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Rethinking the Aqedah after the Holocaust: The Case of Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Shalom Spiegel

In 1946, the scholar Abraham Meir Haberman published *The Book of Edicts in Ashkenaz and France* (ספר גזירות אשכנז וצרפת),[1] an anthology containing a series of chronicles and piyyutim[2] written in Hebrew by Jews reporting on the murder and oppression of their people in Europe during the First and Second Crusades of the Middle Ages. In his short introduction, Haberman ties the work in the anthology to the Holocaust:

> We could not believe that it would be possible for the Middle Ages to return. We thought what had happened cannot reoccur in our time. However, we were bitterly disillusioned. The Middle Ages returned with greater vigor. Although we still have our healthy senses for writing history, what happened in our generation has not yet been expressed, and it is apparently too soon to do so. [. . .] In the meanwhile, we should delve into the ancient pages from which we can sometimes hear an echo of what happened to our generation. We would draw from them the power to keep carrying the pain and a cold comfort for the future. Our enemies wished to destroy us, and we exist and live. Here and now.[3]

According to Haberman, the current catastrophe of the Holocaust cannot be translated into historical-theological reflections because of its vivid and concrete nature. The textual documents from the Crusades offered a locus for contemplation, allowing readers to mourn and process the contemporary disaster from a certain necessary distance.

Haberman's publication can be situated within a larger attempt by scholars, thinkers, and authors immediately after the Holocaust to reexamine the way their ancestors reacted to the 12th-century massacres in Europe.[4] This article offers a comparative discussion of two of these attempts, one by Shmuel Yosef Agnon and the other by Shalom Spiegel.

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1 Haberman was not the first to publish such an anthology. Many of the documents had already been printed in Germany at the end of the 19th century. See A. Neubauer and M. Stern, eds., *Hebräische Berichte über die Judenverfolgungen während der Kreuzzüge* (Berlin: Simion, 1892).

2 Poems with liturgical elements.

3 Abraham Meir Haberman, ed., *The Book of Edicts in Ashkenaz and France* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Tarshish, 1946), xi. [translation, mine]

4 See for instance Yitzchak Baer, "Gezeirot Tatnu," in *Sefer Asaf*, ed. M. D. Kasuto, Joseph Klausner, and Yehoshua Gutman (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1953), 140.

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The chronicles and piyyutim from the Middle Ages present the sufferings of the Jews but also attest to their religious devotion in moments of great despair and oppression. At the same time, they are a source of controversy, as they glorify acts of "death in the name of the Lord" ("מוות על קידוש השם") and radically reinterpret the Jewish law and myths which, in principle, reject the notion of martyrdom. The controversial nature of the testimonies from the 12th century is vividly exemplified by the way they engage the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac. The chronicles and piyyutim describe how mothers and fathers slaughtered their sons and daughters in the name of God (to avoid conversion) as Abraham did on Mount Moriah. These texts include a reinterpretation of the biblical Aqedah, where Isaac is perceived not as the one saved but as the one slaughtered by his father on the altar.[5] The subversive interpretations of the Aqedah present a challenge for both Agnon and Spiegel after the Holocaust: on the one hand, they wish to find in the documents from the Middle Ages a model for Jewish devotion in the wake of immense cruelty. On the other hand, they are reluctant to embrace martyrdom as a normative value and thus refrain from validating the radical interpretations of the biblical text.

In 1947, Agnon published in *Haaretz*, "According to the Toil is the Reward" ("לפי הצער השכר"), a short story on the evening of the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The text is situated in the period following the First or Second Crusades. It tells the story of Rivi Zidkiya who writes a piyyut on the Binding of Isaac but eventually decides to burn it following a Divine message. The story contains symbols and references to the massacres of Jews in Europe during the Crusades, and to midrashic literature on the Aqedah.

Three years later, Spiegel published his influential essay "On the Legends of the Aqedah" ("מאגדות העקידה").[6] In his text, Spiegel reproduces a lost piyyut written by Rabbi Ephraim Ben-Yaacov of Bonn in the 12th century.[7] The piyyut describes how Isaac was slaughtered on Mount Moriah, resurrected by God, and then almost slaughtered again. Spiegel offers a lengthy introduction to Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut where he discusses both the historical circumstances and the midrashic background for the piyyut's radical narrative.

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5 In the late 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, Zionist historians like Isaac Baer strongly argued for the authenticity of the chronicles, including their graphic descriptions. However, a later generation of scholars attempted to refute some of the reports in the chronicles and questioned their historic accuracy. See Baer, "Gezeirot Tatnu," 126–31 and Jeremy Cohen, *Sanctifying the Name of God* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 31–54.

6 Spiegel's essay received significant attention after its translation to English under the title *The Last Trial*.

7 For a discussion of his writings see Robert Chazan, "Ephraim Ben Jacob's Compilation of Twelfth-Century Persecutions," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 84, no. 4 (1994): 397–416.

Although "According to the Toil is the Reward" and "On the Legends of the Akedah" differ in genre, their affinities are striking: the story and the essay were written shortly after the Holocaust, and they address a similar piyyut and similar theological-historical problems—the justification of martyrdom and radical reinterpretation of myth. Nevertheless, to this point, there has been no scholarly attempt to read the texts together. This article offers a first comparative reading of Agnon and Spiegel's works that entails two lines of argumentation. First, I argue that the story and essay can be read as reflections on the Jewish struggle to apply religious meaning to a catastrophic event. The story of the Aqedah serves as a paradigmatic case study which captures the way tradition is reimagined and readjusted to concrete disastrous reality. At the same time, both accounts of the "Aqedah narrative" avoid offering a theological justification of the martyrological narratives. Second, I make the biographical-historical claim that Spiegel's work had a concrete impact on Agnon's story. I support my contention with textual evidence showing that following the publication of Spiegel's article and Rabbi Ephraim's lost piyyut, Agnon changed significant details in the revised version of "According to the Toil is the Reward" published in the late 1950s.

Although no critical work directly links the story and the essay, they have both been discussed in terms of the authors' reactions to the Holocaust.[8] In his work on Agnon, for example, noted literary critique Baruch Kurzweil says "According to the Toil is the Reward" mediates "the hideous agony that is almost unbearable for human cognition." He claims that although the plot is situated in the Middle Ages, the story is "transparent and the concrete [. . .] speaks from it."[9] A similar approach is taken by other scholars who point to the violent symbols of ashes and blood to which Agnon refers and the incomprehensible disaster at the center of "According to the Toil is the Reward."[10]

Spiegel's "On the Legends of the Aqedah" is considered a groundbreaking study of the reception of the Aqedah story.[11] Next to its importance in the field of

8 For groundwork research mapping Agnon's writings during and after the Holocaust, see for instance Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts* 2, no. 1 (1982): 88–90; Dan Laor, "Did Agnon Write about the Holocaust? (Hebrew)," *Yad Va-Shem: A Collection of Articles*, no. 22 (1993): 29–31.

