of our eyes, alert for someone's response somewhere. . . . What is worse, he will always threaten to prove more interesting than the urn itself."<sup>18</sup> The threat of the artist or author as someone proving himself more interesting than the work of art itself is particularly clear and present with Agnon, who always seems to be winking at his readers from between the lines.

No doubt intelligent modern readers attempt to strike a balance between these positions. Yet this raises questions about what it takes to read Agnon. First and foremost, literature has to be understood *qua* literature—the level of *peshat*, if you will. One is not expected, nor is it desirable, to read a novel with one eye on the book and another on the Bar-Ilan CD-Rom, ferreting out each reference.<sup>19</sup> That being said, what was true of Dante is true of Agnon: “[His writing] is often expressed with such a force of compression that the elucidation of three lines needs a paragraph, and their allusions a page of commentary.”<sup>20</sup> And like Dante, who forces the reader to enter the world of thirteenth-century Christianity, the work of uncovering sources, unpacking each referent, decoding the allusions, and primarily being attuned to the echoes in Agnon draws the reader into the universe of the Beit Midrash—that wonderful, asynchronous conversation and “symposium of the generations.”

In Levinas’s felicitous formulation, Agnon’s writings convey a life “beneath the ineradicable memory of their semantic homeland in the text.” One in which “a reference to biblical or rabbinic writings, the repetition of the master formulation, a variant or echo—and suddenly the word, without imitating any model, signifies both in the context of the passage in which it occurs and, in counterpoint, in the scriptural context, oriented toward an unrepresentable past. Such is the enigmatic modality of a resurrected language, beginning again within its own trace!”<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps because of this feature, the comparison to Dante is also suitable in another regard. Although often compared to Kafka, Agnon insisted he had neither read nor been influenced by that great Pragian writer. Whether this is true or not is less important than whether it is useful. Band points out that such a comparison is entirely misleading, as the “referents in a Kafka story rarely belong to a single tradition,” unlike the symbols in Agnon. In Dante, however, “symbolism is not merely a private method of grasping reality nor is it simply a literary device; [in Dante and Agnon] symbols are palpably religious ones transferred into literature.”<sup>22</sup> Agnon’s accomplishment is even more remarkable if we consider that he had the harder task of writing for a

Jewish culture in the first half of the twentieth century in which those referents were part of a tradition very much in flux.

Tradition in flux is the theme of so much of Agnon's writing, and nowhere more so than his 1939 novel *Ore'ah Nata LaLun* (*A Guest for the Night*). The unnamed Guest-narrator, who shares many characteristics with the author, returns during the interwar period to his native Galician town for a visit, after having emigrated to Eretz Yisrael years before.<sup>23</sup> He encounters a society decimated—physically and spiritually—by World War I. At our remove from the events depicted, we are accustomed to think of the Second World War, and certainly the Holocaust, as the factors which destroyed East European Jewry. *Ore'ah Nata LaLun*, which not only depicts a world prior to those events, but was actually written before them, reminds us of the degree to which Jewish society was already crumbling from within prior to Kristallnacht.

Although containing many characters and themes, the main plot revolves around the Guest's attempt to revitalize Jewish life in the town by resuscitating the moribund Beit Midrash. Shuttered and unused, the town elders are pleased to entrust him with the key, where he finances the upkeep and, most importantly, the heating of the building throughout the winter. The townsmen are drawn back to pray and study, even if primarily motivated by the cold they are trying to escape in their own homes, which they cannot afford to heat. At one of the turning points in the novel, the Guest misplaces the key (the symbolism of which cannot be overstated), at which point he encounters Daniel Bach, who like so many other characters in the novel is maimed (in this case he walks on a peg-leg): "One day I met Daniel Bach. Hunched over his wooden leg, he said, 'You should do what I did: If you lost the key, have another one made. . . . I will send the locksmith and he will make you a new key.'" <sup>24</sup> In a city populated by fellows with rubber arms and wooden legs, artificial replacements for tragic losses, Bach suggests making a replacement of a lost world of the Beit Midrash. Both Bach and the Guest are standing on an un-solid footing; some things are irreplaceable. The original key will only be discovered hidden in the crevices of the Guest's suitcase upon his return to Jerusalem, where, Agnon tells us, it awaits in midrashic an-

icipation of the return of the Beit Midrash itself to the Holy Land (à la Megilla 29a). Back home the Guest “put the key in a box, and hung the key to the box over my heart.”

