

THE FLIGHT FROM PARADISE:  
THE SURREALISTIC MOMENT IN AGNON'S  
"FROM APARTMENT TO APARTMENT"

*By*

ARYEH WINEMAN

*University of California at Berkeley*

IN THE EARLY nineteen-thirties, Agnon began publishing a type of story quite similar in its qualities to those of the dream, or more precisely, the nightmare. Most of these were published together in his collection *seper hamma'asim*, in 1941. One of these stories, "middira lədira"<sup>1</sup> ("From Apartment to Apartment"), occupies an especially problematic place in that collection. Kurzweil (1966, p. 78) regarded it as an exception to much that characterizes the collection as a whole: external confusion in which the norms and the continuity of time and space are broken. Also Barzel has referred to it as an exception, as a story which bears close proximity to the world of realistic causation, though he also discusses it as an integral part of *seper hamma'asim*, consisting as it does of a kind of journey "which exists in the consciousness of the narrator" (Barzel, 1972, p. 160), a journey, in this case, in quest of tranquility and rest on the part of the narrator-character who is seeking recovery from a prolonged and unnamed illness.

The story basically follows the logic of time and space as they are assumed in waking experience and in the realistic story. It does not evoke

1. First published in *Ha'arets*, December 8, 1939. Included in Agnon (1953b, pp. 170–181). All page numbers in this article refer to the latter edition.

sense of fright which the disruptions of a logical world evoke in other stories of the same collection. The story contains, however, one move on the part of the narrator-character for which there appears no direct cause: just as he has arrived with his luggage at a quiet, idyllic site which has seemed to answer his needs so completely, the narrator walks to his previous residence in an intolerably noisy section of the city. Only this one move on his part is of the nature of a surrealistic world in which occurrences follow one another without apparent cause or relationship.

Yet, upon careful reading, even this unexpected move is neither a sudden jump for which the reader is not prepared nor an occurrence which defies all logic. In the first room which the narrator finds in a noisy neighborhood of Tel Aviv, he is greatly disturbed by the presence of a young child who gives him no quiet or rest and who, left alone by his family, continually demands the attention of the exhausted tenant. We read, though, that while the constant crying of the young boy at night gives the narrator no rest, the few moments of quiet at night are tormenting, for only with the sound of crying is he certain that the child is alive (p. 172). The reader grasps here a hint of a positive feeling toward the child on the part of the narrator unbeknown to himself and almost hidden within the agony of the total situation. Later, when the narrator has found another room, this time in a rural setting, he nonetheless was severely hesitant and could not bring himself to inform his landlord of his plans to leave. He is caught in an ambivalent situation of moving and not moving at the same time (p. 178), the kind of uncertainty which characterizes the personae in many of the stories of *seper hamma'ašim*. Though his hesitations are not explained, a pattern is established, a deep inner uncertainty concerning a move which itself seems so very rational. The single surrealistic move is thus given a kind of background; it is not suspended in mid-air.

The polarity between the realistic and surrealistic qualities of the story correspond respectively to the conscious quest for rest and quiet and the subconscious doubts concerning their desirability. On the conscious level, the narrator seeks rest and quiet so that he might recover. His moves in pursuit of this goal occur within the accepted norms and relationships of time and place and causation. His deeper feelings, of which he is unaware and which account for his ambivalence, break through to the surface of the story toward the end, and account for his suddenly leaving the house on the hill with its idyllic setting and for his return to the very room in a noisy neighborhood which he had sought to

leave. This one move is characterized by the stuff of dreams, the surrealistic leap over conventional causation. The character's deepest feelings erupt in this one move in a way not answerable to the logic of waking experience.

If the poles of realism and surrealism in the story correspond respectively to the polarity of *mānuḥa* ("rest") and those deeper feelings which run counter to that goal, then that basic polarity can be more fully understood only if one examines the biblical and rabbinic motifs echoed in the particular concept of *mānuḥa* conveyed in the story.

When the narrator cannot find the rest he needs, a friend brings to his attention a room in a house on a hill, a scene of unmarred tranquility with fruit trees surrounding the little house. The paradisaical connotations of this house are overheard in a number of opaque and veiled allusions. The image of a mountain or hill is itself associated with paradise in many different cultures in the ancient world just as it is in Dante. The house in the story is further surrounded by beautiful trees in all four directions (p. 172), the four directions in this context recalling the four rivers which flowed from the biblical Garden of Eden.

