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ARYEH WINEMAN

Agnon's "Linen Man": Abraham and Satan in the Land of Ambiguity

AGNON IS ASSOCIATED WITH alternatives to the realistic story as he forged his byways into the folktale and into surrealism to one degree or another. Most of the short works focusing upon the town of his birth, Buczacz, which are collected in his posthumous volume, *'Ir umelo'ah (A Town and Its Fullness),*[1] however, are essentially realistic stories which offer a concrete picture of the life of the Jews of Buczacz and of the town itself. This is true even when the author colors his stories with strokes drawn from the world of folk-imagination and from aggadic and pietistic lore. An aggadic motif, present and recurring in such a story, then invites the question: what is the significance of the motif for the story and how does the narrative art manifest in the story deal with the motif? We shall ask these questions focusing upon one such story included in the volume and suggest that what happens to the motif brings the reader close to the thematic core of the story.

Ha'ish lavush habadim ("The Man Clad in Linen")[2] describes the life of Jews in Buczacz and in the surrounding area in emphatically realistic terms. The reader acquires a very down-to-earth picture of the town and of the workings of the local Jewish community and its synagogue and follows the activity of a merchant who travels to sell the linen garments which his wife makes. The story also tells of persecution, slander and the absence of justice countered by examples of deep piety.

At various points in the story, however, the narrator appeals to another dimension, one clearly transcending the natural, to explain

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both the ways of behavior in the community and the strange course of events. That other dimension in this case consists of nothing less than the acts of Satan and, in particular, the latter's dialogues with both God and humans. The reader is informed, for example, that the practice of coming even a few hours early to the synagogue on the morning after Yom Kippur has its source in Satan's dialogue with God, lest Satan maintain that the Jews, having been acquitted on their day of judgment, now permit themselves to be lax in their religious duties (p. 89). In a similar vein, following the *'amidah,* the silent devotion, in the evening prayer of Rosh Hashanah, Psalm 24 is recited because it contains a prescription for livelihood, children and life. If this were to be recited at an earlier point in the service, then Satan, knowing of it, could accuse the Jews of praying not for the sake of God but rather for themselves, their own lives and the blessings of life. The psalm is therefore added only following the *'amidah* when presumably Satan, believing the prayer to have concluded, departs the scene (pp. 92–93). So much for particular prayer-practices as counter-strategies against Satan's accusations.

More central to the role of Satan is a hypothetical explanation of the behavior of Gabriel, a devout hero-figure who later dies a martyr's death.[3] A paradigm of piety and a Jew blessed with a most gifted voice, Gabriel consistently refuses to accept any remuneration from the community for his chanting in the synagogue. But on one occasion he does, and the only explanation offered by the wise for his accepting such a gift on one crucial occasion concerns Satan's envy. As one who chants with such purity of intent, Gabriel moves those who worship with him to repent and to perform *mitsvot* and good deeds. In order to turn Satan's attention from him, divine Providence seeks in every way to induce Gabriel to compromise his principles, and when he refuses to do so, Providence, through a series of apparent "coincidences," brings to his attention a book he sorely desires but cannot afford. This is God's response to Satan's envy (pp. 111–12).

One might well suggest that these explicit references to Satan occur in order to intimate the presence of Satan's dialogue where it is thoroughly implicit in the story: in Gabriel's interior monologue conflicting thoughts and ways of reasoning present the subtle signs of psychological indecision. It is Gabriel's firm policy to refuse remuneration in return for his chanting even when such payment is repeatedly offered. When he is seeking a way to acquire the book which so interests him, the thought enters his head to take the money for the book from the tithe which he owes. He rejects this prompting, but his mind returns to rationalize that others have in fact done similarly. Then we are told that he is "distressed concerning himself in that his *yetser* [evil inclination] still sees him as a likely victim, thinking it can easily win him over with these kinds of arguments" (p. 97).

