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Author(s): Nehama Aschkenasy

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“AND A SMALL BOY LEADING THEM”:

*The Child and the Biblical Landscape in Agnon, Oz, and Appelfeld**

by

Nehama Aschkenasy

Each of the three childhood stories, S. Y. Agnon’s “*Baya’ar ūva’ir*” [In the Forest and in the Town] (1939), Amos Oz’s *Panther bamartef* [Panther in the Basement] (1995), and Aharon Appelfeld’s *Layish* (1994), offers a child protagonist who inhabits two parallel landscapes: his own environment and the biblical universe.¹ These child protagonists relive a biblical experience, but the degree to which the respective writers make them participants in evoking the biblical sphere is different in each story. These stories exhibit distinctly different paradigms of the art of embedding the biblical text in a modern, secular narrative and of the status it is given within it. In Agnon’s tale, the scriptural intertext is inseparable from a dense network of Judaic master texts, discoursing with and commenting on each other. In Oz’s novella, the biblical arena is the ancient parallel of present-day reality, the admired yet challenged national epic that mirrors and informs current political and territorial aspirations. In Appelfeld’s novella, the biblical pattern is a remote, foreboding myth, not fully recognized by the actors in the modern tale yet powerful enough to hover over them and determine their destiny.

In Agnon’s and Oz’s tales, the narrative voice alternates between that of a child, imparting a sense of immediacy to the events, and that of the adult looking back to relate a childhood memory; in Appelfeld’s tale, by contrast, only the boy’s perspective is provided. Agnon’s story opens with “when I was a youth, I spent most of my time in the forest” (“*Baya’ar ūva’ir*,” p. 267), and Oz’s story also starts with the adult’s voice: “I have been called a traitor many times in my life. The first time was when I was twelve and quarter . . .” (*Panther*, p. 1). Appelfeld begins with the fifteen-year old Layish introducing himself in the present tense: “My name is Layish, and those who like me call me Layshu” (*Layish*, p. 5). Thus, unlike Agnon’s

* Dedicated to my uncle, Efraim Gottlieb z”l, Gershom Scholem’s distinguished disciple and a ground-breaking scholar of Jewish mysticism, in the hope that future scholars will expound on the Kabbalist elements in S. Y. Agnon’s story and his entire body of work (and perhaps also in the works of Aharon Appelfeld, Efraim Gottlieb’s student at Hebrew University) more thoroughly than I undertook in this article.—Nehama (Gottlieb) Aschkenasy.

1. References are made to the following editions: “*Baya’ar ūva’ir*,” in S. Y. Agnon, *Elu Ve’elu* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1972), pp. 267–278 (the story is available in English translation, “In the Forest and in the City” in Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *A Dwelling Place of My People: Sixteen Stories of the Chasidim*, trans. J. Weinberg and H. Russel [Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983], pp. 94–109); *Panther in the Basement*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (New York: Harcourt, 1997), hereafter *Panther*; *Layish* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1994).

and Oz's children, who have grown to adulthood and therefore are able to alternate between the child's and the adult's perspectives, Appelfeld's *Layish*, it may be presumed, will be forever locked in the child's voice because he did not survive to re-shape his story as an adult (even though the historical moment of the tale may be two generations before the Holocaust).

In each story, the biblical pattern scaffolds the surface narrative and expands it spatially and chronologically, standing in direct and opposite relation to the child's experiences; yet its purpose and the degree to which each protagonist is aware of it differ from story to story. "*Baya'ar ūva'ir*" displays a multi-tiered structure, which is the mark of Agnon's artistic masonry, welding biblical style with other layers of the entire Judaic literary heritage. It exemplifies the prototypical Agnon narrative, which consists of multiple intertextual levels from the entire historical spectrum of Hebrew letters and also reads, as Gershon Shaked has pointed out, "as if" it is itself one of those "sacred" or "semi sacred" texts.² The biblical landscape in this story is the Garden of Eden, to which the child transports himself by saturating the Galician forest outside his hometown with the language of Genesis and Psalms as well as midrashic commentaries and Kabbalist imaginings. Oz's biblical landscape is the Israelite national territory, more specifically, Jeremiah's Jerusalem during the Babylonian siege. In Appelfeld's narration of a bizarre pilgrimage to Jerusalem in pre-holocaust East Europe, the biblical landscape is that of the desert in which the ancient Israelites meandered before entering the Promised Land. Another desolate biblical scenery, the unspecified Genesis backdrop for the sale of Joseph, is also evoked.

The discourse of home and homelessness is also addressed through the biblical embeddings in each story. For Agnon's protagonist, home is the thicket of Judaic texts, producing an Edenic state of mind carried with the child wherever he goes and contrasted with the parents'rejected home and the "Zionist House" in the Galician town. In Oz's story, home is pre-statehood Jerusalem, about to become the official capital of the Jewish "national home" and at the same time also the very same compound of alleys and markets where the prophet Jeremiah roamed. For Appelfeld's orphan, "home" is a caravan, by definition rootless and impermanent, supposedly moving toward a home in Jerusalem yet actually on an endless circular trajectory, never coming to a stop or reaching its destination.

Agnon's story, set in the *shtetl* of the writer's childhood in the latter part of the nineteenth century, belongs to a cluster of pseudo-autobiographical stories which the author collected under the title *Be'ohel beiti* [In the Sanctuary of my Home] as part of the volume *Elu Ve'elu*.³ Although the boy is unnamed in this sto-

2. *Panim 'aherot biezirato shel Shai 'Agnon (Agnon—A Writer with a Thousand Faces)* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989), p. 12.

3. Agnon's critics from Gustav Krojanker to Dan Laor have seen in Agnon's childhood stories strong autobiographical elements. Krojanker discusses five stories in *Yetzirato shel Shay 'Agnon* [The Works of S.Y. Agnon], trans. from the German by Jacob Gottschalk with Introduction and notes by Dan Laor, Jerusalem: Bialik, 1991, pp. 56–62. 7–50; Because Krojanker submitted his manuscript to Schocken in 1938 (Laor's Introduction, p. 15) he was unaware of the present story. But Agnon has seen the childhood stories as belonging together, later including the five stories discussed by Krojanker, together with other stories, as well as "*Bay'ar uba'ir*," in a collection entitled "*Be'ohel beiti*" as part of the volume *Elu ve'elu* (Laor's introduction, p. 15).

ry (unlike in some of the other stories), the narrative voice is clearly autobiographical. The adult voice betrays nostalgia towards an Edenic childhood period, an attitude found in many of Agnon’s works as well as in his other childhood stories, notably “The Kerchief.”⁴

Agnon’s teenage boy creates a duality of opposites between the town and the forest, identifying the forest in which he strolls as the Genesis garden that “God planted” before humanity built the town, “which enslaves the body and tortures the soul” (“*Bayá’ar ūva’ir*,” p. 270). The forest offers a timeless sphere where the boy can miraculously overcome temporal and geographical constraints and be transported to the primordial Garden. Agnon’s child-narrator escapes to the forest as both a place and a state of mind, seeing it as a pristine Edenic realm that displays and celebrates the magnificence of creation. The dichotomy of “forest and town” represents the contrast between freedom and constriction, abandon and restraint, pristine beauty and ugliness, a vision of God’s handiwork merged into one seamless creation and a man-made reality in which demarcation lines are drawn between man and man, humanity and nature. Yet, the neat duality of opposites entertained by the child protagonist soon becomes more complicated: The forest, where the glory and goodness of the creator are best reflected, also harbors the criminal who violated God’s law of “thou shalt not kill.” Thus, the freedom, abandon, and spontaneity of the forest also represent crime and mayhem, revealing tolerance of lawlessness and a potential for danger.