I did not hang the key of the old Beit Midrash itself over my heart, as it was too heavy for my heart to bear. . . . Whenever I would remember it, I would think to myself, “The synagogues and study halls are destined . . .” and I open my window and look outside to see if perhaps they are on their way to establish themselves in *Eretz Yisrael*. Oy, the land is desolate and silent, and the footsteps of the synagogues and study halls are not heard. Yet still the key sits and waits with me for that day. However, it is made of iron and brass and can endure. I who am but flesh and blood find it difficult.<sup>25</sup>

In a novel with such elegiac reflections on Diaspora Jewry, we should not be surprised that Agnon also included a strong argument for Zionism, formulated as a series of confrontational encounters between the Guest and the Rabbi of Szybucz and his son, a spokesman for the anti-Zionist Agudah. In his study of the manuscripts and editing of this novel, Steven Katz has uncovered that earlier drafts of the story had the Guest channeling or quoting Rav Kook in defense of (secular) Zionism. The absence of Rav Kook in Agnon’s fiction is surprising, in light of the very many historical figures who do make appearances, as well as Agnon’s profound love and respect for him.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, as a stand-in for the ideology and figure of Rav Kook, the coda of the novel tells us that Reb Shlomo Bach, Daniel’s father, is the only character from Szybucz to both successfully settle in the Land, having gone on aliyah midway through the novel, and also to retain his commitment to tradition. A different son, Daniel’s brother, had previously emigrated, yet tragically fell defending Kibbutz Ramat Rachel during the Arab riots of 1929. In an epilogue to the novel, the final chapter recounts the Guest’s visit to Reb Shlomo, himself now settled in Ramat Rachel in old age, tending the kibbutz garden. “How did you come to work the garden?” he inquires.

When I came to Ramat Rachel . . . I said to myself: Everyone is engaged in settling the land and I am doing nothing . . . so I lightened the gloom with the Torah and immersed myself in the Mishnah. When I reached the tractates that deal with the religious duties that are linked to the soil of the Land of Israel, I saw that my learning was rootless. I had studied these matters abroad and found no difficulty in them, but in the Land of Israel a man's mind is renewed and he is not content with earlier interpretations. Once I said to myself: Let me go and see what is this tree of which the sages spoke, and what is this field that is mentioned in the Mishnah [cf. Avot 3:7]. When I went out, I heard the young men talking to each other, and through their words the entire subject became clear. It was not that they were referring to the Mishnah, but they spoke as usual about trees and plants. I said to myself, wisdom cries outdoors [Prov. 1:20]. After that, whenever I found a difficulty in the words of the Mishnah I would go to one of our comrades. If he did not know, then the gardener knew. If he did not know how to explain in our way, he explained in his own way and showed me every single thing in tangible fashion. I found out from my own experience better is the sight of the eyes than the wandering of the desire [Eccl. 6:9]. I need not say much more; the sages were right when they said, "There is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel" [Vayikra Rabba 13:5d]. Here I am, some seventy years old, and I was not privileged to understand the truth of the Torah until I came to the Land [cf. Mishnah Bera-khot 1:5].<sup>27</sup>

For Agnon, who loved to embed meaning in the names of his characters, it is no accident that Reb Shlomo's family name is Bach (ב"ח), written specifically as an acronym, the meaning of which seems to clearly hint at the rabbinic work of the same name, *Bayit Hadash*, or "new home," as if to say, after the destruction of traditional society

from within and without, the only hope for the continuation of the world of the Beit Midrash is in a new home—one where “learning leads to doing” as Reb Shlomo states, for “there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel.”<sup>28</sup>

This is reminiscent of the minor yet important character of Reb Menahem HaOmed, in that epic novel of the Second Aliyah, Agnon’s magnum opus, *Tmol Shilshom*. The novel is a portrait of Yitzhak Kummer, a young immigrant to Palestine, searching to obtain *hishtavut* (equanimity, balance, harmony), yet torn between different worlds. Against that main character the reader encounters Reb Menahem—pitchfork in one hand, a Gemara in the other (like Shlomo Bach, he is a pious farmer)—as one of the few to obtain that peace of mind and synthesis in personality, precisely through the combination of settling the soil while maintaining traditional beliefs.<sup>29</sup>

## II.

There is another realm of cultural significance we must explore when considering Agnon’s accomplishment, and our encounter with his writings. That is the role of Hebrew as a vehicle for cultural production, and our relationship with *lashon ha-kodesh* when considering a “theology of culture” as epitomized by Agnon’s writings. In order to do this we must take a short detour through the history of the Hebrew revival.