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The mention of Satan and the motif of Satan's dialogue, which occur both considerably before and after this point in the story, suggest to the reader overtones of the aggadah in which Satan tries to tempt Abraham on the latter's way to Moriah to fulfill the command to offer his son as a sacrifice.[4] In a midrashic rendering of the biblical episode, Satan presents various logical arguments to deter Abraham from his compliance with the request, but Abraham rejects them all. The reader recalls, as well, the identity of Satan and the evil inclination in a talmudic source commenting on the figure of Satan in the book of Job.[5] Gabriel's steadfastness can be likened to Abraham's journey to Moriah, and his internal doubts parallel the role of Satan in the midrashic expansion of the biblical account of the Binding of Isaac.[6]

The internal ambivalence recurs. Later, when Gabriel has the opportunity to purchase the book but can't afford it, the *gabbai* (official) of the synagogue once again brings him a bag of coins, this time accompanied by a logical argument explaining why this particular gift at this precise time should rightly be given to him. In this connection we hear twice of *raʿyone libo* (the ideas of his heart), signaling psychological indecision and ambivalence (p. 103) as he is pulled in diverse directions and supplies himself reasons for accepting the gift. Still later in the same episode we hear that Gabriel has "reasoned with his *holy mind* (*bedaʿato haqedoshah*) that God would not have brought the roll of coins his way if not for the purpose of [acquiring] *Torat haʿolah*," the book he desired (p. 105, emphasis added).

The Akedah reverberates in the story in other ways. When Gabriel's grandson and namesake is urged to accept payment for *his* chanting, he is told, "*Qaḥ, yedidi, qaḥ* . . ." ("Take, my friend, take . . .") (p. 90). The recurring verb recalls Gen. 22:2 in which God commands Abraham to *take* his son, Isaac, and offer him as a sacrificial offering. Later when Gabriel, having accepted the bag of money, goes to purchase the book, from Gershon Wolff, the latter tells him "*zekhe Rabi Gavriel bemeqaḥkha veqaḥ et hasefer*" ("take possession of what you have purchased; take the book") (p. 108). And of course the title of the book itself, *Torat haʿolah* (*The Law of the Burnt-Offering*) contains a reference to the particular kind of sacrificial offering that was supposed to be Isaac's fate.[7]

When Gabriel, grandfather and namesake of the narrator of the former's story, does agree to accept the money so that he might acquire that book, he never returns home from Gershon Wolff's house. With book in hand he finds himself at the scene of an uproar. A woman found stealing sacramental bread from a church insists that a Jew employing witchcraft had forced her to do it. She then points to Gabriel as the guilty party and his book as his foul instrument. Gabriel is beaten by the mob, imprisoned and ultimately drawn and quartered. The *gabbai*

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explains that it was the absence of a king in Poland which brought the gift of money, originally collected for the queen's jewels, into the hands of Gabriel. But the reader also notes ironically that the absence of a king at that particular time also made for a state of lawlessness in which enmity toward Jews could be acted out undeterred (p. 110). The anarchy of that interim created the space for such occurrences as Gabriel's unjust punishment and death.

On the most obvious level of the story, then, it would appear that Gabriel comes to a cruel end because he succumbed to temptation. The same story, however, can be read very differently. Gabriel's great desire for a book bearing the name *Law of the Burnt-Offering* suggests his own longing to become a martyr. His widow quotes the words of her late husband while he was imprisoned before his death: "All my days I placed before my mind those saintly ones who, in their death as martyrs, sanctify God's Name. On the very day that I went to acquire the book, *Law of the Burnt-Offering,* I was consumed by my great desire to offer myself as a sacrifice to God" (p. 106). Read in the light of the above passage, accepting the money to purchase the book does not represent a failing or even a turning-point on Gabriel's part. His death is not a punishment but a privilege. The book's very title indicates its role in bringing him to his desired goal, a longing fulfilled in fact as well as in the intent to be himself an offering to God. His death is, for him, a spiritual fulfillment, an idea suggested by the meaning implicit in the word *ʿolah:* ascent. This point is underscored by the fact that the *ḥazzan* who had taught Gabriel the chants for the Days of Awe met his death while reciting the verse, "Who will ascend (*yaʿaleh*) to the mountain of the Lord?" (Ps 24:3; p. 106).