At the heart of the child’s narrative of his “season in Paradise” is his bizarre and disturbing encounter with an escaped convict, culminating with the child watching the criminal being taken away by the authorities and overcome by a mix of conflicting emotions, guilt, awe, regret, sympathy, and even admiration.⁵ The child’s otherness makes him more open to the antinomian, the social or cosmic other, allowing him to view the social pariah as victim and respond with sympathy to what he sees as the outlaw’s challenge to society and its rules. A strange bond of secret complicity and emotional kinship is created between the child and the hardened criminal, and the encounter becomes a defining moment not only for the impressionable child but for the convict, who is introduced to the sphere of innocence and the concept of religious prayer and blessing by the child. The connection created between the two leads to some kind of redemption for the outlaw and to a more nuanced understanding of good and evil for the child narrator.

It becomes clear that the Edenic forest is for the child a zone of unspoiled wholeness and of rebellion and anti-culture. The protagonist who flees the town in favor of the forest or the cemetery as a form of protest or disgust with social norms or laws is a familiar image in Agnon’s works, appearing in novellas such as *Vehaya he’aqov lemishor* [And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight] and *Sippur*

4. In *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. I. M. Lask (New York: Schocken, 1970), pp. 45–59.

5. Elsewhere I have elaborated on the child-criminal encounter and pointed out similarities between this story and the opening of Charles Dickens’s novel *Great Expectations*, see “Agnon’s Dickensian Moment: ‘*Bayá’ar ūva’ir*,” in *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 2: 2 (Fall, 2003), pp. 174–190.

pashut [A Simple Story].⁶ In the present story the voice of “*nómos*” is represented by the father, worried over the child’s neglect of his Talmudic studies, and the mother, concerned about the child’s avoidance of the regular meals at home (“*Bayá’ar ūva’ir*,” p. 269). Family meals in Agnon’s works sometimes take on a mythic, sacred quality, as in “The Kerchief,” but they may also represent bourgeois greed and vulgarity, as in *A Simple Story*.⁷ Here, meals at regular times in the day stand for a life controlled by the clock and the repressive values of the adult community and family rituals, which the child tries to avoid.

The recognition of the untamed, destructive aspect of the Edenic nature, revealed to Agnon’s child during a period of torrential rains, prepares the way for the appearance of the human manifestation of nature gone awry: the escaped murderer, Franczisk. He is, to quote Aryeh L. Straus, “the ruler of the dark side of the wild nature.”⁸ In the aftermath of the stormy rains, two intertextual images, biblical and midrashic, reinforce the child’s dual perception of creation. Immediately after the rains, a bird appears at the boy’s window, reminiscent of the dove outside Noah’s ark which announced the end of the deluge and the resumption of normal life, thus reaffirming God’s kindness to man. The midrashic intertext is that of Honi, “the circle maker,” whose pleadings to God for rain were answered first with furious downpours and then with moderate, benevolent showers. Honi’s tale is brought to mind through the “truffles and mushrooms” (*kemahin upitriot*), which appear after the rains.⁹ Honi’s story reinforces the child’s growing realization that nature can be both Edenic and destructive; the heavy, stormy rains reveal the malevolent side of nature and its menacing forces, inimical to man.

The arrival of an enigmatic stranger, sometimes from the world of the sacred yet often diabolical, who wreaks some kind of mental or spiritual havoc on the protagonist, is a familiar pattern in Agnon’s tales.¹⁰ This figure, a messenger from the cosmic other side as well as from the depths of the protagonist’s psyche, is central in “*Hamitpahal*” [The Kerchief], a twin story to “*Bayá’ar ūva’ir*”; he also appears

6. Baruch Kurzweil discussed at length the meaning of the escape to the forest as a form of rebellion in the present story and in other stories by Agnon’s stories, *Massot ‘al sippurei ‘Agnon* [Essays on Agnon’s Tales] (Jerusalem, Schocken, 1970), p. 35, 72, 220, et passim. Regarding the present story, Avraham Sha’anán disagrees with Kurzweil that the young protagonist’s frequent visits to the forest represent rebellion. Instead, he sees the child’s experience in the forest as similar to the protagonist’s encounter with primordial forces in the fiction of Knut Hamson and Anatole France; an experience that crushes the protagonist’s sense of harmony instilled in him by faith. See “‘Olam hasegirut vehama’avaq ‘im kohot haresha’” [The Closed World and the Struggle with the Forces of Evil], in Hillel Barzel (ed.), *Shmuel Yosef Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982), p. 465.

7. Food, family meals, and gluttony are frequent motifs in Agnon’s works. On the meal as representing bourgeois vulgarity see Gershon Shaked, “Bat hamelech use’udat ha’em” (The Princess and the Mother’s Meal) in Barzel (ed., 1982), p. 262, 265, 6.

8. See “S. Y. Agnon’s “*Bayá’ar uba’ir*” (Heb.), in A. L. Straus, *Bedarkei hasifrut* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1965), p. 150.

9. For the story of Honi, see H. N. Bialik and Y. H. Ravnitzky (eds.), *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, trans. W. G. Braudi (New York: Schocken, 1992), p. 202, 3.

10. On the child-beggar interaction in this story see Nehama Aschkenasy, *Eve’s Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), pp. 96–100.

in *A Simple Story*, becoming fully blown in some of Agnon’s “Kafkaesque” stories collected in *The Book of Deeds (Sefer hama’asim)*.¹¹ In the present story, the convicted murderer Franczisk is a catalyst in the child protagonist’s spiritual quest to reconcile the paradoxes of criminality and lawfulness, of the presence of evil in a perfect, divinely-designed universe. While Franczisk appears to the child suddenly, it is clear that the boy has been anticipating and wishing this encounter.¹² Further, the boy has heard rumors of Franczisk and participated in the community’s growing admiration for him. Though he had murdered two people, a policeman and a woman, Franczisk was glorified as the citizen resisting the abuse of power by the authorities and as the wronged husband defending his honor. It is clear that the young teenager’s interest is piqued and that the romantic aura around Franczisk suits his own state of mind, which prefers the forest, the anti-town, and those it harbors.

The escaped convict serves as the child’s social, moral, and existential double, highlighting experience versus innocence, evil versus goodness; but he is also twinned with another social stranger, the very old man seen twice by the child, who casts the criminal in different light. This old serf, in many ways a mythic “father time,” or the biblical Methushelah, directs attention to the social evils of a previous generation; his lifelong servitude to the gentry has deprived him of the mental ability to be free, and now he has found in Franczisk the outlaw a new master to wait on. Thus the criminal is measured against the practices of the established, law-abiding community, and found to be less guilty, while the society condemning him to prison or capital punishment is seen as more blameworthy and therefore less entitled to judge its outcasts.

The reversal of values that occurs in the story and, obviously, in the child protagonist’s mind, is enhanced by the introduction of the archetypal myth of fratricide, the Genesis account of Cain and Abel. The old serf recounts his own midrash of the primordial siblings, offering an ironic twist which makes Abel the killer and Cain the victim. This misrepresentation of the famous story is not to be taken as the old man’s senile confusion. The old man revises the age-old myth by arguing that the person whom Western society has always seen as the victimizer was the real victim. Thus, if Franczisk is seen as Cain in the eyes of proper society, he is in fact the sinned-against, not the sinner. At the same time the old man is suggesting a kinship between Franczisk and Abel: both have killed, but because those killed were destined to die anyway, according to the old man’s fatalistic philosophy, both killers are innocent. In the same vein of a topsy-turvy view of the world, the old serf expresses nostalgia for the corrupt previous order in which he was a servant, describing it as a carefree, idyllic era, in contrast with his present life of worries and deprivation.

The association of the criminal with the biblical Abel thus introduces a

11. More on this beggar see Gershon Shaked in Barzel (ed., 1982), p. 285. See also Hillel Barzel, “Introduction: Methods in Interpretation of Agnon’s Works” (Heb.) in Barzel (ed., 1982), p. 82; also Dan Laor (1998), p. 339, 679, 732.