The setting of the house on the hill suggests a reverse order of the events in the biblical account in which man is driven out of the Garden of Eden. In Genesis, man's punishment includes an estrangement between man and the earth; man must labor tiredly for his daily bread as the ground no longer provides him with his needs. In our story, however, the old man who resides in the house explains, "And I planted a garden in order to appease the ground, and it became conciliated to me and gives us fruits and vegetables and flowers" (p. 177). The primordial condition is reestablished. Similarly, during an eight-day trip culminating with his coming to the house on the hill, the narrator observed that "a place which had grown briars and thorns became as a garden of God" (p. 178). The allusion again negates a consequence of Adam's sin, the thorns and thistles which began to sprout from the earth as he left the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:18).<sup>2</sup>

Another allusion to the expulsion from Eden can be overheard in still another detail in the story. There hangs on a wall in the house a painting of a girl in the fields, watching the sunset, and it is noted that there is no feeling of sadness in the picture (p. 175). In Eden, twilight no longer suggests the twilight of life and the approach of death. Furthermore, in rab-

2. See also *Pirqey Derabbi Eliezer*, Ch. 14; *Bereshit Rabba*, 20:10; *Pesaḥim*, 118a.

binic legend, the expulsion of Adam from the Garden occurred during the twelfth hour of light during the day, coinciding with the hour of twilight.<sup>3</sup> In the light of that aggada, the sadness accompanying twilight echoes man's leaving Paradise and his beginning a new life in difficult and unknown circumstances; then, the painting in which the sunset evokes no such sense of sadness suggests, again, a restoration of the original, primordial state of being. The narrator's coming to the house on the hill is, in a sense, an attempt to reenter the Garden of Eden, to secure once again the tranquility of Paradise; it is an attempt to annul the decree of the expulsion and with it the nature of human experience as we know it.

Like the renewed fruits of the earth and the trees according to the midrash (*Bereshit Rabba*, 11:1, 12:6), so the sought-for tranquility is associated in the story with both the primordial past and the End of Days. The porter carrying the narrator's belongings comments on the tranquility which marked Tel Aviv in its earlier period, and he adds, "We won't experience tranquility the likes of which was here in the beginning until the coming of the Messiah" (p. 179). That tranquility belongs either to the very beginning of things or to the time of redemption; it does not belong to man's condition in historical time.

The house on the hill occupies a place within a spatial hierarchy in the story. At the very top are the heavens, the seat of *mānuḥa* ("rest"), as the owner of the rural house recounts, "The heavens stood in their purity and the stars gave off light, and a quiet and secure rest was found above" (p. 176). Below the heavens, but within a certain proximity to them, are that house and garden on the hill which share those qualities of tranquility with the heavens themselves. The hill appears here as an archetypal image which suggests a bridge between earth and heaven, a "point of epiphany," as Frye (1957, pp. 204–206) calls it. Descending further, one reaches the urban room where the narrator had temporarily resided, a room subject to the child's disturbances in addition to all the noise of the city streets day and night. And descending still further, one comes to the cellar mentioned by the owner of the rural home, the populated cellar he had discovered beneath his noisy room in the city when he first came to Eretz Yisrael and a world still less tolerable than that from which the narrator had fled. The narrator had made his way from the bottom half of

3. *Sanhedrin*, 38b; *Pirqey Derabbi Eliezer*, Ch. 11.

this spatial hierarchy to the upper half. He had found *mənuḥa*, and he had also found it to be frighteningly empty.

One particular association of *mənuḥa* in the story provides insight into its ultimately frightening character. The narrator explains his expectations, "I rejoiced in the rest which awaited me in that house and in the sweet sleep which is ready for me there" (p. 177). The association of the word *mənuḥa* ("rest") with *šena* ("sleep") disturbs the reader's identification with the narrator's quest of *mənuḥa*. Later, the narrator speaks of *šena* in a way that shatters all identification with his quest up to that point, "For many years now I see the goal of man in sleep, and I esteem everyone who is expert in sleep and who knows how to sleep as though he knows why man was created and why he lives" (p. 179).

The concept of *šena* ("sleep") is introduced in the opening of the story in an extremely veiled fashion as the narrator describes the smells of the medicines prescribed for him as "one-sixtieth of the signs of death" (p. 170). Behind the formula, the reader overhears a Talmudic saying (*Berakhot*, 57b), *šēnā 'ehād miššiššim ləmitā*, ("sleep is one-sixtieth of death"). The association between sleep and death appears in modern psychology and particularly in Jungian psychology which has pointed to the symbolic dimensions of sleep as a flight from the tensions of waking life and hence as a wish to retreat into an unconscious state. The narrator has found his sought-for *mənuḥa*, but he senses intuitively that it partakes of the nature of death. Having found paradise, he paradoxically escapes from it in flight to life. The surrealistic moment in the story expresses the character's leap to life as he acts upon a sense of his situation from far beneath his rational, conscious self.