9 Baruch Kurzweil, "The Fire and the Woods (an Intermediate Epic Summary after the Akedah) (Hebrew)," in *Essays on Agnon's Stories* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1970), 316–17.

10 Aryeh Wineman, "Paytan and Paradox: An Analysis of Agnon's 'According to the Toil is the Reward,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 49 (1978): 310; Michal Arbel, "Miriam Dvora, the Melancholic Cantor: On 'The Cantor' and 'According to the Toil Is the Reward' by S. Y. Agnon (Hebrew)," *Ayin Gimel: A Journal for the Study of Agnon's Writings* 2 (2012): 123.

11 See for example Yoram Hazony, "Three Replies," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (May 5, 2015): 201; Samuel Lebens, "The Ashes of Isaac and the Nature of Jewish Philosophy," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5, no. 1 (2017): 511.

medieval Hebrew and midrashic literature, the essay is repeatedly acknowledged as an indirect reaction to the horrors of the Holocaust. For example, Arnold Band describes Spiegel's work as "a very authentic Jewish type of lamentation" on the horrors of the Holocaust and the continued sacrifices Jews have made throughout history. Band argues Spiegel's repeated references to the slaughtering of Isaac and his burned remains cannot be read independently from the historical reality of the late 1940s.[12]

Although many critics have studied Agnon's story and Spiegel's essay, they are treated as singular case studies, not as part of a larger conversation on the perception of Jewish history following the Holocaust. In the first decade after the end of the Second World War, a series of intellectuals—including Haberman, Baer, Agnon, and Spiegel—returned to the same documents from the Middle Ages but interpreted them from different perspectives. I cannot offer a full outline of the biographical and thematic ties between the writings of these thinkers. But my comparative reading of Agnon and Spiegel in this article represents a good start.

The article also makes a contribution to a wider conversation on the practice of scriptural interpretation following the Holocaust. The attempt to assign a religious meaning to catastrophic events lies behind many Jewish theological responses to the Holocaust. However, most of these responses were published more than a decade after the end of the war. Richard L. Rubenstein explains that the immediate reaction to the Holocaust was "shock and numbness" which prevented many from reflecting on the tragedy in the first years after the war.[13] Eliezer Berkovits similarly argues that a "quasi-paralysis of the imagination" prevented people from thinking about the meaningfulness of "Jewish destiny" for years.[14] I assert that because Spiegel and Agnon were not theologians and because they refrained from addressing the Holocaust directly, they were able to engage with questions of religious meaning and martyrdom already in the 1940s and early 1950s.

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12 Arnold J. Band, "Scholarship as Lamentation: Shalom Spiegel on 'The Binding of Isaac,'" *Jewish Social Studies* 5, nos. 1/2 (1998): 84–85, 89. The relations between Spiegel's essay and the Holocaust were discussed in Israel Jacob Yuval and Barbara Harshav, *Two Nations in Your Womb*, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 160; David Norman Gottlieb, *Second Slayings* (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2020), 169.

13 Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis, IN: MacMillan, 1966), x.

14 Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith After the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1973), 67.

1 The Piyyut, the Aqedah, and God's Judgment: Reading Agnon's Story

In this section, I discuss Agnon's "According to the Toil is the Reward." The first pages of the story present a few biographical details essential for understanding his account of the Aqedah and its martyrological interpretations. Agnon begins by presenting the circumstances which led a Jewish community in the Middle Ages in Europe to appoint Rivi Zidkiya (the story's protagonist) as their leader. Agnon describes his protagonist as an epitome of righteousness who has mastered all the canonical Hebrew Scriptures, yet in the same paragraph, he says Rivi Zidkiya was appointed to lead his community "before his beard was fully grown [. . .] for the wicked goyim captured the city's sages and placed them in jail until God had mercy on them, and they passed away."[15] In other words, the protagonist is in his early teens and according to Halachic norms should not be chosen as the emissary of a community.[16] Therefore, his appointment is a result of tragic circumstances in which the city's sages were executed by gentiles in what seems to be the period of the Crusades.

After describing the background for Rivi Zidkiya's appointment, Agnon reports that his protagonist is devoted to his role as the judge of his community and his vocation of writing liturgical poems: "As he stood between man and his fellow man, so he stood between the people of Israel and their Father in Heaven through prayer, because Mar Rivi Zidkiya had a pleasant voice to please his maker and poetize poems (Lefayet Piyyutim)."[17] As a judge, Rivi Zidkiya imposes justice on the community, and as a paytan, he serves as a mediator of God and his people. The two frameworks seem independent, and we should not expect the legal relations between man and man to be identical to the relations between man and God. Nevertheless, Agnon ties the two together; he presents a model which enables Rivi Zidkiya to measure the value of his poetic creations. The protagonist allocates a coin to every piyyut he writes and awards it to a beggar. To Rivi Zidkiya, the quality or behaviour of the beggar serves as an indication of God's view of his poetic effort:

> If a poor man who learned the Torah and had good virtues occurred before him (Rivi Zidkiya), he knew that the piyyut is proper and placed it in the prayer book and read in the synagogue. If a simple poor man occurred before him, he archived (deposited to Genizah) the piyyut. If it was a poor who had no Torah, and no manners, he burned the piyyut.[18]

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15 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition, Hebrew), in *The Fire and the Woods* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), 5.

16 *Babylonian Talmud*, "Chulin," 24.b.

17 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward," 5.

18 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward," 7.

Rivi Zidkiya's calculative system corresponds with the title of the story, "According to the Toil is the Reward," a Hebrew translation of an Aramaic verse from Mishnah Avot.[19] The Mishnah discusses the merits of studying the Torah and following the commandments and says the agonies or sufferings of the pious will be rewarded. Traditional commentaries tend to explain that the reward cannot be calculated in advance and might be awarded either in this world or the one to come.[20] Rivi Zidkiya's mechanism for judging poetry offers an unorthodox interpretation which modifies and concretizes the traditional formula. According to Rivi Zidkiya, God's artistic verdict on his poetry is given immediately and not in the world to come.[21] To understand the gravity of Rivi Zidkiya's expectation of an immediate Divine judgment on his piyyutim, we must take into account the content of his liturgical poems. Rivi Zidkiya's piyyutim describe the deeds and sufferings of his people and couple them with scriptural tradition. Therefore, when he brings a piyyut before God, he asks for validation of both its actions and theological views.

a) Rivi Zidkiya's Piyyut: Between History and Fiction

The first few pages of Agnon's story prepare readers for the dramatic moment when Rivi Zidkiya decides to write a piyyut which ties the story of the Aqedah to the concrete sufferings of his people in the period of the Crusades. Rivi Zidkiya sets his liturgical poem in the period between Rosh Hashana and the Yom Kippur—a timeframe in which according to Jewish tradition people repent and ask forgiveness for their sins, while God evaluates their deeds and intentions. In other words, the piyyut about the Binding of Isaac is written as part of a legal event. Within this trial-like framework, Rivi Zidkiya, who sees himself as the representative of the community, reflects on his people who "stretch forth their necks for slaughter in the name of God"[22] and relates the story of the Aqedah.