12. Contrary to Straus and Band, who maintain that the child does not identify the wild-looking man as the notorious fugitive until he sees him led to the gallows, and to Werses, who sees the encounter as “unexpected”; see Straus, p. 151, Band, p. 236; Shmuel Werses, *Syay Agnon kipeshuto* [S. Y. Agnon, Lliterally], (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2000), p. 79.

counter-cultural way of thinking, which questions the values of established society and generates in the young protagonist a sense of affinity with the social outcast. The rebellious boy projects onto the criminal his own situation, seeing Franczisk as a free spirit unwilling to yield to social norms. Franczisk's grotesque, misshapen face (his two eyes merge together and look like one big eye, turning him into a mythic, Cyclops-like creature) challenges the symmetry and flawless beauty of creation. Yet, paradoxically, as the child notices, the outlaw who spoils the pristine Eden is very much at home in the forest, and nature seems to collaborate with him by creating large holes in the trees into which he can easily disappear.

The power of evil to attract innocence to its own orbit, narrated in the Genesis account of the first seduction in Eden, is evident here when the child becomes a silent collaborator with the outlaw. When the boy runs into the old man carrying a hot meal in the forest he makes no mention of it to the people in town, and when he meets Franczisk himself, he shares an alcoholic drink with the criminal and keeps this meeting a secret. Indeed, when the boy witnesses Franczisk being led to his execution, the latter establishes eye contact with him, which the boy reads as a message that "although I did not swear to him, he did not suspect me that I revealed his hiding place to others," and that the criminal was pleased that the child did not "join" those who were seeking his death ("*Baya'ar ūva'ir*," p. 277).

However, the protagonist's attraction to the antinomian is only one aspect of the relationship between child and criminal. The scene involving the shared drink turns into a sacred ritual and the child becomes a catalyst of redemption for the criminal. Franczisk first looks angrily at the books in the boy's hands and, upon learning that these are "sacred books," he yells at him: "why do you need these?" ("*Baya'ar ūva'ir*," p. 274). Later he queries the boy about the blessing over the alcohol, which the latter recites in Hebrew. This traditional blessing, in which we thank God, the "king of the world," for creating "everything according to His will (or word)," expresses our acceptance of God's rule and His way of governing his creation. This blessing becomes the focal point of the story and the means of Franczisk's redemption. The escaped convict, pondering the blessing, grotesquely mispronounces the Hebrew name of the blessing, *shehakol*, which in his tongue becomes "tshakel." He tentatively agrees with the message of the blessing, uttering "perhaps it is so, perhaps it is so," and asks the boy to repeat it ("*Baya'ar ūva'ir*," p. 275). Later, when the child watches Franczisk's execution, the latter emits an incoherent sound which the spectators fail to understand, but which the child interprets as "tshakel" or the Hebrew blessing *shehakol*. Thus, while the adult narrator neither verifies nor denies the child's interpretation, what is important is that for the child protagonist the hardened murderer Franczisk has accepted the verdict of the law and reconciled himself to God's ways. In the final scenes of the story, the criminal is seen as redeemed and repentant, while the law-abiding citizens surrounding him are described as a barbaric, bloodthirsty mob.

The biblical presence, so potent that it both converts the forest into the primordial paradise and also allows for the anti-Edenic to have its say, is an inextricable part of a mosaic of intertexts embedded in Agnon's story that furthers the story's inherent paradox of good and evil. The forest, which the child visits during a magic, joyous period in his life, becomes creation at large as celebrated in biblical poetry,

especially in Psalms, and in the midrash. Yet, this intertextual network, which includes midrashic and Hasidic sources, also enhances the commuting of the brute into a legitimate member of God's creations. As a prelude to his meeting with Franczisk, Agnon's boy recounts the midrash in which the frog tells King David that its song of praise to God is even better than David's psalms. Thus it seems that the bungled benediction uttered by the brutish Franczisk at his hanging would be worth more to God than a perfectly enunciated prayer by a God-fearing person. This concept also appears in Hasidic stories, recreated by Y. L. Peretz and others, in which the illiterate country boy's whistle, and in other versions the somersault he performs, during the somber High Holiday services means more to God as an expression of genuine spirituality than the stylized, standardized community prayers.¹³

The idea that the region of childhood is primarily biblical, midrashic, and mystical is enhanced when the child protagonist tells us that he has abandoned the study of the Talmud, epitomizing the “town” and its observance of the constricting rabbinic law, in preference of the Bible and the midrashic interpretations of it. The deliberate abandonment of the study of the law, the *Halakhah*, further illuminates the boy's state of mind. If the boy immerses himself in a paradisaal existence, which is a restoration of the original Garden, then studying the law seems irrelevant. As Gershom Scholem explained, the Kabbalists faced the dilemma that if in the end of days paradisaal conditions will be restored and only the original good will be realized then there was no “real need for all those ‘fences’ and restrictions with which Halakhah was surrounded in order to secure it [the new order] from the temptation of evil.”¹⁴ This thinking, says Scholem, introduced “an anarchic element” into “Messianic Utopianism,” which combined the idea of the restoration of original harmony, and repairing what went wrong since, with a vision of a harmony that never existed before.¹⁵ Thus, the child's recreated Paradise inevitably contains the seeds of anarchy, while the biblical, midrashic, and mystical intertexts, which are initially recruited to enforce the sense of primordial innocence, introduce as well the antinomian and the “other side,” the *sitra ahra*.

The biblical and midrashic vocabularies that lace Agnon's story, converting the Galician forest into the primordial Garden of Eden as envisioned by the Genesis narrator and post-biblical commentators, are obvious to any reader with a Hebrew education. More subtle and less immediately obvious, yet equally persistent and powerful, is the Kabbalist intertext, which translates the protagonists and the natural forces around them into mystical codes and animates the biblical landscape into a cosmic drama of feuding powers. It should come as no surprise that in a story revolving around the mystery of good and evil, which anchors in one sacred utterance (*shehakol*) a climactic moment of transformation and redemption, the learned Jewish boy would ponder both the earthly configurations of good and evil and their corresponding mystical forces.

13. For more on this and other aspects of the story see Shmuel Leiter's insightful comments in *Selected Stories of S. Y. Agnon* (New York: Tarbut, 1970), pp. 49–55.

14. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1972), p. 20.

15. On the two aspects of the Messianic vision in Kabbalah, the restorative, and the Utopian, as well as on the concept of *tikkun*, repair, see Scholem (1972), pp. 12–23, et passim.

The Kabbalist system that scaffolds Agnon's story reinforces the themes of *tikkun*, the transvaluation of values (especially in connection with the rehabilitation of the biblical Cain), the child figure as a catalyst of redemption, the correspondences between the material world and the divine sphere, the conception of the human world as a battlefield between the forces of divine goodness and those of the *sitra ahra*, and God's dual treatment of creation, the measures of justice and of mercy.¹⁶ The metathetical link between the nouns *ya'ar*, forest, and *'ir*, town (or city), whereby the transposition of the letter *yod*, a potent mystical sign, changes the noun yet points towards an affinity between the two opposite realms, is in line with the various Kabbalist strategies of manipulating words and letters.¹⁷

Kabbalist symbolism often inserts itself into the biblical and midrashic idiom prevalent in the story; terms such as wind, upper and lower waters, floods, light, trees and grass, and garments are often released from their biblical or midrashic origins and encoded in the Kabbalist symbolical language. To illustrate Agnon's strategy: Genesis narrates how God separates "the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were under the firmament" (Gen. 1:7), while the midrash names these realms "upper waters" and "lower waters" (Gen. R. 4:4). Agnon adds a dynamic quality to these forces of nature by describing them as "coupling" *mizdvugim* ("*Baya'ar ūva'ir*," p. 273), thus introducing the Kabbalist concept of *zivvug* and putting into motion a cosmic drama as envisioned by the Kabbalists. The act of *zivvug*, coupling, is seen in the Zohar as a major element in the process of *tikkun*, repair; therefore, the mystical aspect of the child's search for harmony and repair is established rather early in the story.¹⁸

