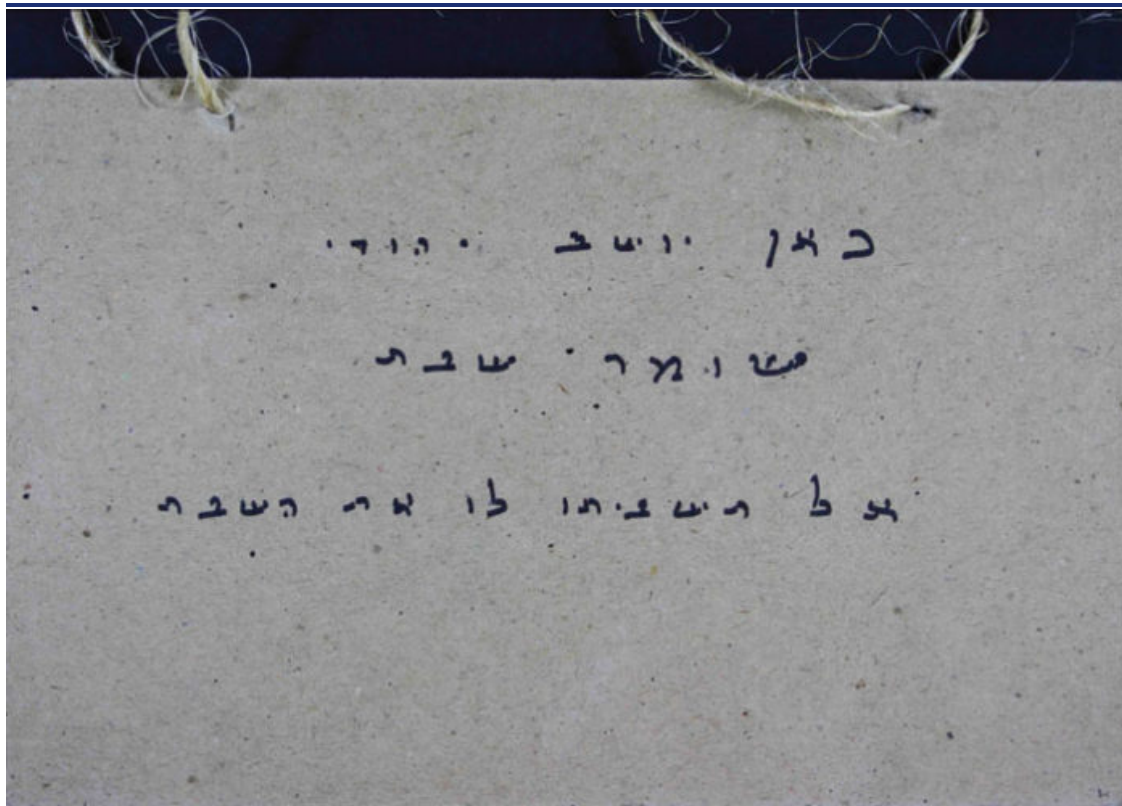


By Rabbi Daniel Bouskila

January 6, 2022

## Spinning Thread vs. Spinning Tales: Agnon's Spin on Desecrating Shabbat



Every Friday afternoon before Shabbat, S.Y. Agnon would prepare a sign to hang on his front door. Written in his iconic and almost illegible Hebrew cursive script, the sign read: “Here lives a Jew who observes Shabbat. Do not disturb his Shabbat.”

Agnon was a religiously observant Jew for whom Shabbat was an important day of rest. He was also a very private person who did not love the “Shabbat tourism” that had developed in the Talpiyot neighborhood of Jerusalem where he lived, where many would walk to see his home and try to visit with the great Israeli writer.

The sign never deterred the multitudes from making the Shabbat pilgrimage to Talpiyot. In fact, every week someone among the “Agnon pilgrims” would take the sign as a souvenir, forcing Agnon to write another one the following Friday.

Yet despite the sign, it's also a well-known fact that Agnon did receive many visitors to his home on Shabbat afternoons. This begs the question of what Agnon meant by “do not *disturb* his Shabbat”? If Agnon indeed received visitors on Shabbat, then

what was the nature of those visits? What was Agnon's definition of "disturbing" Shabbat?