The concrete coupling of the Aqedah and the pious behaviour of the community takes place in the following paragraph:

> He (Rivi Zidkiya) explored wherefrom does this power of ours emerge; every day we are killed, and every day we accept everything with love, and we do not claim credit for ourselves. His mind wandered to Isaac, the first of the bound ones, who bound himself on the altar in order to follow the will of his heavenly father. Mar Rivi Zidkiya said, "My Lord, you did much

19 Mishnah Avot, 5:22–23.

20 Judah Loew ben Bezalel (Maharal of Prague), *Derech Haim*, ed. David Hartman (Jerusalem: Mechon Yerushalaim, 2007), 539.

21 There is an ironic aspect to the protagonist's perception of justice, as he seems to treat God as an art critique, and the beggars as actors in his artistic theater. For more, see Arbel, "Miriam Dvora, the Melancholic Cantor," 121.

22 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 9.

> for us, so that Isaac would sacrifice himself before you, so we could stand in this world. It is from our father Isaac that we receive this power to sacrifice our souls for you."[23]

The way Agnon describes Rivi Zidkiya's perception of the Aqedah blurs the lines between history, fiction, and Scripture. The biblical story of the Aqedah stands at odds with Rivi Zidkiya's narrative which describes Isaac as the one who paves the way for the sacrificial acts of Jews in the Middle Ages. Tradition is reimagined, and the Aqedah is described as a story in which Isaac is not bound but actually killed by Abraham. The reinterpretation of the Aqedah gives more importance to the concrete oppression of Rivi Zidkiya's community. When the protagonist declares, "It is from our father Isaac that we receive this power to sacrifice our souls," he echoes the common expression: "Everything that occurred to our forefathers is a sign for the children" ("מעשה אבות סימן לבנים"). The medieval Jewish thinker Nachmanides,[24] who coined the expression, explains that God determines the faith of future generations by the deeds of their fathers. According to this logic, if Isaac was sacrificed by Abraham, the sufferings and sacrificial acts of Jews in the Middle Ages cannot be isolated tragedies. Rather, they are part of a larger genealogy of martyrdom that can be traced back to the nation's biblical fathers.

Rivi Zidkiya's interpretation of the Aqedah may go against the grain of the biblical text, but Agnon, as the author, is following a radical narrative that is well-grounded in historical documents. Agnon's descriptions resemble the Hebrew piyyutim and chronicles from the 12th century published in 1946 by his friend Abraham Meir Haberman in *The Book of Edicts in Ashkenaz and France*. For instance, Haberman included the writings of Shlomo Ben Shimon, considered one of the early chroniclers from the period after the First Crusades. Ben Shimon describes the 1096 persecutions in Mainz as follows: "Zion's precious sons, the people of Mainz, were put through the ten trials like father Abraham. [. . .] They too offered up their sons, exactly as Abraham offered up his own Isaac. [. . .] There were 1,100 victims in one day, every one of them like the Aqedah of Isaac son of Abraham."[25] As in Agnon's story, the chronicler creates a lineage which begins with the story of the Aqedah and culminates in the martyrological acts of the Crusades. The resemblance of the testimonies from the Middle Ages to Agnon's description is evident and indicative of the type of narrative Rivi Zidkiya engages as he writes his piyyut.

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23 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward," 9.

24 Moses ben Nahman, *Nachmanides' Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Zichron Joseph, 1958), 112. Agnon repeatedly refers throughout the story to traditional sources written after the 12th century where the plot is approximately situated. Towards the end of the story, the narrator even refers to this tendency explicitly. See Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 14.

25 Haberman, *The Book of Edicts in Ashkenaz and France*, 31–32.

In Agnon's story, right after contemplating the Binding of Isaac and the sacrifices made by his people, Rivi Zidkiya opens the Pentateuch, reads the biblical story and poetizes "the whole story of the Aqedah with terrible and wonderful rhymes."[26] There is much to say about the way Agnon describes Rivi Zidkiya's writing process, but I will postpone this discussion to the third and concluding part of this article. In the meantime, I wish to focus on the apparent substance of the piyyut based on the affinities between Agnon's text and the historical documents published by Haberman. Although we can only speculate on the precise content of Rivi Zidkiya's text, Agnon offers enough historical clues for us to identify it as a "piyyut Aqedah" which both commemorates the sacrificial acts of Jews and radically reinterprets the biblical narrative by describing how Isaac was slaughtered rather than saved.

b) The Piyyut is Put on Trial: Agnon's Normative-Theological Stance

After writing his liturgical poem about the Aqedah, Rivi Zidkiya brings his text to the judgment of God through the "beggar test," a test which should indicate if the piyyut is welcomed in heaven or not. I believe that bringing a "piyyut Aqedah" to God's court means not only asking God's artistic opinion, as some interpreters of Agnon's text have indicated,[27] but also seeking validation of the content of the poetic text. The text apparently radically interprets the biblical narrative of the Aqedah and assigns greater meaning to and justification for the acts of martyrdom following the Crusades. In other words, Rivi Zidkiya wants his people's sacrifices to be justified and he asks permission to reinterpret tradition in a form more reflective of the complex historical circumstances.

The "juridical scene" takes place when the beggar knocks on Rivi Zidkiya's door immediately after he completes his "piyyut Aqedah":

> The landlord (Rivi Zidkiya) asked the poor man, "Where do you come from and where are you heading?" The poor man answered with fury: "We go from trouble to trouble and from disaster to disaster." Mar Rivi Zidkiya started to console him on the troubles which the poor man shouted about, and the troubles which shouted out from his body. He told him, "God will save you." The poor man bent his face and answered straightly, "I have no powers to stand this person, my agonies are shouting from my flesh," and he said, "God will save."[28]

The meeting with the beggar suggests the implications of looking at the tragic and absurd reality without providing a religious rationalization or interpretation. The beggar refuses to look for a religious justification of his tragic existence and expresses

26 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 9.
27 Arbel, "Miriam Dvora, the Melancholic Cantor," 121.
28 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 10–11.

a grim perception of life when he says, "We go from trouble to trouble, and from disaster to disaster." He describes a structure which does not treat God as an entity that attaches meaning to suffering; instead, the Divine Being only crystalizes the injustices. The beggar simply states, "God is rich, and I am poor, God has everything, and I have nothing," and he ridicules Rivi Zidkiya's attempt to console him.[29]