The cluster of light and wind, the color green (*yerakrak*), and the "beaten gold," used by the child to describe the Edenic nature, are elements in Kabbalist imaginative thinking, denoting the measure of justice (the opposite of mercy) which comes to the fore when "an evil wind" blows.¹⁹ The roaming wind "woven like threads" is taken from the Kabbalists' vision of the measures of justice and mercy as "threads."²⁰ Further, Franczisk is mentioned in the context of *gevurah*, valor ("*Baya'ar ūva'ir*," p. 276), and in some Kabbalist texts, *gevurah* is identified as the Sefirah in which evil originates, yet "from that Sefirah onward there is a mixture of good and evil."²¹ Thus again, Franczisk is placed in the context of both cosmic evil and the merging of good and evil. More importantly, the theme of the rehabilitation of Cain, a major point in the story because of the identification of

16. See Yishayahu Tishby, *Mishnat Hazohar* (Heb.), vol. 1 (Bialik: Jerusalem, 1957), p. 476.

17. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), p. 409 et passim; also, Moshe Hallamish, *Introduction to the Kabbalah* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), p. 13, 186, 7, et passim. On the letter *yod*, see Yeshayau Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 342–347.

18. On the concept of *zivvug* see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 141, 43, et passim.

19. For the meanings of different colors, see "Sha'ar hagevanim" in *Pardes Rimonim* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1962).

20. Tishbi (1957), p. 476.

21. Hallamish (1999), p. 169.

Franczisk with Cain, is also an important Kabbalist idea, linked to the concepts of *tikkun* and *gevurah*.²²

The child's role in the story also takes on a Kabbalistic significance. The protagonist introduces himself as *na'ar*, youth, evoking the Metatron, who in the Zohar is called the Shekhinah's *na'ar*, her messenger and conductor of her emanation; thus the child narrator reinforces his own role in the story as the catalyst of the criminal's restoration to cosmic harmony.²³ The phrase “*Abba and Imma*,” “Father and Mother,” used by the child, appears frequently in the Zohar in the context of a cathartic process which mitigates the harsh power of *din*, or justice, and leads ultimately to *tikkun*, repair.²⁴

Franczisk's name resonates with numerous meanings that signify his dual status in the story; it may also have a Kabbalistic significance. As a nickname of Franz, or as the more degraded, peasant version of this name, the escaped murderer is the opposite and yet the double of Kaiser Franz Josef, who was loved and admired by his Jewish subjects. In fact, the figure of the Kaiser is evoked by Franczisk's cohort, the emancipated servant who longs for the good old days when “the Kaiser was a bachelor” and “people were happy” (“*Bayā'ar ūvā'ir*,” p. 271). Franczisk is the king of the wild nature and thus he is the distorted mirror of the benevolent Kaiser, the ruler of a law-abiding empire. But in many ways Franczisk becomes a royal presence in the story, held in awe and admiration by the simple people. When he is led to his death, the two guards holding him on his left and his right are reminiscent of the angels escorting the primeval couple out of Eden, while the guard in front of him is also described as an angel of God “with his sword drawn” (“*Bayā'ar ūvā'ir*,” p. 276). Franz also means a “free man,” and as such he is a mirror image of the boy, who describes himself very early as *ben horin*, free. Franczisk is thus both vile and noble, an outlaw and a king, a captured fugitive and free man.

The reversal of values which Franczisk stands for may link the “little Frank” to Jacob Frank, the founder of the Frankist sect, described by Gershom Scholem as a “nihilist” and a “figure of tremendous if satanic power” who carried the Sabbatian concept of the “sacred sin” to its very limit.²⁵ The plot thickens when we remember that Agnon has played with figures from Kabbalist legends, such as “Rabbi Gadiel the Infant” as well as with historical figures associated with the

22. To quote from Gershom Scholem: “Now and then . . . some of the upper souls . . . might descend to earth in order to take part in some great mission of *tikkun*. A complete innovation in Lurianic Kabbalah was the stress laid on the high rank of the souls of Cain and Abel, and particularly of the former.” Scholem further discusses the identification of Cain with *gevurah* and the reversal of current cosmic order in the state of *tikkun*, and thus the rehabilitation of Cain: “Paradoxically, therefore, many of the great figures of Jewish history are represented as stemming from the root of Cain, and as the Messianic time approaches . . . the number of such souls will increase.” *Kabbalah*, p. 163.

23. Tishbi (1957), p. 452.

24. *Kabbalah*, pp. 141, 142.

25. Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1972), p. 127. For more on Jacob Frank, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (1974), pp. 287–309. Interestingly, one of Jacob Frank's chief disciples was a person by the name of Franciszek Wolowski, see *Kabbalah*, p. 305.

Sabbatean controversy.²⁶ In the story “*Kishrei Kesharim*” [Knots upon Knots] two enigmatic figures, Shmuel Emden and Joseph Eybeschuetz, evoke the eighteenth-century personalities Yaakov Emden and Yonathan Eybeschuetz, who were locked in a vicious feud stemming from Emden’s accusations that the Kabbalist Eybeschuetz was a clandestine follower of the Sabbatean movement.²⁷ These two diametrically opposite personalities serve in the story both as each other’s inverted doubles and as an externalization of the narrator’s opposing inner selves (their first names are those of the author’s); they also embody the same duality of conformity and freedom, law and nature, that *ya’ar* and *’ir* do in our story. Thus if the child feels an affinity with Franczisk as the historical Jacob Frank, he may also wish to bring about his salvation. Just as in the “The Kerchief” the young protagonist attempts to bring about the Messiah, in the present story he tries to succeed where history failed, redeeming the eighteenth-century outcast Frank and restoring him from a vile figure of demonic proportions to a repentant soul.

The Edenic possibility embodied in childhood underlies Agnon’s entire body of works; his child figures are a vehicle opening vistas to the paradisaical past of the writer as well as of humanity at large. Like other Hebrew writers, notably Bialik, Agnon views the Eden of childhood from an adult’s bifocal perspective: nostalgia for a lost paradisaical era and skepticism that it ever existed. In the present story, Agnon has chosen a learned *shtetl* boy of thirteen or fourteen who is still naive enough to attempt to recapture an Edenic sphere, but sophisticated enough to acknowledge the power of evil not only to horrify and alienate but also to attract and seduce. The boy’s growing awareness of the persistence of evil in the world, his curiosity about its human face, and his attempts to reconcile his undeniable fascination with evil with the need to reaffirm the perfect harmony and total goodness of creation are rendered through the imaginings of Eden not only in the Bible but in other Judaic master texts.

With Franczisk reciting the benediction before he meets his maker, it is not only the universe that is returned to its primordial harmony but speech itself. The story’s polyphonic text consists of biblical poetry, midrashic elaboration, the universe’s song of praise to its creator, and the mystics’ conception of cosmic drama and redemption cited by the idealistic child narrator, as well as the adults’ utilitarian vocabulary, the community’s rhetoric of hypocrisy and cruelty, the outlaw’s initial scoffing, the revisionist Bible commentary of the disenfranchised serf, and the traditional texts insisting on the letter of the law versus those rewarding the intention of the heart. This polyphony is overpowered by the simple word *shehakol*, which resolves all differences and wraps up all voices into one sacred utterance. Further, earlier in the story, the biblical, midrashic, and mystical texts are posited against another Judaic master authority, the *Halakha*, or law, which is rejected by the child when he abandons his Talmudic studies in favor of the fantasy and escape afforded by his favorite biblical, midrashic, and mystical texts. Yet, by having

26. On the Jewish sources of Agnon’s story “*Ma’aseh Rabbi Gadiel hatinoq*” [The Tale of Rabbi Gadiel the Infant] and other mythic infants in Judaic letters, see Gershon Scholem, “The Kabbalist Sources of ‘The Tale of Rabbi Gadiel the Infant’” (Heb.) in *Le’Agnon Shay* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 289–305.