As he lay dying in 1926, friends of Franz Rosenzweig collected a book of letters to present to him—a sort of private *festschrift*. Undiscovered until the 1980s was the letter Gershom Scholem contributed on the “apocalyptic thorn” embedded within modern Hebrew.<sup>30</sup> Writing from Jerusalem, Scholem warns that “more sinister than the Arab problem is another threat, a threat which the Zionist enterprise unavoidably has had to face: the ‘actualization’ of Hebrew.” The attempt to secularize the holy tongue for everyday use in managing the affairs of a modern society overlooks the fact that “it is impossible to empty out words which are filled to the breaking point with specific meanings—lest it be done at the sacrifice of the language itself! . . . Would not the religious power of this language perforce break open again one

day? . . . *Fraught with danger is the Hebrew language!* . . . God will not remain silent in the language in which He has affirmed our life a thousand times and more.”<sup>31</sup>

In other words, Scholem negates the possibility of secularizing a language so deeply embedded with religious meaning and associations. The language itself is a volcano, in Scholem’s word, which will ultimately erupt, spewing religious fanaticism onto the naive secularizers and the culture they are attempting to build. Although in time Scholem would come to moderate his fears, this important text captures a phobia of Hebrew, and the danger of trying to utilize it as a vessel for modern means.

The opposite approach is epitomized by Bialik, who saw the secularizing (חילון) of religious and halakhic terminology as an act of redeeming, as in the verse “And what man is there who has planted a vineyard, and has not yet redeemed it (חָקְלוֹ)?” (Deut. 20:6). “There is secularizing which blasphemes, and there is secularizing which redeems,” Bialik wrote in 1932. “Only in this way will we acquire our vocabulary for human concepts, and not need to invent new words for general usage. My way is to redeem.”<sup>32</sup> Unlike Scholem, not only did Bialik not fear the demon lurking within Hebrew, but he thought the language itself could be “reprogrammed” with the agenda the secularizers were promoting. Consider Bialik’s well-known nursery rhyme, *Nadnedah* (The Seesaw):<sup>33</sup>

See-saw, see-saw,	גַּד , גַּד , גַּד , גַּד
Down and up, up and down!	רָד , עָלָה , עָלָה וְרָד!
What’s above?	מָה-לְמַעְלָה?
What’s below?—	מָה-לְמַטָּה —
Just me,	רַק אֲנִי ,
Me and you;	אֲנִי וְאַתָּה
We are both balanced	שְׁנֵינוּ שְׁקוּלִים
On the scales	בְּמֵאזְנַיִם
Between the Earth	בֵּין הָאָרֶץ
And Heaven.	לְשָׁמַיִם.

On the surface it seems an innocent jingle, one which can be heard to this day on most playgrounds around Israel. Only if one

hears the echoes of the texts on which Bialik draws do we understand how insidious it really is. “What’s above? What’s below?” is precisely among the questions the Mishnah (Hagigah 2:1) suggests should not be examined:

Whoever puts his mind to these four matters, it were better if he had not come into the world: What is above? What is below? What came before the creation? What will be in the hereafter? —Whoever has no regard for the honor of his Creator it were better for him had he not come into the world.

A phrase representing ultimate theological questions about the existence of God and man’s role in His universe is twisted around by the poet, who purports to “reprogram” the sacred text as a statement of apostasy—“there is nothing between the Heaven and Earth—just you and me.” Not only is God dead, but He has been buried in the sandbox by children on the playground.

Unlike Scholem or Bialik, Agnon neither fears Hebrew nor considers that it can be neutralized of its embedded values. This makes Hebrew writing from the pen of Agnon a particularly rich vein to mine for those of us looking for theologically meaningful culture.<sup>34</sup>

In 1934 Agnon wrote a short story called “*BaSukkah*” (later incorporated as chapter 17 of *Sippur Pashut*), in which his usage of the transitive *sukkah merihah* (meaning “the *sukkah* gave off a [pleasant] smell”) caused a hail of criticism. The grammarian Avraham Avrunin took Agnon to task for using the verb “to smell” (סַחֵחַ) in any but its intransitive sense, claiming that the word cannot be used in the manner Agnon suggested, but only “to smell,” never to give off scent. Agnon used the incident to compose a fantastical story, one which both vindicated his usage and explained his understanding of the role of the modern Hebrew author, or at least his own view of the enterprise in which he was engaged.<sup>35</sup> Foreshadowing the words he would speak in accepting the Nobel Prize (cited above), he articulates a vision of the Hebrew author as an agent of divine service:

For love of our language and affection for the holy, I darken my countenance with constant study of Torah and starve myself over the words of our Sages. These I store in my belly so that they together will be present to my lips. If the Temple were still standing, I would be up there on the platform among my singing brothers, reciting each day the song that the Levites sang in the Temple. But since the Temple remains destroyed and we have no priests at services or Levites at song, instead I study Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, Mishnah, laws and legends, supplementary treatises and fine points of Torah and the works of the scribes. When I look at their words and see that of all the delights we possessed in ancient times there remains only this memory, my heart fills up with grief. That grief makes my heart tremble, and it is out of that trembling that I write stories, like one exiled from his father's palace who makes himself a little hut (*sukkah*) and sits there telling of the glory of his father's house.<sup>36</sup>

Sensitive to the grammarian's critique, Agnon was "worried that perhaps I had strayed from proper usage and done harm to the beauty of the language. I went and looked in the reference books but found no support for my usage." He consults with scholars, to no avail, since scholars "know everything except that particular thing you are looking for." That night, he is visited by the apparition of Rabbi Yaakov of Lissa, whereupon he awakens to discover his usage of the verb in the *Siddur Derekh Haim* of Rabbi Yaakov. Along the way, the Hebrew language itself, and his literary use of it, is compared to a *sukkah*—a temporary dwelling in exile to house the memory of the "delights of the past"; since the Holy Temple is destroyed and the author cannot sing with his brother Levites, instead he composes his stories. For Agnon, the vehicle for his craft is neither something to be feared nor something which can be emptied of meaning. Rather, it is a means to encapsulate and convey eternal messages, a sheltering *sukkah*, and a form of worship itself.

Conscious of the fact that I have written the preceding paragraphs in English, I am aware of the obvious complication in implementing a meaningful cultural consumption of Agnon's writings, and as an educator I am aware that this is first and foremost a curricular challenge: namely, the state of Hebrew in the (Anglo) Diaspora. If in past generations mastery of Hebrew was a tool and handmaiden to Torah study proper, as well as the mark of a *talmid hakham*, or even a merely literate *yode'a sefer*, today we must admit to a very high level of functional Hebrew illiteracy. As Hillel Halkin, one of our greatest living translators of Hebrew to English, has guiltily warned:

Until modern times, a Jew with a reading knowledge of Hebrew—and only such a Jew—had access to the thought and creativity of Jews everywhere . . . [Today] living in translation has its advantages for the Jewish people: it facilitates communication among them, disseminates Jewish culture, creates a new Jewish literacy to replace the old one that has been lost. Yet it dilutes the culture it disseminates, weakens Jewish distinctiveness, puts Jews at a remove from themselves.<sup>37</sup>

If part of our quest as religious consumers of culture is to know the “best that has been thought and said,” surely that must include modern Hebrew literature as well, especially as it chronicles and depicts the last century and a half of Jewish life and civilization.

If this is true of Berdyczewski, Bialik, Brenner, and the other great modern Hebrew writers, for us it ought be doubly true regarding Agnon, whose magisterial use of the language is a distillation of the dialects of the Beit Midrash throughout the millennia—biblical and mishnaic Hebrew, their style and rhythm; the cadences and “suggestive power” of Hazal, aggadot, and midrashim; allusions and *melitzot* to the entirety of the Jewish bookshelf. But that is merely on the aesthetic plane. If contemporary linguistic theory, post-Chomsky, is correct, that language is not the reflection of a universal human hard-wiring, but far more culturally specific and determined, with the ability of any one language to leave differentiated, deep, and lasting cultural, social,

and valuative impact on its native speakers,<sup>38</sup> we ought to reconsider our relationship to *Ivrit beIvrit*, and the literary treasures written in Hebrew (even when wonderful translations are available), as well as the role of fine Hebrew literature in the curriculum of Jewish schooling. If the canon of Torah literature is precious to us, we who accept the benefits of the encounter with literature (for reasons enumerated above), be we native Hebrew or English speakers, toiling in Israel or the Diaspora, as educators and parents we ought to reap the pedagogic and cultural benefits of the encounter with a literature which is the reflection and refraction of our educational, communal, and spiritual ideals. Toward that goal, reading Agnon cannot be surpassed.

