

A City in Its Fullness Between Hebrew and English

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A City in its Fullness Book Launch (Toby Press)

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Unfortunately, health issues have kept me from joining you at Beit Agnon for the evening in honor of the magnificent, new English translation of Agnon's *Ir uMeloab—A City in Its Fullness*. But my friends Prof. Alan Mintz and R. Jeffrey Saks encouraged me to write a few words by way of introduction to the program and hopefully to make up for my absence. And I do so gladly.

To tell the truth, I was skeptical about the task assigned to me: to moderate a literary discussion on Agnon *in English*, because for me, Agnon is so tightly bound to the Hebrew language. So deeply did I connect with the music of his language, the structure of his sentences and writing, that whenever I wanted to convince students in my university classes of Agnon's greatness, I would simply read passages from his stories, and without a word of explanation or interpretation, the text itself would succeed in capturing their hearts. The delicate humor and gentle irony enliven the Agnonian text, bring it to life and make it accessible, even when the historical and religious world described in the writing is foreign and distant to the young reader. Nevertheless, allow me to make three points about this evening's event:

A City in Its Fullness was published after Agnon's death, along with other volumes of his writing culled from his archive. Agnon was not like Gogol or Kafka, who issued "death sentences" on their unpublished writings and forbade them to be published, perhaps out of some insanity or self-destructive impulse. Agnon, by contrast, was an author possessed of strong self-confidence and high self-esteem. If he left large amounts of material unpublished in his lifetime, I believe it was for literary considerations. He was unsure if he had achieved the level of revision and "polish" that would have satisfied his standards. It is in this light that we have to read his posthumous writings.

After the Holocaust, regarding such writers of Bialik's generation as Agnon, Hazaz, Berkovitz, Kabak, Shinhar and many others, who came from the Diaspora to *Eretz Yisrael* in the 1920s and 30s and knew the destroyed Jewish world from their own experience, we often asked ourselves the following question: Why was it that they barely treated the Holocaust in their own writing? I cannot answer this difficult question right now, but Agnon's answer to the critique was astounding. He grappled with the destruction through writing in a detailed, rich, and highly nuanced way about the Jewish world that existed *prior* to the destruction. The tragedy was granted its magnitude and pain *but also its meaning* in the detailed, historical epic that is Agnon's writing – *A City in its Fullness*, *In Mr. Lublin's Store*, *Takbrieh shel Sippurim*, and many others. Instead of revisiting the destruction and mourning it, in such works as *A City in its Fullness*, Agnon reunited his readers – through both laughter and tears – with the world that was lost.

Finally, Israeli literature, my own as well as that of my colleagues, has been translated into many languages, and it has been recognized and appreciated by both Jewish and non-Jewish readers worldwide. But here English readers are at a disadvantage they don't face with their own literature. For when we read contemporary English literature we are aware of the sources being drawn upon. We recognize Joyce, Woolf, Faulkner, Foster, and writers of even earlier generations like Dickens and Hardy. But readers of Israeli literature in translation are not aware of the sources and literary traditions that came before my generation: Agnon, Yizhar, Shinhar, Shamir, and others. Our literature did not arise in a vacuum. Toby Press's translation project, especially this work edited by Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks, helps you English readers, and indirectly us Hebrew readers, to connect more deeply with the modern Israeli literary experience. In that regard, your presence here tonight, here at the home in which these wonderful stories were written, is extremely important also for Hebrew, the language which is the authentic language of the Jewish people.