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In 1931, just two years after he settled into his new home in Talpiyot (where he would live for the rest of his life), Agnon published one of his most powerful short stories about Shabbat. One page in length, the story is titled "Concerning Those Who Assemble in Laughter and Frivolousness." The story begins:

*There is a story about a certain woman who, on every Shabbat, after praying and reading from the Torah portion of the week, would sit alone in her house spinning thread, so as to not be with her neighbors engaging in idle matters, gossip and slander.*

*Once it happened that Moses our Master (Moshe Rabbenu) was taking a walk on Shabbat. He came upon the town of the said woman, and he saw the Shekhina (Divine Presence) resting above one particular house [something only Moses could recognize]. He entered the house and found a woman sitting at her spindle spinning thread.*

*He said to her: "My daughter, don't you know that today is Shabbat?"*

*She said to him: "I know that today is Shabbat."*

*He said to her: "And don't you know that it's forbidden to work on Shabbat?"*

*She said: "I know it's forbidden to work on Shabbat."*

*He said to her: "Then why are you spinning thread?" [which is the 16th of the 39 prohibited labors on Shabbat listed in the Mishnah]*

*She said: "And what else am I to do right now?"*

*He said to her: "You could pray or read the weekly Torah portion."*

*She said to him: "I have completed my prayers and have already read the week's Torah portion."*

*He said to her: "If that's the case, then go and sit with your neighbors and do not desecrate Shabbat." She stood up, laid down her work, and went to her friends.*

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January 6, 2022

Agnon's creative plot raises the question of how we define "Hillul Shabbat," the desecration of Shabbat, or, as Agnon's sign indicated, "disturbing Shabbat." Is it only by violating one of the 39 prohibited labors, or does "sitting with neighbors engaging in idle matters, gossip and slander" also constitute a desecration of Shabbat?

The story continues:

*The following Shabbat, Moses our Master chanced upon the same house, yet saw that the Shekhina no longer rested above the house. He entered and found the woman sitting amongst her neighbors and chatting with them. And what were they discussing? Mrs. So-and-So made for herself a garment worth fifty gold pieces, and another's husband bought her a string of pearls. This one's son cast his eyes upon this one's daughter, and another's daughter had her eyes on someone's son. And thus they engaged in idle chatter and gossip and slander.*

*Upon seeing this, Moses said to the woman, "My daughter, return to your former deeds, and do not busy yourself with such foolishness."*

## WHAT MESSAGE IS IMBEDDED IN THIS CREATIVE INTERPLAY ON SHABBAT BETWEEN MOSES—THE ULTIMATE SYMBOL OF HALAKHIC AUTHORITY—AND ONE PIOUS WOMAN WHO PRAYS, STUDIES TORAH, AND CHOOSES TO SIT AT HOME SPINNING THREADS RATHER THAN GOSSIPING?

What message is imbedded in this creative interplay on Shabbat between Moses—the ultimate symbol of Halakhic authority—and one pious woman who prays, studies Torah, and chooses to sit at home spinning threads rather than gossiping? By Moses telling her to "return to her former deeds"—spinning thread on Shabbat—and "not busy herself with foolishness," what does Agnon suggest are Moses' deepest feelings about desecrating Shabbat?

This story represents a meeting between Agnon's two worlds, that of the man of words and that of the observant Jew. For a man whose artistic life was all about words and stories, Agnon was careful to use his literary talents solely to express the fractured nature of the human condition, and the challenges of modernity on traditional Jewish life in the 20th century. His words were an artistic expression of

human emotions, and at times of ideas, but never a forum for “idle chatter, gossip or slander.”

By **Rabbi Daniel Bouskila**

January 6, 2022

## AGNON'S STORY CHALLENGES US TO WIDEN OUR DEFINITION OF DESECRATING SHABBAT AND HOW WE USE OUR WORDS—ON SHABBAT, AND EVERY DAY.

Agnon's story challenges us to widen our definition of desecrating Shabbat and how we use our words—on Shabbat, and every day. His story's creative license makes the case that the Divine Presence may actually prefer to reside above a house where someone sits and spins threads on Shabbat, rather than a house where people sit and spin tales.

“Disturbing Shabbat,” in Agnon's world of words, is about the choices we make in our Shabbat table conversations. In light of that, those Shabbat afternoon visits with Agnon must have been very meaningful.

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