And yet, Agnon does not do the work for us; rather he presents us with challenges and questions. Let us conclude by looking at one short story that captures the complexity of the themes described throughout this essay. The collection of short stories in the *Sefer haMa'asim* cycle draws the reader into a dreamlike, nearly surrealistic world, in which an anxious narrator is faced with the task of having to accomplish something which becomes a synecdoche for religious observance and commitment in general. Like the common anxiety dream in which one feels he is entering an exam unprepared, the protagonists of these stories anxiously stand on the eve of Rosh HaShanah (“HaTizmoret”), Yom Kippur (“Pi Shnayim”; “Im Kenisat haYom”), or Erev Pesach (e.g., “LeBeit Aba”). The 1932 story “HaNerot” starts right before the onset of Shabbat, with the narrator caught at the last minute, confronted with the fear: *Is it too late?*<sup>39</sup>

The two-page story is compact in the extreme: “All six days of Creation [the weekdays] I was busy and had no time to bathe. On Friday afternoon I freed myself of my affairs, took white garments, and went [to the sea] to bathe.” Typical of many stories in the cycle, the attempt to perform a seemingly mundane activity (take a bath, catch a bus, mail a letter, visit the doctor), becomes a Sisyphean affair. According to the form of these stories, an inevitable distraction, in this case in an “encounter”<sup>40</sup> with Mr. Haim Apropos, leads the narrator away from his purpose, and the reader is left with an inconclusive conclusion.

The whole story takes place at the intersection, or commingling, of holiness and profanity. Indeed, the action seems to be placed mostly within the time frame of *bein ha-shemashot*, the minutes which are neither day nor night (ספק יום ספק לילה), on the border between weekday and Shabbat.

The narrator follows Apropos (whose name in Hebrew connotes “an incidental life”; unintentionality) into a house he has never entered before, in which Shabbat has been prepared, yet the people are occupied with “secular matters.” A book-seller is displaying his wares—volumes written in Samaritan—and the narrator discovers that they are his own writings, as well as things he has thought to write but had not succeeded in doing so because his “pen couldn’t capture them.” Nevertheless, these writings and thoughts have been translated into that language which he does not understand, yet surprisingly recognizes as his own books.

At this point the image (ghost?) of his disapproving, pious, bearded grandfather appears, à la the “image of his father” which midrashically prevents Yosef from sin (Sota 36b).<sup>41</sup> Apropos disappears, and the narrator attempts to adjust the four candles which are tipping in their holders, and which he fears will ignite the table and cloth (*shulhan* and *mapah*), but he makes a mess of it with wax melting and breaking in his hands. With Shabbat about to begin, he is reminded that he is losing his chance to bathe, and he makes his way to the sea, where the “water stood like a wall,” and people in various states of dress or undress are standing around at the puddles caused by low tide. Unsure where to store his clothing, both clean and dirty, and fearful he won’t be able to recognize which is which when he returns, he alights onto a bridge or pier jutting out between land and sea, from which he hopes to take the plunge. At this point the bridge begins to tremble, and the story ends.

Like so much of Agnon’s writing, this story has a meta-artistic theme. That his own writings should appear to him in Samaritan plays into the crux of the question of whether his creation is holy or secular/profane. After all, the Samaritans are they who both “feared the Lord, yet they worshipped their graven images” (II Kings 17:41).

As the literary critic Dan Miron has pointed out, Agnon's writing aimed to "domesticate a foreign genre"—itself a reflection of this story's theme of the "twilight zone" between *kodesh* and *hol*. Is his writing a holy act? How does he view his literary output: a distillation of the corpus of biblical and rabbinic literature cast into forms perfected by Balzac, Flaubert, and Proust? When it is written in *lashon ha-kodesh* he is able to view the work in one way. When his work is presented back to him translated into a foreign language—and Samaritan, an inherently "*shatnez*" culture at that—he sees it in a different, secular light, one which can contain modes and profanities that he thought to write, yet could not in the original Hebrew.<sup>42</sup> The narrator is aware that his writing—like the atmosphere in the house, the time of the day, or the Samaritans themselves—is caught betwixt and between, suspended between heaven and earth, tradition and modernity, and he realizes the power and danger in such work.