27. In the collection *Samuch Venir’e* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1929), pp. 186–190.

Franzisk recite the blessing the boy reaffirms the law and its system of obligations, marking his own return to the sphere of the clock and responsibility. He also weaves yet another Judaic colloquy, the system and laws of blessings, into the story's linguistic fabric, bringing the vocabulary of the law back to its place within the thick nexus of Judaic multiple discourses.

Agnon himself has stated that his method of implanting an amalgam of all strata of Judaic textual traditions in his secular, modern stories is deliberate.²⁸ This strategy is intended as homage to the hallowed texts, but it also balances modern skepticism and anarchy with a vision of restored harmony. It also serves as a paradigm of a certain kind of writing and a certain linguistic culture and state of mind to which the author is heir and of which he is one of the last practitioners.

In contrast to Agnon's narrative tapestry, in which the biblical is so tightly woven into the other textual threads that followed it that it becomes inseparable from them, in Amos Oz's works, the biblical model is sharply defined, unencumbered, so to speak, by generations of commentaries. Oz's child protagonist in *Panther in the Basement* is placed in the secular Zionist environment of Jerusalem on the eve of statehood, and as such he represents a generation whose Judaic knowledge and identification were confined mainly to the Bible rather than to the largely diasporic tenor of “rabbinic Judaism,” which was despised by Ben-Gurion and many of his contemporaries.²⁹

A study of the biblical intertext in Oz's works is inextricably tied to the writer's geopolitical and cultural views. Modern Zionism considered the Bible a powerful national narrative and merged its Messianic promises of “return to Zion,” which sustained the Jewish people for two thousand years of Diaspora, with the secular grand scheme of national redemption in history; the latter originated in the French revolution and the romantic wave of national revival which followed it.³⁰ In its interpretation as labor Zionism, this metanarrative also absorbed another master story, the Marxist idea of emancipation and equality, and gave it a nationalist bent. The early Zionists transformed the Bible from its long-standing status in Jewish life as a book of religious law and moral teachings to a secular national epic akin to other European works in the epic genre (such as the medieval *Chanson de Roland*, *El Cid*, *Nibelungenlied*, and the nineteenth-century poem celebrating the Polish mythic hero, *Pan Tadeusz*) whose purpose was to inspire patriotic sentiments in the people. In pre-Statehood and the early years of the State, the Bible

28. On intertextuality in Agnon, see Gershon Shaked, *Panim 'aherot biezirato shel Shai 'Agnon (Agnon—A Writer with a Thousand Faces)*. (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989), pp. 11–13, 26 n. 2, et passim.

29. For Ben Gurion's views of the Bible as a national narrative see Anita Shapira, “Ben Gurion and the Bible: The Forging of an Historical Narrative,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 33:4 (Oct. 1997), pp. 645–675.

30. For the various myths incorporated in Zionist thought, see Arthur Hertzberg, “Introduction” in *The Zionist Idea* (New York: Atheneum, 1970), pp. 15–100; Walter Laqueur, *History of Zionism* (New York: Schocken, 1989). For a study of the reinterpretation of some of the Jewish traditional myths and their assimilation into “the Zionist collective memory” see Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

became a major tool for inculcating love for the homeland and was labeled “national literature,” and “an ancient heroic epic.”³¹

Oz’s dialogue with the Bible began with his early publications in the 1960s, in stories such as “The Way of The Wind” (1962), “Nomad and Viper” (1963), and “Upon This Evil Earth” (1966), and continued throughout his literary career, further manifesting itself in *Hill of Evil Counsel* (1976), *A Perfect Peace* (1982), and *Panther in the Basement* (1995). These works offer a gateway to understanding Oz’s stand towards the role of the biblical narrative in Zionist thought and in the political and ideological debate in contemporary Israel. The writer’s discourse with the Bible has reflected Israeli culture’s changing attitudes toward the Bible as a pedagogic tool of inspiring patriotic loyalty, and even has anticipated and influenced cultural perceptions and processes, progressing in tone from the polemical and dialectical to the comical and ultimately conciliatory.³² Thematically, the scriptural presence provides Amos Oz with a vehicle to confront the Israeli meta-narrative, a fusion of the biblical grand tale and the modern ones; to assess and critique it, and very often, cut it down to size.³³

In “Upon This Evil Earth,” Oz recreates the era of the Judges and dramatizes the story of Jephtah; but in his other stories the biblical tale is present as an intertext, often not alluded to directly but subtly forming an architectural scaffold that extends to the entire plot line, supporting the full trajectory of the narrative and creating direct analogies between the modern dramas and the ancient ones. In some of his works Oz has displayed the modernist tendency to challenge and combat the Bible. This is evident especially in the story “The Way of the Wind,” which castigates the hypocritical and ruthless Zionist father who directly causes the violent death of his paratrooper son, as a reincarnation of the biblical Abraham, the fanatic father who was willing to sacrifice his own son on the altar of a cruel God. “Nomad and Viper,” which embeds the Genesis tale of the rape of Dinah in present-day events, yields itself to a postmodern interpretation. The story converts the rape narrated in Genesis to an imagined rape and thus views revenge as unnecessary violence. The narrative voice in this story transmits a sense of postcolonial discomfort towards the local tribes, seen as closer to the land than the kibbutz members. Further, it doubts that the European immigrants’ self-image as “enlightened” and their condescending attitude to the “savage,” while benevolent and well-meaning, is helpful in conducting a dialogue of peace with the indigenous tribes.

Hill of Evil Counsel (1976), a childhood story written early in Oz’s career, may be read as an inverted recreation of the biblical Book of Ruth, displaying a tragic discrepancy between the ancient Ruth, a model of familial and national loyalty

31. See Anita Shapira, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 258–259, 303, et passim.

32. For a close study of the biblical intertext in Oz’s works, see Nehama Aschkenasy, “Deconstructing the Metanarrative: Amos Oz’s Evolving Discourse with the Bible.” *Symposium*, 55:3, Fall 2001, pp. 123–139.

33. On the permutations of the Zionist metanarrative in Israeli fiction see Gershon Shaked, “Fiction and the Zionist Metanarrative: Hebrew Fiction’s Dialectical Encounter With a Changing Reality” [Heb.], in Anita Shapira, ed., *Independence: The First Fifty Years* [Heb.] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1998), pp. 487–511.

alty, and her modern namesake, a traitor to her family and people.³⁴ The biblical underpinnings of the events in the story are provided by the impressionable child protagonist, Hillel, who, in Jerusalem of the pre-statehood years, fervently wishes for the return the glorious days of old. He envisions himself as the young shepherd who became king of Israel, and assigns to his mother the role of the ancient Ruth, ancestress of the illustrious King David. Yet in an ironic reversal of the idyllic old tale, the latter-day Ruth betrays her son and her husband, as well as her people and their historical memory, by running away with the lecherous British admiral, thus casting her lot with a dying, corrupt empire. Paradoxically, while Ruth the mother betrays the biblical spirit, she also embodies it. Ruth is a locus of passion and romantic yearnings, a larger-than-life figure of remote beauty and charm, infecting the men around her with inflated biblical rhetoric, crazed passions, and mythic visions. With Ruth's departure, the lives of all the men in her orbit are left shrunk and diminished, losing their luster to everyday banality; yet her exit is seen as necessary for the restoration of normalcy and equilibrium to life. Tragically for Hillel, the new Israeli reality, cleansed of unhealthy and dangerous romantic yearnings, can establish itself only when his mother finally leaves, taking with her the illusory magic of both foreign and ancient Israelite landscapes.