The encounter with the beggar causes Rivi Zidkiya's principles to collide: on the one hand, his attempt to recreate structures of meaning after the disaster is encapsulated in the "piyyut Aqedah." The liturgical text justifies the sacrificial acts of his people and assigns greater meaning to the community's tragedy by linking it to the biblical Aqedah. On the other hand, Rivi Zidkiya is committed to his mechanistic perception of Divine judgment whereby God delivers his verdict through beggars. God's verdict is unambiguous: the beggar does not have good manners and shows no respect to the Torah. Thus, the piyyut, with all of its dramatic content, should be burned. The implications are radical because God's verdict seems to reject the connection Rivi Zidkiya makes between the "sacrifice of Isaac" and the sufferings of his people. The piyyut in Agnon's story initially functions as the locus in which the protagonist searches for a justification of the catastrophe and his people's sacrificial acts, but the text turns out to embody the failure of this search.

After the beggar leaves, Rivi Zidkiya is in a state of confusion. First, he contemplates the proper reaction to the events; then, he burns the piyyut. He later regrets his decision, but fails to recreate the text in writing. At the end of this sequence, Rivi Zidkiya decides to give up writing liturgical poems altogether. Thus, he abandons the task of representing his people before God. He refuses to mediate their message in search of God's judgment.

The meeting with the beggar in which God refuses to give his blessing to Rivi Zidkiya's piyyut is important when we think about "According to the Toil is the Reward" in normative and theological terms. At this point of the story, it seems Agnon is taking a stance which renounces the sanctification of martyrological acts and thus the radical reinterpretation of the Aqedah. But Agnon complicates things by giving his story a more ambiguous and less didactic tone in its final pages.

In the later versions of "According to the Toil is the Reward," the plot skips several decades forward,[30] to a point where Rivi Zidkiya is old and ill. On the Day

29 Several intriguing interpretations of the encounter with the beggar point to the resemblance between his character and Amnon of Magenza who was tortured and known for writing the piyyut "Unetanneh Tokef." See Galili Shahar, *Bodies and Names* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2016), 254. For a survey of Agnon's repeated references to the story of Amnon of Magenza, see Michal Arbel, "The Miracle of Rabbi Amnon from Magenza (Hebrew)," in *Maase Sipur*, ed. Avidov Lipsḳer, Rela Kushlewski, and Yoav Elshtein, vol. 2 (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan, 2009).

30 I return to the differences in the last part of this article.

of Atonement, he is brought to the synagogue on a bed because he can barely walk. However, towards the end of the prayer, he imagines the story of the Aqedah, gains strength, and takes his place on the synagogue's stage where he suddenly recalls the text of his burned piyyut about the Binding of Isaac and performs it aloud for the first time. A series of dramatic events follows: Rivi Zidkiya has a revelation in the form of heavenly voices singing his piyyut; he collapses and almost dies, but eventually regroups and returns home on his feet. Even after these astounding events, he still wants assurance from God about his piyyut and his martyrological interpretation of the Aqedah. Therefore, he performs a "She'elat Halom"—a mystical-prophetic practice in which, during the night, an individual receives the answer to a question posed before falling asleep:

> And he (Rivi Zidkiya) was answered with the following words: "Le-pum zara agra'" ("According to the toil is the reward"). And he knew that the Akedah was accepted and desired. And the poor man who experienced many terrible forms of sickness and troubles in this world was sent to him.[31]

The answer seems to reveal God's true judgment and brings the story to a cohesive closure. Yet I see some ambiguity in the message. The text specifically states that Rivi Zidkiya experienced a revelation comprising only three words "לפום צערא אגרא" ("According to the toil is the reward"). The rest of the paragraph seems to be his interpretation of the message. Rivi Zidkiya understands from the Divine message that God did not reject the content of the piyyut but his behaviour. Apparently, Rivi Zidkiya failed to recognize that it was his duty to reward the beggar for his sufferings. The act of rationalization is essential for the protagonist who wishes to rehabilitate his religious world and find meaning for his people's sufferings right before his death.

Before concluding his story, Agnon adds one more twist to the plot. This twist prevents us from associating his text with a clear theological stance. Following the events at the synagogue and the answer given to him in a dream, Rivi Zidkiya believes the time is right to recreate his piyyut not only in prayer but also in writing. However, when he takes a quill into his hands, he cannot write a single word. At this point, the narrator approaches the readers and explains: "And you, do not wonder about it. Once the Aqedah was accepted in heaven, there was no longer need for it on earth. And the melody which he drew from his heart changed, for the melody on earth is not like the melody in heaven."[32] The narrator stresses the distinction between the melody (Nigun) in heaven and the melody on earth and

31 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 17–18.
32 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward," 18.

thereby indicates the difference between the realm of man and that of God; the piyyut is accepted by God, but not as Rivi Zidkiya intended. The story points out the limitations involved in rearticulating Jewish tradition and scriptures to rationalize moments of radical crisis. We can try to attach contemporary meanings to the traditional corpus, but we must accept that validation might be out of reach. The narrator's explanation challenges attempts to conclusively define the story's theological stance: on the one hand, the text does not explicitly renounce the martyrological content of the piyyut, but on the other hand, Agnon makes a deliberate choice to avoid sanctifying the radical interpretation of the Aqedah which remains concealed from the reader's eye. Even if the piyyut is accepted, it does not become an integral part of the prayer book, and it should not be revealed to the reader.

Agnon's story captures a unique reaction to a concrete historical catastrophe, but it does not capture a clear theological stance on divinity and catastrophe. Rivi Zidkiya tries to couple the Aqedah with the suffering of his people, but God's reaction to his piyyut is ambiguous or even contradictory. In other words, Agnon focuses on human behaviour and human interpretation of the Scriptures following a historical crisis; God is depicted as a present entity, but one which remains silent and refrains from offering absolute answers.[33]

In the final paragraphs of "According to the Toil is the Reward," Agnon returns to the motif of the lost text which repeatedly reoccurs in his œuvre, notably in his story "The Sign" ("הסימן").[34] "The Sign" is considered Agnon's most explicit account of the events of the Holocaust, and it merges fiction with autobiographical elements.[35] As several scholars have argued, "The Sign" functions as an immediate context for reading "According to the Toil is the Reward" and emphasizes the legitimacy of interpreting the latter as an indirect reaction to the Holocaust.[36] "The Sign" is set in Jerusalem during the mid-1940s. Before the evening of Shavuot, the protagonist learns that Buczacz, his hometown in Poland, was completely destroyed by the Nazis and its people killed. In the final scene of the story, the narrator sits alone in his small synagogue and mourns the death of his neighbours and relatives; suddenly, Solomon ibn Gabirol, the 11th-century Andalusian paytan and philosopher,

33 Netah Stahl argues that the silence of God in many of Agnon's stories speaks to his larger tendency to define the Divine Being through structures taken from Maimonidean "negative theology." Neta Stahl, *The Divine in Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 100–03.