Mr. Apropos distracts our narrator on his way to an act of purification (repentance?). The narrator tries to safeguard the *shulhan* and *mapah* (i.e., tradition or halakhic observance, here symbolized by the great *Shulhan Arukh* code of R. Yosef Karo and the glosses of R. Moshe Isserles), but ends up making a mess of it, when he is reminded that his chance to reach the sea (and true repair, *tikkun*, that he botches with the candles) is slipping away.

Baruch Kurzweil, the pioneer of Agnon criticism, points out that the scene on the seashore, with parodic elements of the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea, leaves the narrator wavering on a bridge between holiness and purity (the sea), on one side, and the secular, unclad folk on shore (a scene grotesque in an almost—again—Dantesque way).<sup>43</sup> We do not have space here to unpack every element of even this exceedingly short story, but we are clearly presented with the image of a writer caught between tradition and modernity, between observance and secularism, between sacred and profane—confronted with existential questions about the nature of his own literary creation—standing on a very narrow, shaky bridge between the two worlds he inhabits.

In discussing the purposes of literature, Hemdat states: "I didn't come to answer the question 'Where are you going?' though I do sometimes answer the question 'Where did you come from?'"

Religious readers of Agnon are reminded that we, too, are still on the shaky bridge, caught in the modern world between past and future, between "where we are coming from" and "where we are going," between *kodesh* and *hol*. Many Agnon critics point out that his oeuvre is preoccupied with the questions: Is it too late to go back? to return? to repent? to repair? This is certainly true, but at the same time he is asking: Have we ever left? Can we ever leave? Indeed, we are caught on the shaky bridge. By answering the question of where we come from, Agnon helps us consider where we are going, and how we each might find our own way back, as well as forward, as modern readers and as thinking, religious beings. The ending of "HaNerot" is indeterminate, leaving the narrator swaying on the bridge, for there can be no ending. We each must write one for ourselves.

## NOTES

1. S. Y. Agnon, *MeAtzmi el Atzmi*, pp. 200–201. All quotations from Agnon are from the most recent edition of the Collected Writings, *Kol Sippurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, published by Schocken Books in twenty-three volumes (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv), between 1998 and 2003. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2. Hemdat in *Shira*, p. 119. The minor figure Hemdat, a Hebrew author, makes appearances throughout Agnon's works, and is his most clearly autobiographical character.
3. Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. v. See also p. 41 for the assertion that a "consequence of the existential concept of religion is the disappearance of the gap between the sacred and the secular realm. If religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, this state cannot be restricted to a special realm."
4. There is as yet no full-length English biography of Agnon, but I am told that Dan Laor's *Hayye Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998) is being translated. In the meantime, see the "cultural biography" that serves as the first chapter of Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 1–28. Unable as I am in this brief essay to analyze Agnon's writings and simultaneously summarize

each story or novel I refer to, I direct the uninitiated reader to Band's comprehensive volume, which includes excellent summaries of almost everything published in Agnon's lifetime.

5. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), p. 102. For Rabbi Lichtenstein's writings, see (inter alia) the essays "A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View" and "The End of Learning," in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1 (Jersey City: Ktav, 2003), and "Torah and General Culture: Confluence and Conflict," in *Judaism's Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?*, ed. Jacob J. Schacter (Northvale, N.J.: Aronson, 1997), pp. 217–292.
6. Emuna Yaron, *Perakim MiHayyai* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 2005), chap. 36. (Mrs. Yaron elaborated on this in a private conversation when I met with her on December 10, 2009.) Even in the period when Agnon was not ritually observant (from his arrival in Yaffo in 1908, through his sojourn in Germany starting in 1912, and ending with his return to Jerusalem in 1924), there is no sense of rebellion, nor of a theological or philosophical crisis. If he abandoned *shmirat ha-mitzvot*, it was only in practice, never in sentiment. Scholem writes that even during the period in Germany, Agnon still "gave the impression of being a bearer of spiritual tradition." Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 97.  
 Agnon's period of nonobservance is alluded to in various autobiographical layers embedded within the stories, yet neither the reasons for it nor for his return to observance are ever explained. See, however, the evocative short story "Shnei Zugot" in *Elu veElu*, pp. 199–205, regarding his neglected childhood tefillin, their destruction in the 1924 fire that devastated his home, and his subsequent return to *shmirat ha-mitzvot*.
7. Gershom Scholem, interviewed by Dan Miron, in *S. Y. Agnon BaBikoret HaIvrit 1*, ed. A. Barshai (Tel Aviv: Schocken/Open University, 1991), p. 362. For a treatment of the Agnon-Scholem relationship, see Gerold Necker, "Gershom Scholem and Shmuel Yosef Agnon: Metamorphoses of a Friendship," in *Agnon and Germany*, ed. H. J. Becker and H. Weiss (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2010), pp. 41–62.
8. *MeAtzmi el Atzmi*, pp. 87–88 (full speech available in Hebrew and English at NobelPrize.org; audio recording in media section of AgnonHouse.org.il).
9. Amos Oz, *Shtikat HaShamayim: Agnon Mishtomem al Elohim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993), p. 9. See Shalom Carmy's review essay of Oz's *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, *First Things* (August/September 2005): 54–59, for a portrait of a contemporary Israeli author who cannot fathom the idea of religious people as being in any way complex.
10. Cf. Aharon Lichtenstein, "HaYesodot haHiyuyiyim veva-Shelili'im beTarbut Maaravit," in *Tokh veKelipa beTarbut haMaaravit* (Alon Shvut: Tevunot, 1996), pp. 11–19 (see at p. 17).
11. Among the first to analyze the discrepancy between author and narrator was

- Leah Goldberg, "S. Y. Agnon—HaSofer veGiburav," in *LeAgnon Shay* (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency, 1966), pp. 47–61. On this issue see also Dov Sadan, *Al Shai Agnon* (Tel Aviv: HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 1978), pp. 21–23 ff., and Esther Fuchs, "The Unreliable Narrator in Agnon's Ancestral Tales," *Prooftexts* 3, no. 3 (September 1983): 278–284.
12. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 97.
  13. Gershon Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative: Agnon's Agunot," in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. G. H. Hartman and S. Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 285, 286.
  14. "Shnei Talmidei Hakhim," in *Samukh veNireh*, pp. 7–44; "Malakh haMavet ve-haShochet," in *HaAish vevaEitzim*, pp. 198–220.
  15. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., *The Verbal Icon* (London: Methuen, 1954), pp. 12–13, 15.
  16. Avraham Holtz, *Mara'ot uMekorot: Mahadurah Me'ueret shel "Hakhnasat Kallah" leShay Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1995).
  17. Wimsatt, *Verbal Icon*, p. 255.
  18. Walter J. Ong, "The Jinnee in the Well-Wrought Urn," *Essays in Criticism* 4, no. 3 (1954): 309–320; quotation at pp. 312, 320.
  19. This is true *qua* literary analysis, but should not discount using Agnon's fiction as the basis for interesting halakhic explorations. However, the two should not be confused. Good examples of the latter can be found in E. E. Urbach, "Shnei Talmidei Hakhamim Shehayu Be'reinu: Mekorot uPerush" in *LeAgnon Shay* (Jerusalem: Jewish Agency, 1966), pp. 9–25; and in Yitzhak Bart, "Ba Harug beRaglav," in Yeshivat Har Etzion's *Daf Keshet*, no. 960 (3 Iyar 5764) and "MiBa'ad leKol HaTzinorot" in no. 961 (10 Iyar 5764), available at [etzion.org.il](http://etzion.org.il).
  20. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, p. 206.
  21. Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names* (London: Athlone Press, 1996), p. 9.
  22. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, p. 199, who also points out that "any discussion of Kafka's influence upon Agnon ignores the simple historical fact that Agnon wrote 'Kafkaesque' prose before Kafka was known in Prague, let alone Buczacz or Jaffa." Scholem observed that Agnon just as likely was influenced by the tales of Rebbe Nachman of Breslov—an influence which would have lent the same "Kafkaesque" aura (*On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 108–109). See especially "HaMashal vevaNimshal" in *Ir uMelo'ah*, pp. 405–451, which is not merely Dantesque, but clearly echoes and has components modeled on the *Divine Comedy*, albeit in the guise of a Hasidic folktale.
  23. The autobiographical antecedents of the story were in the 1930 visit Agnon made to Buczacz, as described in Dan Laor, *S. Y. Agnon Hebetim Hadashim* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1995), pp. 154–174, and in Agnon's letters home, *Esterlein Yakirati*, pp. 283–291. See also *Ir uMelo'ah*, pp. 223–224. Although published in book form in 1939, the novel was mostly completed in July 1938, and initially serialized in *Ha'aretz* starting in October 1938.
  24. *Ore'ah Nata LaLun*, pp. 60–61.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 343–344.

