

A Tale of Two Menorahs: Agnon Rekindles the Hanukkah Lights

By **Daniel Bouskila**

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S. Y. Agnon

With vivid childhood memories of Hanukkah flashing through his mind, Israeli author S. Y. Agnon sat in his book-lined study in his Jerusalem home to compose a new short story. The story, “A Tale of Two Menorahs,” was part of a larger book of short stories Agnon was working on in the 1950’s. When asked by colleagues to describe the nature of this book (which he later titled “A City in its Fullness”), Agnon responded “I am building a city – Buczacz.” This was the city in Polish Galicia where he was born Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czackes in 1888, and the city of his upbringing and education until his emigration to Palestine in 1908 (where he changed his name to S.Y. Agnon).

In “A Tale of Two Menorahs,” Agnon tells the story about the strange year when the Hanukkah menorah in the Buczacz synagogue mysteriously disappeared. It was a beautiful menorah made of fine metals, featuring an artistic depiction of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, as well as an engraved plaque with the Hanukkah blessings. All year long this menorah hung on the northern wall of the synagogue,

and just before Hanukkah, the caretaker would take it down, polish it until it shines, place it on a table opposite the synagogue entryway, and fill each lamp with oil and wicks. This year, it was gone.

When news reached the Buczacz community that the menorah was missing, the children were particularly upset. They met and decided to donate their dreidels for the purpose of making a new menorah. They brought their lead dreidels to the local town artist, and promised to pay him with all of the “Hanukkah coins” they would receive over Hanukkah. Within one to two days, the artist crafted a new menorah. The children took the menorah, brought it to the synagogue and kindled the Hanukkah lights.

A few months later, while cleaning the synagogue before Passover, someone found the original menorah. There was no deep mystery: it simply lay hidden under one of the synagogue benches. He picked it up and hung it back in its natural place.

The following Hanukkah, the synagogue caretaker prepared the original menorah to kindle the Hanukkah lights. Upon seeing this, the synagogue elders said: “Last year, our beloved children donated their dreidels and Hanukkah coins in order to have a new menorah cast for our city. It’s only proper that we should kindle the Hanukkah lights using their menorah.”

They ruled that from now on, the annual Hanukkah lighting in the Buczacz synagogue should be done with the lead menorah that the children commissioned, even though the original menorah was artistically superior to this plain one.

So it was, the light of the children illuminated the synagogue every year throughout Hanukkah.

The story ends tragically: “Upon the arrival of the reviled degenerate, along with his cursed and impure gang of accomplices, the light was extinguished.” This ending is a reflection on “A City in its Fullness,” the book where Agnon compared the act of writing to “building a city.”

It was 1943 when – in Agnon’s words – “the news reached us that all the Jews in my town had been killed.” The massacre of the Jews of Buczacz devastated Agnon. Everything and everyone from his childhood were gone.

In his introduction to “A City in its Fullness,” Agnon wrote: “This is the chronicle of the city of Buczacz, which I have written in my pain and anguish so that our descendants should know that our city was full of Torah, wisdom, love, piety, life,

grace, kindness and charity, from the time of its founding until the arrival of the reviled degenerate with his impure and deranged accomplices who wrought destruction upon it.”

What did Agnon mean by “reviled degenerate”? In his ingenious use of Hebrew, Agnon employs the term *ha-shikutz ha-meshomem*, the same term that the biblical book of Daniel and the apocryphal Book of Maccabees used to describe the defilement of the Jerusalem Temple by Antiochus, the villain of Hanukkah.

For Agnon, the “reviled degenerate” was Hitler, who along with his “impure and deranged accomplices,” defiled Buczacz and extinguished the light of the children’s menorah.

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Only memories and stories survived, and Agnon’s writing about Buczacz became his battle for memory. His weapons were pen and paper, and he was determined that the Nazis would not get the last word. The children’s menorah – at least on paper – would stay alive.

“For his profoundly characteristic narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people” (words from the Nobel Committee), Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1966. He was the first Israeli ever awarded a Nobel Prize.

The 1966 Nobel Prize ceremony took place on Saturday night, the 10th of December, but the Hebrew date is more symbolic here. As destiny would have it, the Hebrew date was the 28th of Kislev – the fourth night of Hanukkah.

At the risk of being late to his own Nobel Prize ceremony, Agnon did not leave his hotel room until lighting that night’s four Hanukkah candles and waiting for their flames to extinguish. As he sat in his room gazing at the Hanukkah lights, in anticipation of receiving the world’s most prestigious literary prize, I cannot help but think that flashing through Agnon’s thoughts were the children from Buczacz and their menorah. On this night, the flames of the menorah would not be extinguished by a “reviled degenerate.” On this night, a child from Buczacz lit the menorah and was then awarded for “getting the last word” – literally.

Don’t let the lights go out.

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