34 "The Sign" has two versions; the first is less than one page long and was published in 1944; the second is much longer and was printed as part of "Ha-esh Ve-Haezim." Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "Ha-Siman (First Version)," *Moznaim* 18, nos. 2–3 (1944): 104; Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "The Sign (Hebrew)," in *The Fire and the Woods*.

35 See for instance Laor, "Did Agnon Write about the Holocaust?," 47.

36 Shahar, *Bodies and Names*, 249.

appears to him. The encounter between the narrator and the paytan culminates when ibn Gabirol poetizes a piyyut in remembrance of Buczacz. However, the narrator fails to recall the text and explains that the piyyut "sings itself in the heavens above."[37]

In both "The Sign," and "According to the Toil is the Reward," Agnon expresses the aspiration to remember the sacrifices of the community and attach meaning to them by applying a religious framework. However, by leaving the liturgical text veiled, the author avoids providing closure for the reader; he does not offer a theological justification of the suffering and leaves things open-ended.

2 A Lost Piyyut and Isaac's Resurrection: Reading Spiegel's Essay

I will return to Agnon's story, taking a different perspective, but before doing so, I wish to add the voice of Shalom Spiegel to the discussion. Spiegel's "On the Legends of the Aqedah" is a 70-page "introduction" to a piyyut published from a manuscript by Rabbi Ephraim Ben Jacob of Bonn, who lived at the time of the Second Crusade in Europe. The piyyut's content is radical in comparison to other testimonies of the same genre and time period. It describes how Isaac was killed by Abraham, resurrected by God, and then almost slaughtered again. In his essay, Spiegel studies the historical and scriptural background creating the conditions for Rabbi Ephraim and his generation to reinterpret the meaning of the Aqedah in a way that radically broke from the explicit message of Genesis 22. Despite a rigorous attempt to understand the martyrological interpretation of Rabbi Ephraim, Spiegel rejects any attempt to attribute a normative 20th-century value to it. He stresses that although subversive narratives existed, the canon of Jewish Scriptures was devoted to the theological message of Genesis 22 opposing any form of human sacrifice in the name of God.

To better understand Spiegel's point of departure, we should examine some of the more dramatic strophes in Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut:

> He made haste, he pinned him down with his knees,
> He made his two arms strong.
> With steady hands he slaughtered him according to the rite,
> Full right was the slaughter.
>
> Down upon him fell the resurrecting dew, and he revived.

37 Agnon, "The Sign," 312.

(The father) seized him (then) to slaughter him once more.
Scripture, bear witness! Well-grounded is the fact:
And the Lord called Abraham, even a second time from heaven.[38]

In these strophes, Rabbi Ephraim presents a subversive narrative at odds with the common perception of the biblical Aqedah. In Genesis 22, we see no evidence that Isaac was slaughtered by Abraham or resurrected by God as the piyyut explicitly states. Moreover, the poet does not simply reimagine the Binding of Isaac; he clarifies that his narrative is grounded in the Bible: "Scripture, bear witness! Well-grounded is the fact." Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut interprets the two revelations on Mount Moriah[39] described in verses 11–12 and verses 15–16. The piyyut implies that because the angel revealed himself twice and declared Abraham was willing to sacrifice his son, we should understand that Isaac was slaughtered in proximity to the first revelation; he was then resurrected and a ram substituted for him; in the end, he was almost sacrificed again. Another important aspect of the piyyut is the coupling of Abraham and Isaac's deeds and the horrors of the Crusades. Rabbi Ephraim explicitly asks God, "Recall to our credit the many Akedahs / The saints, men and women, slain for thy sake."[40] In his essay, Spiegel studies the conditions within which this radical interpretation of the Aqedah emerged and asks if the Scriptures throughout the generations truly "bear witness" to and support the subversive narrative in which Isaac is slaughtered and resurrected.[41] In what follows, I describe Spiegel's contextualization of Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut, starting with the causal relations he draws between moments of historical crisis and the reinterpretation of the Aqedah.

Before Spiegel addresses the chronicles and liturgical poems of the Middle Ages, he argues that the phenomenon of changing the meaning of the Aqedah in the wake of radical circumstances can be retraced in earlier Jewish sources. For instance, he discusses the woman and her seven sons who died to avoid idolatry.[42] Spiegel refers to the version of the tale from midrash *Lamentations Rabbah* where the mother—Miriam Bat Nachum—refuses to allow her two-year-old son to bow before the Roman Emperor Hadrian who eventually sentences him to death. Before the moment of execution, she says:

38 Ephraim Ben Jacob, "The Akedah," in Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, trans. Judah Goldin (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1993), 148–49.
39 Genesis 22:11–12, 15–16.
40 Ben Jacob, "The Akedah," 152.
41 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 131.
42 The story has various versions in which the names of the woman and of the foreign ruler change. Its first canonical version appears in 2 Maccabees 7.

> My son go tell Abraham, our father, "my mother says to you, 'do not take pride, claiming I built an altar and offered up my son Isaac.' Now see, my mother built seven altars and offered up seven sons in one day. And yours was a test, but I really had to do it."[43]

The midrash testifies to the sufferings of the Jewish people under Roman rule and does not change the meaning of the Aqedah. Instead, the biblical narrative is confronted. The story of the mother who gave birth to seven children and still breastfeeds the youngest represents a counter-narrative to that of Abraham. Her story inverts the Aqedah both in terms of gender (an aspect Spiegel ignores) and in terms of the normative message which sanctifies the sacrificial act. Spiegel analyzes the rationale behind the midrash and points out the historical circumstances from which it emerged:

> In light of the historical reality of the second-century persecutions under the Roman Empire, it seemed almost as though something of the splendor and awe of the biblical Akedah story was diminished. Who cares about some ancient, far off time, who was merely thought of as a possible sacrifice on the altar, but delivered from the danger, whom no misfortune overtook; when right before your eyes, in the immediate present, fathers and sons *en masse* ascend the executioner's block to be butchered and burned [. . .] through the outcry of that mother in the Talmudic Haggadah, the whole Shemad generation registered its pain and the formidable achievements of its children that could make the biblical hero blush: Yours was a trial mine were the performances.[44]

The concrete crisis leads Miriam Bat Nachum to carry out a zealous act in the name of God. It also leads to a radical confrontation with the constitutive myth of the Aqedah. Abraham is the father of the nation, willing to sacrifice his dearest son because of his faith in God. Therefore, any act of human sacrifice can apparently be positioned in relation to the Aqedah. Spiegel notes the difficulty that arises when the Aqedah can no longer serve as norm for ultimate religious devotion because the present reality forces people to make greater sacrifices than their biblical forefather. The story suggests we can find religious meaning in life in moments of crisis and absurdity, but at the same time, we might need to renounce certain religious Scriptures at odds with concrete historical circumstances.