The noisy atmosphere of the inner city to which the narrator suddenly returns is epitomized by the presence of the young child whose insatiety, at one point in the story, is referred to in a general way as that of 'adam ("man, humankind") (p. 172). He stands for Everyman, for the human reality. The child cries for the eight days of the narrator's absence, and in rabbinic aggada, Adam, following his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, cried for eight days upon noticing the increasing darkness of the world which he thought to be part of his punishment (*Aboda Zara*, 8a). If the house on the hill suggests Paradise, the child alludes to Adam after the expulsion from Paradise. The room in the inner city is the antithesis of *mənuḥa*; it provides the narrator with neither rest nor tranquility, but it offers him a chance to be needed and to experience affection and con-

cern for the plight of human beings, and these, unlike the deadly road to paradise, make for life.

The narrator's return to his former abode from which he had sought to flee gives the story the illusion of a cyclical pattern. The character has returned precisely to the same objective situation from which he had sought to flee, but his response to that situation is now very different from what it had been previously, and in that sense the story has a linear rather than a cyclical direction. While the dingy room in the noisy part of the town is the same, the narrator has undergone a transformation. He now seeks that which he had formerly sought to escape.

Barzel (1972, pp. 178–179) has emphasized the “secular thematics” of our story as he contrasts it with other stories of *seper hamma'asim*. “mid-dira lədira” is said to be different in that it concerns only man's relationship to his fellow-man rather than the crisis of his confrontation with the divine and with the satanic. The text, however, contains intimations which suggest its transcending “secular thematics” as such.

The root *h̄zr* (“return”), for example, appears three times in the conclusion of the story, and this root bears association of the expression *lah̄āzōr bitšūbā* (“to return to God in repentance”); the narrator's return to his urban abode is also, in a sense, a return to God. Then, the story concludes with a kind of summary-definition as the case of “a man who returns to the place from which he escaped” (p. 180), an echo of ibn Gabirol's “keter malḳūt” in which the persona flees “from You to You.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, the concluding expression given to the paradox of flight points to a source in which the flight is both from God and to God.

The severely afflicted and unkempt person is a recurrent motif in Agnon's stories. In stories such as “hammiṭpaḥat” and “ləpi hacca'ar haššakar,”<sup>5</sup> as in Jewish folklore as far back as Talmudic aggada,<sup>6</sup> this kind of figure, beyond what the capacity of human tolerance can normally bear, always serves as a test. The presence of such a figure in “middira lədira” in the person of the young boy who insists upon poking his dirty fingers into the narrator's eyes in order to seize his own reflection in those eyes similarly suggests itself as a way of God's testing man.

4. Chapter 38, line 4. Found in Shirman (1954, p. 282).

5. “hammiṭpaḥat” first appeared in *Musaf Davar*, July 22, 1932; included in Agnon (1953a, pp. 256–267). “ləpi hacca'ar haššakar” first appeared in *Ha'arets*, September 23, 1947; included in Agnon (1962, pp. 5–19).

6. *Qiddushin*, 81 ab; *Midrash Tanhuma* (ed. Buber), Ha'azinu 8; Gaster (1924, No. 139); *ma'asiyyot miccaddiqey yəsodey 'olam* 14; “Reb Lever,” in Ben-Yehzekel (1958, I, pp. 76ff).

The basic polarity in the story between its generally realistic nature and its surrealistic moment thus receives an additional dimension of meaning in the contrast between a flight from God and a return to Him. The story, in the light of analysis, conveys that repentance demands confronting the responsibility of the present moment. The way of true life is found not in retreat to a lost idyll but rather in relating lovingly to God's creation in a way in which one is needed. The cherubim guard the way to the Garden with a flaming sword, for man's humanity is rooted in the world this side of the Garden.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agnon, S. Y. 1953a. *'ellu və'ellu (kol sippurav šel šəmu'el yosep 'agnon, vol. 2)*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.
- . 1953b. *samuḵ vənir'e (kol sippurav šel šəmu'el yosep 'agnon, vol. 6)*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.
- . 1962. *ha'eš vəha'ecim (kol sippurav šel šəmu'el yosep 'agnon, vol. 8)*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.
- Barzel, H. 1972. *beyn 'agnon ləkafka*. Ramat Gan.
- Ben-Yehzekel, M. 1958. *seper hamma'asiyyot*. Tel Aviv.
- Frye, N. 1957. *An Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton.
- Gaster, M. 1924. *Exempla of the Rabbis*. London and Leipzig.
- Kurzweil, B. 1966. *massot 'al sippurey šay 'agnon*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.
- ma'asiyyot miccaddiqey yəsodey 'olam*. 1903. Shenkel.
- Shirman, H. 1954. *haššira ha'ibrit bisparad uḅiprovens (vol. 1)*. Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.