26. Steven Katz, *The Centrifugal Novel: S. Y. Agnon's Poetics of Composition* (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 1999), pp. 52–55. Days after Rav Kook's death, Agnon wrote to Dov Sadan, "The Rav's death has greatly depressed me . . . It's clear to me that for generations we have not had in Israel a genius and *tzaddik* like him, and it seems to me that a few generations will pass before we see his like again." *MiSod Hakhamim*, p. 236; see also *MeAtzmi el Atzmi*, pp. 190–202.
27. *Ore'ah Nata LaLun*, pp. 344–345; *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 473–474. Cf. Rav Kook, *Orot HaTorah*, chap. 13, on "*Torat Eretz Yisrael*." I have added the square-bracketed references here to aid in the unpacking of sources. Agnon only very rarely did that type of footnoting, assuming that readers either would or would not catch his references on their own, aiming instead for the richness and cadences of the rabbinic echoes.
28. I am surprised that, to the best of my research, none of the commentators on this novel makes this point regarding the name Bach. The poignancy of the Bach family is compounded when we consider that Agnon revisits the character of the maimed son Daniel in his novella *Kisuy HaDam* (posthumously published in *Lifnim Min HaHomah*), in which we learn that Daniel has been killed in the Holocaust.
29. On Menahem as stand-in for the role of Rav Kook's thought in *Tmol Shilshom*, see Boaz Arpaly, *Rav Roman* (Tel Aviv: Kibbutz HaMeuhad, 1998), pp. 124–125.
30. The letter was written in German, and was only first published in English in William Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew, Ghatly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926," *Prooftexts* 10, no. 3 (1990): 413–433. See also Annabel Herzog, "'Monolingualism' or the Language of God: Scholem and Derrida on Hebrew and Politics," *Modern Judaism* 29, no. 2 (2009): 226–238, and bibliography in n. 1 there. Agnon's own contribution to the *festschrift* was an early version of what would become his novella *Bilvav Yamim* (published in *Elu veElu*, pp. 391–444), his classic tale of *hibat Zion*.
31. In Cutter, "Ghostly Hebrew," pp. 417–418.
32. H. N. Bialik, "LeShe'elat Tarbut Ivrit," in his *Devarim SheBa'al Peh*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1935), p. 198.
33. H. N. Bialik, *Shirim uFizmonim LiYeladim* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1933), p. 19.
34. Indeed, *Tmol Shilshom* can be read as a critique on secular Zionism, and the degree to which its innovations were haunted by what it attempted to supplant. See Todd Hasak-Lowy, "A Mad Dog's Attack on Secularized Hebrew," *Prooftexts* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 167–198, who calls this the novel's theme of the "return of the repressed."
35. The story "Hush haRe'ah" appears in *Elu veElu*, pp. 237–244; translated as "The Sense of Smell," in *A Book That Was Lost* (New Milford, Conn.: Toby Press, 2008), pp. 149–156. See Emuna Yaron, *Perakim MiHayyai*, p. 48 for interesting biographical background. See also the final chapter of Aharon Bar-Adon, *S. Y. Agnon uTehiyat HaLashon Halvrit* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1977).

36. "Hush haRe'ah," p. 238; trans. from "Sense of Smell," p. 151–152.
37. Hillel Halkin, "The Translator's Paradox," *Commentary* (June 2008): 38–43.
38. See Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass: Why the World Looks Different in Other Languages* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).
39. "HaNerot," in *Samukh veNireh*, pp. 100–101.
40. "Mr. Haim Apropos encountered me (*paga bi*)" suggests identifying Apropos as the embodiment of the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil inclination), as we hear in the echo of Kiddushin 30b, "If that rascal (*menuval*; Rashi: *yetzer ha-ra*) encounters you, drag him to the Beit Midrash."
41. Interestingly, a different character appears to the narrator "in a window" to remind him of the imminent onset of Shabbat.
42. Agnon's decades-long struggle with his final novel, *Shira*, whose plot revolves around an act of adultery, was rumored to have been connected to a similar ambivalence about allowing his pen to "capture" such scenes.
43. Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al Sippurei S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1975), pp. 367–368.