The story of Miriam bat Nachum and the chronicles and piyyutim from the Middle Ages both engage the Aqedah in a moment of great crisis. However, Spiegel stresses the profound difference between the two interventions in tradition:

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43 Jacob Neusner, trans., *Lamentations Rabbah: An Analytical Translation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1989), 177.

44 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 15.

> Like a permanent refrain, this comparison of their experience with that of the Patriarchs recurs in all the writings of that generation, and you will find an echo of it in the poetry of R. Ephraim of Bonn: "They offered up sacrifices, they prepared victims like Isaac their Father." Like Isaac their Father? But was not Isaac delivered from the knife's thrust? Was he not restored to his father very much alive? These pious folks were butchered and became food for the worms! How is it then that from out of the mouths of these votaries and victims, or the relations of the slain, there did not burst forth a painful groan like to that of the saintly mother, bereft of all her sons, as she addressed herself to Father Abraham?[45]

As a mid-20th century scholar, Spiegel is aware that Miriam's reaction when she confronts the biblical myth might seem more reasonable than the one of Rabbi Ephraim and his generation. Therefore, he wishes to explain how the Aqedah was a meaningful framework for poets and chroniclers in 12th century Ashkenaz. Spiegel argues that what forces one generation to confront the story of Genesis 22 and another to embrace it is their profoundly different understanding of the biblical myth; the midrashic text confronts the Aqedah but maintains its content, while medieval literature embraces the Aqedah by changing its meaning.

Spiegel uses several examples from the chronicles and piyyutim of the Middle Ages where the Aqedah is reimagined as an event where the slaughter is not prevented but materializes. By reinterpreting the meaning of the biblical text, a certain cohesiveness within Jewish history is maintained; those who sacrifice their lives and those who report on the tragic events later see themselves as a continuation of the Aqedah narrative. Spiegel explains, "The victims themselves constantly set before their own eyes the example of the Patriarchs' behaviour on Mount Moriah and yearned to act their own parts in the image and likeness of the earlier *dramatis personae*."[46]

a) "As Though Isaac Himself Had Been Burned"

As I have argued to this point, Spiegel convincingly shows how concrete tragic events led to radical changes in the interpretation of the Aqedah. He does not stop there, however; he goes on to reveal a far more sophisticated mechanism of interpretation running through Jewish history. The biblical text in general and the Aqedah specifically are relatively modest in detail, and this generated the practice of midrashic interpretation. Throughout the generations, midrashic commentaries on the Aqedah take certain details from the biblical text and develop it into expanded stories. In his essay, Spiegel points out allusions in midrashic literature on the Aqedah to the depiction of the slaughtered Isaac and his resurrection. Even

45 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 26.
46 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 24.

though midrashic commentaries rarely adopt martyrological narratives in full, they sometimes hint at the radical subversive potential of the myth. Spiegel highlights several threads from the midrashic tales, one of which focuses on the "ashes of Isaac." These tales have left clear traces both in Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut, where Isaac is quoted as saying "Gather my ashes, bring them to the city,"[47] and in Agnon's "According to the Toil is the Reward."

Spiegel's discussion of the "ashes of Isaac" departs from the Middle Ages, specifically from the midrash *Shiboleh Ha-Leket* from the 13th century. The midrash recounts: "When Father Isaac was bound on the altar and reduced to ashes and his sacrificial dust was cast on Mount Moriah, the Holy One, blessed be He, immediately brought upon him dew and revived him."[48] Spiegel stresses that the "Midrash flatly contradicts Scripture and everything it reports on the subject of the Akedah"[49] but then looks for the background and mechanisms of interpretation from which its radical narrative emerged. He argues that the subversive interpretation of the Aqedah is not novel; rather, it represents an idea with older sources.[50] To substantiate his claim, Spiegel turns to midrashic sources discussing the story of the ram burnt as offering instead of Isaac (Genesis 22:13). Spiegel says midrashic literature picked up on the act of substituting a ram for the son and treated the animal "as though" it were Isaac himself. Some of the stories even say the ram was named "Isaac" long before the journey to Mount Moriah. Therefore, when the midrash speculates on the ashes of the ram, it by proxy alludes to the vision of human sacrifice:

> "Let Isaac for Isaac come." Perhaps therefore the ashes of Isaac are nothing other than the ashes of that ram called Isaac which served as the substitute burnt offering for Isaac son of Father Abraham? [. . .] or the ashes of the ram which served as surrogate suggested that it was as though Isaac himself had been burned, and therefore they were called Isaac's ashes? [. . .] Indeed, you will often find this guarded expression as though recurring in the sources which refer to the ashes of Isaac, as though the expression were eager to dull somewhat the sharp edge of the startling phrase.[51]

Spiegel claims the term "as though" ("כאילו") enabled the authors of Jewish tales to imagine the death and resurrection of Isaac while still adhering to an interpretation that could be forced "into agreement with the biblical account."[52] Therefore,

47 Ben Jacob, "The Akedah," 148.
48 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 33.
49 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 35.
50 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 37.
51 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 41.
52 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 73.

even though the chroniclers, poets, and commentators in Ashkenaz pushed their interpretations of the Aqedah to an extreme, they were actually continuing existing streams in midrashic literature. In other words, the moment of historical crisis may have led to the rearticulation of the meaning of the Aqedah, but the building blocks were in place long before.

The relations between the midrashic background and the subversive meaning awarded to the Aqedah in the period of the Crusades are epitomized in Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut. Spiegel asks if the poetic depiction of the slaughtered Isaac was "born only from meticulous study of the biblical text? Or is it perhaps an echo from the historical nightmare of those times?"[53] But he avoids giving a precise answer, as the "boundaries between midrash and reality get blurred."[54] Spiegel finishes his essay with a quotation from Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut: "(The father) seized him (then) to slaughter him once more. / Scripture, bear witness! Well-grounded is the fact," and adds the following conclusion to it: "If not in Scripture, then in the experience of the Jews in the Middle Ages."[55] Spiegel keeps both options in play. In his opinion, Rabbi Ephraim's vision corresponds to tradition but is grounded in the concrete circumstances of 12th-century Europe.

b) The Voice of Jewish Canon: Spiegel's Normative Stance

Spiegel spends most of his essay describing how and why Rabbi Ephraim and his generation find new meanings in the Aqedah following their radical oppression. As I pointed out earlier in the article, even though he attempts to understand the martyrological interpretations, Spiegel refuses to give them normative value in the 20th century:

> The Akedah story declared war on the remnants of idolatry in Israel and undertook to remove root and branch the whole long, terror-laden inheritance from idolatrous generations. In this attack on the survivals of alien creeds Scripture and Midrash were at one. The haggadic lore of the Talmudic Sages continued battling along these lines and under such standards, against every vestige of an idolatrous heritage.[56]

Spiegel asserts that the Aqedah and its reception within canonical commentaries stand in contrast to pagan traditions sanctifying the sacrifice of the first-born child. His terminology is not neutral but reflects a normative stance on the martyrological narratives. Spiegel identifies with the canonical sources and describes the Talmudic sages as battling to abolish the "idolatrous heritage." In Hebrew, Spiegel names the "idolaters"—"עכו"ם" ("Acu'm"), an acronym for the term "עובדי כוכבים ומזלות" (liter-

53 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 131.
54 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 137.
55 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 138.
56 Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 73.

ally star worshipers) widely used in rabbinical literature but less common in academic jargon. Spiegel describes the Jewish Scriptures as a battleground for the fight between the proper message of the Aqedah and the subversive voices which can be traced back to the pagan tradition.

Spiegel's historical-theological arguments seem to suggest that every act of human sacrifice inherently symbolizes a return to the pre-biblical-idolatrous order. Nevertheless, Spiegel's reconstruction does not critique or condemn the Jews who adjusted the meaning of the Aqedah or even took part in acts of martyrdom. In other words, he avoids insinuating that Rabbi Ephraim and his generations were idolaters. In my view, it is exactly because Spiegel protects and validates the so-called "proper" theological interpretations of the Aqedah that he can freely engage with the subversive manifestations of the story throughout history. On the one hand, Spiegel refuses to sanctify Rabbi Ephraim and his generation's martyrological interpretation of the Aqedah. On the other hand, his whole essay functions as an act of commemoration that tries to truly understand and assign meaning to the sufferings of the past and the evolution of tradition in times of crisis.[57]

Spiegel's stance is especially interesting in the wake of the historical moment in which he presents it. His essay was published in 1950, a time when the question of Jewish martyrdom was highly relevant as part of Holocaust commemoration; moreover, it was published in the new country of Israel, where the Aqedah was appropriated for theological-political purposes.[58] In a dramatic historical moment, right after the Second World War, Spiegel clearly rejects both the value of sacrifice in the name of the Lord and its coupling with the story of the Aqedah. Nevertheless, Spiegel's normative position does not mean he ignores the bloody history of Jewish sacrifice in times of crisis. Rather, he attempts to understand it better.

I wish to conclude this part of the discussion by taking a comparative perspective: writing immediately after the Holocaust, both Spiegel and Agnon return to the period of the Crusades and address a fictional and an actual piyyut on the Binding of Isaac. Although the texts are profoundly different, the piyyut affords both authors a platform for reflecting on the ways a community reinterprets Scripture to find new meanings in moments of great oppression. However, the aspiration to understand the moment of radical crisis through scriptural tradition does not lead either author to adopt the normative-theological stance of his fictional and

57 Band, "Scholarship as Lamentation: Shalom Spiegel on 'The Binding of Isaac,'" 84–85.

58 Yael Feldman offers a broad reconstruction of the reception of the Aqedah story after the Second World War. She demonstrates how the reception of the biblical story corresponded with the Holocaust and the Israeli war for independence. See Yael S. Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 133–34.

historical protagonist who changes the meaning of the Aqedah and sanctifies the martyrological narratives.

3 Resurrection and Sacrifice: Reading Agnon after Spiegel

In the last part of this article, I will present a different line of argumentation and suggest that the relations between Agnon's and Spiegel's texts go beyond thematic and historic proximity. I point to the concrete and significant influence of Spiegel's essay and Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut on Agnon's editing of "According to the Toil is the Reward."[59] My discussion is not based on archival documentation, but it is important to note that Agnon and Spiegel were acquainted and corresponded from time to time.[60] Although they lived on different continents during the 1940s, they belonged to similar intellectual and social circles from which they could learn about each other's works.[61] Nevertheless, even if we ignore these biographical details, the way the texts echo each other is striking and substantiates my argument on the possible impact of Spiegel's work on Agnon's story.

Agnon published in *Haaretz* the first and shorter version of "According to the Toil is the Reward" in 1947 on the evening of Yom Kippur. Three years later,

59 Spiegel was Professor of Medieval Hebrew literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. He published "On the legends of the Akedah" as part of the Jubilee Volume in celebration of Professor Alexander Marx's seventieth birthday. According to the catalog of Agnon House in Jerusalem, there was a copy of the volume in Agnon's personal library. Agnon's House Library, accessed September 16, 2020, http://www.infocenters.co.il/agnon/notebook_ext.asp?item=6867&site=agnon&lang=HEB&menu=1. Moreover, Spiegel indicates that a copy of Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn's piyyut was at the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry in Jerusalem, and Agnon's close friend Abraham Meir Haberman knew about it. See Spiegel, *The Last Trial*, 141.

60 The National Library in Jerusalem holds a few letters from Spiegel to Agnon from the 1930s. Some specifically address the anthology *Days of Awe* (ימים נוראים) in which Agnon assembled tales addressing the time between Rosh Ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur. One of these tales specifically ties Rabbi Ephraim to Rabbi Amnon from Magenza who appears in many of Agnon's stories. "Shalom Spiegel to S. Y. Agnon," June 11, 1936, ARC. 4* 1270 05 0470, S. Y. Agnon Archive, National Library, Jerusalem; Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Days of Awe* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1937), 132.

61 Alexander Marx worked with Spiegel as a professor and librarian at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and his sister Esther was married to Agnon. This is one of several biographical facts which support my assumption that Agnon was aware of Spiegel's essay possibly before but certainly after its publication. For more on the connection between Marx and Agnon, see Avner Falk, *Agnon's Story: A Psychoanalytic Biography of S. Y. Agnon*, Contemporary Psychoanalytic Studies (Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2018), 335–36.

Spiegel published "On the Legends of the Akedah." In 1959, a second and more elaborate version of Agnon's story appeared in *Haaretz,* this time on the evening of Rosh Hashanah.[62] Although the central narrative of the story remains intact in all versions, the later edition puts more emphasis on the concrete act of writing the piyyut and couples it with the motif of sacrifice and resurrection. As I showed in the preceding discussion, the structure of sacrifice, resurrection, and a second slaying singles out Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut and fuels many of Spiegel's arguments. Therefore, I argue Agnon's new emphasis on the "resurrection motif" indicates the impact of Spiegel's essay and Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut.