The analogy with the biblical Ruth questions the validity of Zionist expectations to duplicate in modern times the glamour of the ancient Davidic kingdom. In fact, Oz in this tale questions not only the Bible but all romantic grand visions that have wreaked havoc on people's lives. Ruth the mother is wedded to the myths of the Polish nation; her young child, to the romantic biblical myth of the heroic King David; Mitya the lodger, to the prophets' rhetoric of outrage; and the British administration in Jerusalem to the colonialist grandeur of the British Empire. Hillel's chance encounter with the grotesquely smiling skull of a Turkish soldier evokes another faded empire, exemplifying the terrifying face of grand historical and nationalist ambitions.

Panther in the Basement, also set in Jerusalem during the waning years of the British mandate in Palestine, is in some ways a twin tale of *Hill of Evil Counsel*. It offers a dialogue with biblical figures and themes that runs throughout the entire narrative, and a child protagonist, nicknamed “Proffy,” who draws analogies between himself and several biblical models, especially the prophet Jeremiah. For Proffy, the Bible is a master text in which he constantly looks for models to follow, finding in the besieged prophet Jeremiah his biblical double. This semi-autobiographical novella, written in first-person narrative, conveys the boy's constant wrestling with national and moral dilemmas reflected in the Bible and brings a certain kind of closure to Oz's own dialogue with the Bible. The child's story is driven by two competing myths, the Hollywood mystique, especially the genre of action movies that came to be associated in the 1940s with Tyrone Power, and the biblical stories, which offer contradictory paradigms of heroism and “cowardice,” loyalty and “treachery.”

Dominant in the biblical mood in this story is the prophets' advocacy of spiritual fortitude and peaceful surrender, not the drive for conquest and the use of

34. *The Hill of Evil Counsel*, trans. Nicholas de Lange (New York: Harcourt, 1978); *A Perfect Peace*, trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Harcourt, 1985).

power, which is a different, equally potent, biblical legacy. The prophet Jeremiah comes up frequently in the context of the theme of betrayal; Proffy wrestles with the question whether Jeremiah was a traitor for preaching surrender while Jerusalem was under siege (*Panther*, pp. 29, 139). The child narrator, who has also been called a traitor by his friends for associating with the kindly British Sergeant Dunlop, shuttles between two diametrically opposite biblical models. On the one hand, he possesses a fierce wish to be like King David's valiant soldiers, whose brave feats are narrated in 2 Samuel: "like the heroes of King David we studied in the Bible class, I always feel a strange urge to put everything I have on line for them. To risk my life fetching them water from enemy well" (*Panther*, p. 78). On the other hand, he sees in the Prophet Jeremiah his ancient soul mate: "And Jeremiah, too, was called a traitor: they tried him and found him guilty and threw him in a pit" (*Panther*, p. 29).

By sympathizing with the prophet and seeing in his predicament a mirror of his own, the child Proffy is an anomaly among his schoolmates and contemporaries. We know that in pre-Statehood and the early years of the State, school children were taught to see Jeremiah as a traitor and identify with the more "heroic" figures in the Bible and with the biblical warriors.³⁵ Proffy's own Bible teacher, who has the biblical name Gihon (like the Genesis river that flows out of Eden and the brook east of Jerusalem), criticizes the tormented prophet for failing to uplift the national morale during the siege of Jerusalem: "In Mr. Gihon's view, when the enemy is at the gate, the duty of the prophet is to raise the people's spirits, to unite their ranks, and to pour out his wrath on the foe outside the walls, not on his brethren inside" (*Panther*, p. 139).

Proffy's Bible teacher reflects both a cultural and a literary trend; Hebrew poets such as the *maskil* Yehuda Leib Gordon (in his poem "Zedekiah in Prison") and the Zionist Saul Tchernichovsky (especially in his poem "In *Ein Dor*") had taken the positions of the biblical kings, viewing them as tragic personalities, even heroic, and castigating the ancient prophets as religious fanatics or political defeatists. Proffy's conversations with the peace-seeking, Hebrew-loving, slightly effeminate British Sergeant center mainly on the kindly Sergeant's pacifist views and revisions of some of the biblical stories (*Panther*, pp. 78–83). As in Agnon's story, the figure of the stranger, or the other, becomes a catalyst in the child's decision to choose the less popular view and opt for a position (in Agnon moral and in Oz geopolitical), which goes against the predominant cultural narrative. In spite of the influences of the heroic Hollywood movies and the Bible teacher's preference for biblical examples of national defiance and militancy, the more powerful model for Proffy is that of Jeremiah. Proffy is preoccupied with the prophet's tragic dilemma, creating an analogy between himself, sneaking through the streets of Jerusalem on the eve of national independence to meet secretly his British "friend," and the prophet Jeremiah, walking through the same streets on the eve of the Babylonian's invasion, advocating surrender to the enemy. In fact, Jeremiah thus becomes not only a mirror of Proffy's dilemma, but because of the confessional style

35. Anita Shapira quotes an article by the scholar and pedagogue Ernest Simon who complains about this very tendency, citing the attitude to Jeremiah in particular, see *Power and Land*, pp. 258–259.

of the narrative, that of the writer himself: “I have been called a traitor many times in my life” (*Panther*, p. 1).

One might argue that the precocious child Proffy (for “professor,” though fortunately for English readers the noun “prophet” also comes to mind) could more readily find models from his own environment and times: professors Martin Buber, Hugo Bergman, Yehuda Magnes, and Ernest Simon, who demonstrated in the streets of Jerusalem during that very same period on behalf of their pacifist organization *Brit Shalom* [A Covenant for Peace], advocating appeasement and accommodation of the Arabs. It is a measure of Oz’s ongoing dialogue with the Bible that he has Proffy, as close a mirror of himself as he has ever come to in his writings, choose from the biblical model to grapple with his own dilemma regarding patriotism and treachery, rather than cite the authentic models whom he undoubtedly saw marching through the streets of Jerusalem in his own childhood.

With *Panther in the Basement* Oz’s discourse with the Bible comes full circle. Interestingly, his earlier tales display more prominently the postmodern antipathy towards “totality”; they reveal a skeptical, condemning attitude towards the biblical as well as Zionist metanarratives and wrestle with the colonialist aspect of the Zionist enterprise.³⁶ By contrast, in *Hill of Evil Counsel* and *Panther in the Basement*, the present-day colonizers are the British, and other foreign colonialist and nationalist aspirations come to the fore as well. In fact, in *Panther in the Basement* Proffy’s father, a moderate, unassuming personality who is nevertheless involved with the underground, gives Proffy the best justification for the need of a national home for the Jewish people. He tells Proffy of a harrowing and degrading violent act perpetrated on himself and his own father in their hometown in Poland when he was a child (*Panther*, p. 145). The father’s Zionist conviction is based not on the biblical grand story, but on a devastating personal experience of persecution in Diaspora. Thus, it is not the biblical promise that justifies the Zionist enterprise in Israel, but rather, the Zionist idea of the “negation of the Diaspora” coupled with the protagonist’s identification with the plight of the East European Jew and the collective determination to never let it recur.

For Amos Oz, the Bible, while removed from the precinct of the sacred, duled with, and turned upside down, still retains its canonical status, and the author grapples with it as a worthy, powerful myth. Ruth Kartun-Blum has seen the same syndrome in Israeli poets, and argues that “modern secular Israeli poetry testifies to the enduring relevance of the Bible.”³⁷ A similar case is made by Robert Alter who has shown, in his study of Kafka, Bialik, and Joyce, that while the modernists’ position towards the biblical material could be iconoclastic and combative, at the same time “the Bible remains for them a value-laden, imaginatively energizing body of texts.”³⁸ In some of Oz’s earlier works, the biblical models provide paradigms of zealotry and violence, creating self-aggrandizing characters and vengeance-

36. For the postmodern condemnation of “metanarratives,” see Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

37. *Profane Scriptures*, p. 90.