One might suggest a deeper logic underlying the narrative. Both Gabriels, the grandfather who died a martyr's death and his namesake-grandson-narrator, not only possess exceptional voices but also chant the liturgy with such purity of motive that they become virtual embodiments of prayer. The grandson likens the story of his grandfather to an act of prayer as he whispers his own prayer before beginning to recount the story (pp. 90–91). Later, when the grandson interrupts the story to pray, saying that he will continue "provided God brings me to life after the prayer," one of those present remarks, "I would be astonished if he were not among those who offer their very lives in their prayer" (p. 107). In the story self-sacrifice is perceived as the apex of the life of prayer.[8]

The aspiration to die a martyr's death—counter to normative Jewish teaching—has been attributed specifically to Rabbi Joseph Karo, author of the *Shulḥan ʿarukh,*[9] and linked to his practice of intense ascetic penance.[10] In his *Maggid mesharim,* Karo reports the repeated promise of the *maggid,* the angel which, he claimed, dictated to him the text of his

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mystical diary, that Karo would be privileged to die as a martyr for the Sanctification of God's Name and to ascend as a burnt-offering before God.[11] The major commentator on Karo's legal code was Rabbi Mose Isserles,[12] author of *Torat ha'olah* (*Law of the Burnt-Offering*), the book which Gabriel purchased with the money he had accepted.

After developing the story-line as an analogy to the Abraham-Satan dialogue in the midrash, the author turns to build upon other associations of the Akedah in a way which questions the very analogy he has so carefully and subtly constructed. The story testifies to Agnon's almost infinite playfulness with a traditional text and motif, in this case with the complex of themes associated with the Akedah. Gabriel's inner dialogue can, therefore, also be read as a dialogue not with Satan—or with his own evil inclination with which Satan is identified—but with a highly devout sense of vocation.

The ambiguous treatment of the motif of the Abraham-Satan dialogue comes to exemplify other marks of ambiguity in the story. Such ambiguity surrounds the understanding of Gabriel's death. While his death suggests ascent as he died as a martyr, the culmination of the life of piety, his grandson is careful not to repeat his grandfather's crucial flaw, and the reader responds to the same occurrence of death in very different terms. Gabriel's death is felt to be tragic and senseless, and the fate of his corpse merely underscores the utterly absurd nature of his death.

In proceeding to the larger question of who or what caused the pattern of events in the story, the reader is also directed to contradictory conclusions. Did Gabriel's affliction and death flow as punishment following his compromise of his principle? Or did God bring him to such an end, as is suggested, in order that he might come unblemished to the life of the World-to-Come (p. 104)?[13] Or, again moving beyond the tone of the narration to the presumed norms of the reader's responses: does his fate indicate, rather, the absence of any meaning in his life, and does his absurd death place in question the value of his piety? Early in the story a tale of miraculous deliverance from the hands of a murderer is told (p. 88);[14] the contrast, in retrospect, is only too obvious: in the world beyond the confines of the pious folk-tale, there is no deliverance.

"The Linen Man," then, tells of two persons, one the namesake of the other, who represent an exalted degree of spiritual and moral wholeness. In both Gabriels, grandfather and grandson, the author has painted a single portrait of saintliness. The grandfather is referred to as *shalem* ("whole") by God, as it were, even after accepting the money to purchase the book (p. 104). And yet it is his body which is in the end cut into pieces. The reader is astounded by the measure of piety of both Gabriels, by the grandfather-martyr's determination to accept all his

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sufferings in joy (p. 105) and by the grandson's almost observing Yom Kippur two days (p. 89). But the reader is also astonished by the cruelty, pain and absurdity of the grandfather's punishment and death, and one cannot avoid asking the question of whether this is the reward for a truly pious man. When the grandfather is assaulted with his newly acquired book in hand, it takes place across from the court house, *beit hamishpat,* literally "the house of justice."

In "The Linen Man" ambiguity also wears the face of indeterminacy. In reference to the question of just when it was that the grandson would have been able to resume his account of his grandfather, the narrator states, "in respect to this type of thing, I say there are dilemmas in the world which we are unable to resolve" (p. 108). And later, speaking of the first Gabriel's fate: "In a world consisting entirely of questions lacking answers, it is a big question; in a world with no place for unresolved questions, it is no question at all" (p. 112). How do we take this statement? Does it tell us that in a dogmatic and closed perspective on the world allowing for no questions, then this, too, is not a question? Or, from a point-of-view which does not posit a faith in God and His justice and ordering of events, does the account of Gabriel constitute a real question? There is a question, and hence a story, only assuming the truth of faith; without that assumption, and positing instead a meaningless universe, there are no grounds for the story, no issue to be raised. For such a question, simple answers are not acceptable.