In all versions of the story, the narrator describes how Rivi Zidkiya couples the sacrificial acts of the community with the Binding of Isaac. However, the scene in which the piyyut is actually written is presented in very different terms in the first and final versions. In 1947, the description is brief: "His quill was suddenly lifted and placed between his fingers, and he started to emanate holy and horrible rhymes until he poetized the whole Parashah of the Akedah."[63] The description is short and leads immediately to the encounter between Rivi Zidkiya and the poor man, after which the piyyut is burned. In the later version, the scene is detailed and includes both the act of slaughter and the anticipated resurrection:

> He raised from his chair, opened the Pentateuch and read the Parashah of the Akedah. If a word of Torah enters the heart of the pious ones, then they turn to its place of origin. [. . .] After he had read the whole Parashah, he gazed and saw the ashes of Isaac placed on the altar. His quill raised and set itself between his fingers and leaned towards the paper as he was used to in time when the mysteries of the Lord Blessed Be He, are revealed to him directly or through the heart. Mar Rivi Zidkiya left his pen on the table, sat and thought with himself and contemplated on the Binding of Isaac, that because of it we are blessed with life. And although the troubles and agonies come upon us, we exist for ever and eternity. He stretched his hand towards the pen and started to emanate holy and terrible rhymes about the Akedah, as it is written in the Torah and the Midrash. And so, he sat and rhymed like the sacred poets who bind their hearts in their poems for the Great One, until he had poetized the whole story of the Akedah with terrible and wonderful rhymes.[64]

62 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (second edition, Hebrew), *Haaretz*, February 10, 1959. This edition almost fully overlaps with the last version of the story published in 1962 as part of Agnon's collection *The Fire and the Woods.* Because the differences between the last two versions of the story are microscopic, I decided to focus my comparative discussion on the first and last.

63 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (first edition, Hebrew), *Haaretz*, September 23, 1947.

64 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 9.

The scene begins when Rivi Zidkiya turns to chapter 22 in the book of Genesis and treats it as an origin ("מקום חיותו") from which the piyyut should emerge. However, after reading the parashah, he refrains from starting to write. He imagines in front of him not Isaac himself but the "ashes of Isaac placed on the altar." As I have already noted in my discussion of Spiegel's "On the Legends of the Akedah," midrashic literature contentiously contemplated the notion of "Isaac's ashes," and in the Middle Ages, it served as an idiom for imagining both the sacrifice of Isaac and his resurrection.[65] In other words, the reference to "Isaac's ashes" anticipates the burning of the piyyut and its resurrection from ashes.

The reference to a symbol of resurrection is important when we look at the way Agnon ties the practice of writing with that of slaughtering. Rivi Zidkiya raises the quill as Abraham raises the knife[66] and recreates the sacrificial act in writing: "He stretched his hand towards the pen and started to emanate holy and terrible rhymes about the Aqedah." If the elaborated account of the process of writing the piyyut alludes to the act of sacrifice, then the final scenes of the revised story bring up the motif of resurrection which is prominent in Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut and Spiegel's essay.

In the 1947 version, the whole story takes place in more or less the same time period; the narrator reports the burning of the piyyut and then simply describes how during the Day of Atonement, Rivi Zidkiya arrives at the synagogue, takes his place on the stage, and experiences a revelation in which he hears the words of his piyyut. In the later versions, there is a gap of several decades between the two major parts of the story; until the burning of the piyyut, Rivi Zidkiya seems to be a relatively young man, while in the final chapters, he is old and about to die. Moreover, during the ecstatic scene in which he hears the text of the piyyut from heaven, Rivi Zidkiya collapses, and the community is convinced that he is dead until his sudden recovery.[67] In other words, the old protagonist relives a certain version of the Aqedah, which includes a death on the synagogue's stage and a resurrection.

The insertion of the motifs of slaughter and resurrection in later versions of "According to the Toil is the Reward" is most radically emphasized when Rivi Zidkiya wishes to recreate his piyyut in writing. In 1947, the protagonist's attempt and failure are only briefly mentioned:

65 Aryeh Wineman points to the midrashic background of Agnon's reference to the ashes of Isaac but also accounts for the difference between the two versions of the story. Wineman, "Paytan and Paradox," 296.

66 See Genesis 22:11.

67 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 17.

> Rivi Zidkiya immediately ascended from his bed, washed his hands, and took the quill, so he could put the Akedah in writing. And all of its strophes and rhymes disappeared from his mind, and he could not find one decent letter, because the Akedah has already ascended to heaven.[68]

The story's bottom line does not change between the different versions, as in both the piyyut finds a place in heaven, but not on earth. The way Agnon develops and expands his description in the later version ties the act of writing to the second slaughter:

> He stretched the paper in front of him and soaked the quill with ink and asked to put in writing the things which were on the tip of his tongue like the ashes of Isaac on the edge of the altar. He spread the paper, held his quill, soaked it in ink and asked for words to put in writing. He reflected on one word and then another, and placed them at the tip of his quill, but the words returned whence they came and could not be written on paper. [. . .] He pushed the quill against the paper. The quill poured splashes of ink, some of them were swallowed in paper and some spread, but no word and no form of letter appeared.[69]

The process of writing echoes the act of slaughtering; Agnon's wording indicates the protagonist's aspiration to close the circle and complete his act of sacrifice in writing.

Rivi Zidkiya imagines again the ashes of Isaac and compares the ashes to his ink; he stretches the paper as if stretching the neck of Isaac and soaks the quill as if using a knife to shed blood. However, as in Rabbi Ephraim's piyyut, the second slaying is not materialized. Rivi Zidkiya wishes to recreate the slaughtering of Isaac and his own people in writing but is prevented from doing so.

4 Conclusion

Spiegel and Agnon have much in common, not only personally but also with respect to their historical and fictional protagonists. Like Rivi Zidkiya and Rabbi Ephraim, they look at the bloody past in a moment of concrete crisis. However, while Rivi Zidkiya and Rabbi Ephraim reimagine the Aqedah in order to find meaning in their tragic and concrete experiences, Agnon and Spiegel only allude to the ties between their reflections on the Crusades and the Holocaust. Agnon and Spiegel do not present normative conclusions or suggest how to read the Aqedah or its martyrological interpretations following recent calamitous events. Instead, they give

68 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (first edition).
69 Agnon, "According to the Toil is the Reward" (third edition), 18.

an account of the Jewish aspirations and struggles involved in finding meaning and comfort in the Scriptures in a profoundly unstable world.

In addition to discussing the affinities between the two intellectuals, in this essay, I have pointed to a larger conversation in the first years after the Holocaust on the role of the Crusades within post-Holocaust Jewish history. Spiegel and Agnon's texts represent only a small part of this conversation. Several other scholars and writers also focus on different aspects of testimonies from the Middle Ages. I hope further examination of the writings of these intellectuals will shed more light on the ways our understanding of history and the Scriptures is influenced by concrete moments of crisis.