38. In *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writings and the Authority of Scripture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 8.

filled youngsters in the modern era. In this tale, however, the writer seems more conciliatory towards the Bible, finding in it the voice that suits him. Proffy weighs the model of the fierce warrior provided in the Bible with that of the prophet as the tragically misunderstood, peace-loving figure, and chooses the latter.

The biblical image that arches over the tale of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem narrated in Appelfeld's *Layish* is somewhat of a departure from this writer's body of works. While allusions to biblical verses and to symbols or models from other Judaic sources, especially Hasidic tales, are scattered in his works, Appelfeld's stories usually do not reveal a sustained biblical pattern underlying a complete story nor are they heavily weighted by multiple Judaic intertexts.³⁹ In the present story, however, there is a clear biblical presence in the journey to Jerusalem of a grotesque group consisting of brutish wagon drivers, criminals, genuinely pious old men, and deranged individuals. This caravan of miscreants mimics as in a distorted mirror the ancient Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness, while the young protagonist Layish, the story's narrator, reenacts the tale of the biblical Joseph's trials and tribulations. The biblical intertext in this story is not tightly embedded in the linguistic fabric itself, as in Agnon, nor is it explicitly alluded to as a parallel arena, as in Oz; nonetheless, it exerts a mythic grip on the narrative.

The biblical prototype in *Layish* casts an ominous shadow over the protagonists because it portends doom and failure that are recognized by the reader and not by the pilgrims themselves. The ancient wilderness is comingled with the geography of the European Diaspora as well as with the internal, symbolic topography of the Hasidic tales of travels, most significantly, according to several scholars, the story of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav's journey to the Land of Israel.⁴⁰ In spite of the many concrete references to actual European towns and historical figures, the stops on the travelers' route take on the allegorical quality of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* rather than of geographic sites, yet without Bunyan's clear moral mappings and the linear trajectory of his Pilgrim's journey. The voyage thus takes place in an eerie, nightmarish terrain of aimless meandering beyond time and place, symbolizing the Jewish tortuous voyage through history. Gershon Shaked has seen in the caravan's directionless, zigzagging motion in this story, as well as in similar circuitous patterns in other works by Appelfeld, a variation of the Christian myth of the "wandering Jew," doomed to a limbo existence of eternal drifting, never achieving a full life or peaceful death.⁴¹

39. As Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi has said: "the holy language has no resonances for Appelfeld's characters . . . and Hebrew [remains] a language without echoes." See *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 119. See also Gila Ramras-Rauch, *Aharon Appelfeld: The Holocaust and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 75.

40. Tzvi Tzameret finds the various grotesque, handicapped characters in the story "as if they came out of the tales of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav" with Appelfeld picking up their stories where Rabbi Nachman left off. See "In Remembering—the Secret of Redemption" (Heb.), *Amudim*, 1994, pp. 346–347. Yigal Schwartz sees "clear lines of similarity" between the plot-line of the present story and "The Order of the Journey of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav to the Land of Israel," in *Aharon Appelfeld: From Individual Lament to Tribal Eternity*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2001), p. 108.

41. See "Requiem for the Murdered Jewish People" (Heb.), in *Ben Kefor Le'ashan* [Between

Francois Pitavy's description of biblical presence in Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* (originally titled "If I Forget Thee, Jerusalem") is helpful in defining the biblical intertext in Appelfeld's story, in spite of the vast differences in the vision of Jerusalem between the two stories: "The Bible does not function here as a text within a text, as the Word among words, but rather as a pattern—a chart—*informing* the circular, regressive structure of the novel as it shapes the desires (conscious or repressed), the behaviors, and thus the journeys [of the two protagonists]."⁴² The sense of an ill-fated voyage that will never be fulfilled in terms of the biblical promise is introduced early in Appelfeld's novel, when Layish reads the memoirs of the dead old man Jacob, who warned the pilgrims that "the way to Jerusalem is crooked" (*Layish*, p. 24), thus reversing Isaiah's vision of the return of the exiles to Zion as an extraordinary event in which "the crooked will become straight" (Isaiah, 40:4). In this godless, "biblical" landscape, miracles are not promised, so that the prophet's optimistic vision of a God manipulating and shaping the natural environment to accommodate the returning exiles is converted into a secular, yet equally powerful, prophecy of doom precisely because it is rendered in an inverted biblical phrase.

Tragically, Layish, who serves as the chronicler of events, desperately tries to give a sense of historicity to the journey by naming concrete places and personalities, yet a hallucinatory cloud hangs over his narrative. The pilgrimage takes place as if in a blank, black hole outside time and place; it is a frenzied circular motion marking at the same time a spiritual and mental standstill. The pilgrims' progress consists of short, sudden spurts forward, punctuated by movements sideways and backwards and interrupted by periods of lingering in one place. The linearity of wagons and people moving forward, constituting the "caravan of history," is an illusion; what is rendered is not a sense of a historical or spatial continuum but rather a *discontinuum*, which Walter Benjamin called "the history of the oppressed."⁴³ The analogy with the story of Exodus, which culminates, in the Bible, with the Israelites' entry into the promised land, is thus deceptive. Further, the ancient journey itself, severed from its scriptural context of a successful conclusion and becoming an endless pattern of aimless peripatetic motions, serves only as a portent of calamity. Like the author, who described himself at the age of fourteen as "an orphan with no language, no parents, no education," Layish at fifteen is only now being tutored in the biblical tales by pious old men.⁴⁴ He is, therefore, "prearticulate," not on account of his age, but in terms of his ignorance of the Judaic textual tradition—which renders him a cultural orphan as well.⁴⁵

The Genesis tales of the patriarchs are evoked through the names of the pious old men who serve as Layish's teachers of Bible, "old man Abraham," "the

Frost and Smoke] (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 1997), pp. 52–54, as well as "In Every Generation One Must See Oneself" (Heb.) in *Haaretz/Sefarim*. July 27, 1994.

42. See "Forgetting Jerusalem: An Ironic Chart for *The Wild Palms*," in Michel Gresset and Noel Polk, eds., *Intertextuality in Faulkner* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1985), p. 118.

43. *Ecrit Francais*, ed. Jean-Maurice Monnoyer (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 352.

44. "A Novelist's Optimism: Reclaiming the Jewish Tradition." *Tikkun*, 13:2, March-April (1998), p. 1.

45. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi describes the typical child protagonist in Appelfeld's works as

aged Jacob,” and the storyteller “Jacob-Isaac.” Yet, these supposed authority figures of learned and wise men are the Diaspora version of the confident, awe-inspiring biblical patriarchs; in reality they are decrepit, frightened, and humble. The Joseph story is a constant presence in *Layish*, both intertextually and intervisually: a show titled “The Sale of Joseph” is performed by a group of pilgrims, and Layish himself, motherless like the biblical Joseph and moving as slave from patron to patron, unwittingly reenacts a terrifying version of the Joseph saga, embodying the Jewish historical predicament in the vicissitudes of his fate. Layish often sinks into sleep as if into “a deep pit,” like Joseph cast into the pit by his brothers; his dreams, however, are not visions of a glorious future, like those of his biblical model, but nightmares in which his tormentor returns to haunt him. Layish hopes for a successful culmination of the pilgrimage, seeing himself becoming free (he uses the same phrase from the Hagaddah, “*ben horin*,” as Agnon’s boy does). But the analogy between Layish and the biblical protagonist extends only to the vision of the ancient Joseph being taken by a caravan of Ishmaelites to captivity in Egypt, not to Joseph rising to glory. Again, the biblical intertext appears only in a truncated form, the miserable beginnings of the hero but not his triumphant ending, providing a parable of destruction rather than redemption.