The very end of the story tells of the death of the grandson, who, knowing the details of his grandfather's life and death, remains adamant in his refusal to accept any payment for his chanting. His death is the one supernatural intrusion into the narrative. In a state of perfect health, he nevertheless knows that he is about to die and makes all the preparations. His is a death which, in the lore of Jewish pietism, befits a saintly person.[15] Unlike his grandfather he receives a proper Jewish burial (p. 113), but like his grandfather's death, his death, too, is portrayed as an act of love.

None could resolve the enigma involved in the grandson's peculiar death; only God knows. In a story having a thematics of ambiguity[16] which is raised to the level of the aesthetic, the lack of any single or acceptable final hypothesis merges with a sense of resignation, an absolute inability, on our part, to interpret happenings. The fate of the aggadic motif in the story alludes to an infinitely larger ambiguity as the author wrestles, in the narrative, with ultimately unanswerable questions.

Troy, N.Y.

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NOTES

1. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1973.

2. *'Ir umelo'ah*, pp. 84–113. Page references in this article refer to this edition. Part of the story had previously appeared in *Ha'arets*, September 29 and October 10, 1965.

3. The "man clad in linen" mentioned in Ezekiel 9:4, 6 is identified in both talmudic and midrashic sources with the angel Gabriel, whose name appears in Daniel 8:16 and 9:21. TB Shabbat 55a; *Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, *Emor*, III, 84. By association, the two figures named Gabriel in the story suggest virtually angelic figures in a human setting.

4. *Bereshit rabbah* 56:4; *Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber I, 114; TB Sanhedrin 89b, as well as later parallels.

5. TB Baba Batra 16a, where, according to the opinion of Resh lakesh, Satan is identified both with the evil inclination (the term based upon Gen. 6:5) and with the angel of death.

6. Agnon's story, *Lefi hatsa'ar hasakhar* in *Ha'esh veha'etsim*, vol. 8 of *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef 'Agnon* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1969): 5–19 is also built on the Akedah-motif and on allusions to its later exegesis. See A. Wineman, "Paytan and Paradox," *HUCA* (1978): 295–310, included in the author's *Aggadah ve'omanut: 'iyunim bitsirat 'Agnon* (Jerusalem, 1982), pp. 35–49.

7. *Torat ha'olah* by Rabbi Moses Isserles. This work, which appeared in Prague in 1570, explains the significance of the sacrificial offerings among other subjects in the framework of an attempt to establish a basic identity of philosophy and Kabbalah. Agnon refers to this book in *Korot betenu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1979), p. 64.

8. Note, for example, Zvi Hirsch ben Aaron Samuel Kaidanover, *Kav hayashar* (Frankfort, 1705), 59:5, and Menahem Azariah Fano, *Kanfe yonah* (Koretz 1786), part one, section 61, 24b; part two, section 109, 57b–58a.

9. R. J. Z. Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo: Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford, 1962), pp. 151–52.

10. Ibid., p. 151.

11. Ibid., p. 98.

12. The *ReMA*, d. 1572.

13. The Zohar suggests concerning the biblical Enoch whom "God took" (Gen. 5:24), "When the Holy One, blessed be He, is aware that they would commit a sin if they lived longer, He removes them before their time" (Zohar II, 10b); tr. Soncino edition 3 (London & New York, 1984) 31. The expression from the Enoch passage is echoed in the story's mention of Rabbi Amnon, the medieval paytan, concerning whom we are told, "for God took him" (p. 106).

14. The tale related is found in *Ḥemdat yamim* (Venice? 1763), *Yamim nora'im*, 49a and also in *Or ḥadash* (1671) 50c by Benjamin Ze'ev Bochner, where it is told in the name of Moses Meizlesh of Cracow.

15. A very similar situation occurs in the conclusion of *Tehillah*. See *'Ad henah*, vol. 7 of *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef 'Agnon*, pp. 205–6.

16. On the subject of ambiguity, see C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York, 1958), pp. 126, 152; T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 52–53, 150; and Sh. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction—Contemporary Poetics* (London and New York, 1983), pp. 103, 121.

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