The conversion of the Bible’s linear paradigm of history to the Hellenic circular model of human destiny is enhanced by the presence of the theatrical troupe, which stages “The Sale of Joseph,” thereby transforming biblical chronicle into myth and its realism into a dramatic performance. The evolution of the play itself mirrors, though grotesquely, the chronological development of ancient Greek theatre; like the latter, the pilgrims’ production of the biblical tale started with one actor performing all the roles and only later expanded to include more “actors” (*Layish*, p. 119, 120). In its theatrical reenactment, the biblical story of liberation becomes a Greek play of foreboding and grim fate and further introduces the reversal of the Judaic idea of history as a linear progression towards salvation.⁴⁶ The pilgrim’s show captures the tragic moment of the sale of Joseph and severs it from the happy ending offered in the biblical narrative. The play—based on a biblical theme, as produced by the pilgrims—subverts the biblical conception of human history as a redemptive journey and further hints at the pilgrimage as entrapment rather than deliverance.

The Exodus tale is the other biblical precedent that hovers over the entire story. The caravan is made up of a motley group that includes genuine religious pilgrims as well as riffraff, as in the biblical story of the Exodus. The saintly rabbi of Vitznitz compares the Diaspora to slavery in Egypt and the pilgrims to the generation of Exodus (*Layish* p. 109). As in the biblical event, some urge the wagon drivers to push on, others have second thoughts. Yet unlike in Exodus, where the older

“prearticulate.” See *Booking Passage*, p. 194. Her reading of *Layish*, however, differs somewhat from the one offered here; see *Booking Passage*, 181. I wish at this point to thank Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi for reading this manuscript and making insightful suggestions and observations, some of which could only be addressed in future studies.

46. On the differences between the Hellenic and Hebraic conceptions of human time and history, see Tom Driver, *The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), pp. 17, 18 et passim.

generation is considered too attached to their previous lives and unfit to enter the promised land, in the present story it is the old men who wish to leave the tainted Diaspora soil and complete the journey. The greedy younger men, on the other hand, constantly digress from the path and linger during the stops in order to engage in trade. The sea that so conveniently parted itself in Exodus finds its warped analogy here in the river Prut, which rages like the Sambatyon, the mythic river leading to hell. And the pilgrim who jumps into the river drowns, unlike the legendary Nachshon, who in the midrash dared to jump into the sea first and showed the way to the frightened Hebrews (*Layish*, p. 165).

Thus, the pilgrimage exemplifies Jewish nomadic history in Diaspora, characterized by perpetual yearnings for Jerusalem, yet only as a remote dream, or as an abstract “*yerushalayin shel ma’alah*.” The unanswered question underlying the story is whether this caravan of history truly leads to realization of the dream, or the utopian Jerusalem is only an excuse for all sorts of misfits to find temporary refuge and for failed tradesmen to join the convoy of wagons in order to do business. In some ways, Appelfeld’s pilgrims are reminiscent of Bertold Brecht’s “Mother Courage,” forever pushing her wagon in search of business and safety for her children, losing all on a journey leading nowhere yet never coming to a stop. Brecht’s conception of “epic theatre,” as opposed to the dramatic, characterizes Appelfeld’s mythic theatre of history as well.

Layish the boy may also be seen as a Jewish *Oliver Twist*, an orphan who finds himself among thieves and murderers and yet maintains his innocence; but the happy ending and healing guaranteed to Oliver are not within Layish’s reach. Layish shares the destiny of other child figures in Appelfeld’s works who are the innocent victims of a nightmare; they are blameless yet often driven by a sense of inexplicable guilt, which is their Jewish identity, as is Kitty in a story named after her. Appelfeld’s fictional children are, at times, a projection of the pre-holocaust community’s collective neurosis and dreads; such is The Yanuka in *Badenheim 1939*, a bizarre child with an old face who reflects the vacationers’ need to retard time and their unwillingness to depart from the illusory Eden of their present life and enter the holocaust terrain. The Yanuka, who sings in Yiddish, also embodies the vacationers’ long lost and painfully hidden Jewish childhood, to which they mysteriously begin to long as a prelude to joining the Jewish destiny of suffering.⁴⁷ In the present story, Layish is favored by the pious old men, holding for them a promise for a future that may materialize if not in their lifetime, at least in his. Yet the readers’ inevitable “back-shadowing” interprets the protagonist’s future as doomed, disallowing a vision of Layish as an adult narrating a horrible childhood memory that he has survived. Layish remains the eternal Joseph frozen in the predicament of a young slave descending to Egypt or to annihilation and not Joseph as a free agent moving toward success and victory; and the biblical arena itself turns from a linear story of historical fulfillment and repair to a circular voyage of no escape.

In all three stories, the writers’ personal backgrounds determine the status of the biblical pattern in their narratives as well as the degree of their protagonists’ in-

47. For more on this story, see Nehama Aschkenasy, “Appelfeld’s *Badenheim 1939*,” *Tradition*, Summer, 1982, pp. 170–73.

volvement in and recognition of the biblical intertext. Agnon's child, like the writer himself, is erudite in the entire corpus of Judaic texts that constitute his spiritual and psychological home. Oz's Proffy, like his creator, is the product of a secular school system and Zionist education that emphasized the biblical tales of valor and national pride. He sees the biblical sphere as a parallel world by virtue of the Hebrew language, the rebuilt land, and the revived political aspirations that find in the Bible a historical precedence and justification. Layish, like Appelfeld himself, encounters the biblical material relatively late in his life, and therefore it is still external to him, unassimilated into his consciousness and internal being. Layish is therefore unaware of both his own Joseph stature and of the other mythic prototype of aimless wandering in the desert that has predestined the hapless caravan to eternal drifting.

Agnon sees in the biblical text the original link in a long chain of imaginative creations, a pre-text, which is of value especially because of the later texts it triggered and bred. His yarn weaves together all strands of Hebraic texts, allowing them to converse with and comment on each other. He assumes a textual linearity in which his own narrative is one among a host of previous models, and though a departure from them—secular fiction rather than sacred letters—it is still an organic part of the whole. Roland Barthes' description of the "ideal text" as a "galaxy of signifiers," in which "the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest," applies to an Agnon text.⁴⁸ For Agnon's protagonist, the biblical landscape does not exist independently and alone, but exists, rather, mainly as it is recreated in midrash, Kabbalah, and other Jewish imaginative expressions throughout the ages.

For Oz, as for his entire generation, the Bible is the nation's epic, which offers an actual historical precedence and a parallel universe, concretized by virtue of the revived language and reclaimed territory; it is the master text, admired and wrangled with at the same time. It offers a metanarrative that articulates the fundamental debates of king and prophet, political pride versus moral and humanistic sentiments, with which the writer and his protagonists wrestle in contemporary Israel. These biblical debates had been suspended for nearly two millennia of Diaspora existence and resurfaced with the advent of Zionism, such that the biblical intertext opens up the national dialogue in the modern text, assuming a historical continuity between then and now. For Oz, the biblical landscape is not the sacred terrain promised in and inseparable from the holy writ but, rather, the Jewish homeland—fought for and lost in antiquity, in a conundrum of great controversy, and now positioned again at the center of dispute and schism. By contrast, in Appelfeld's story, the biblical tale is an eternal parable which Jewish history and its suffering agents have been tragically destined to repeat and reenact, often unbeknownst to them. It is a mythic prefiguring that foils his protagonists' attempts to break into the linear path of history, holding them hostages in a circuitous trail of no exit.

Nehama Aschkenasy
University of Connecticut
Stamford, Connecticut

48. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (London: Cape, 1975), pp. 5–6.