

Agnon and Buber: The Story of a Friendship, or: The Rise and Fall of the "Corpus Hasidicum"

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If two of the greatest Jewish cultural figures of the last century maintained a well-documented personal relationship lasting some fifty years, this is certainly a matter deserving of our attention.¹ S.Y. Agnon and Martin Buber first met in Germany on the eve of World War I, and their relationship ended only with the death of Buber in Jerusalem in 1965. They were in continuous contact throughout this entire period, as reflected both in the correspondence between them and in their writings about each other. Agnon always preferred the company of scholars and thinkers to the literary milieu, and Buber belonged to the rather restricted circle of his close acquaintances.² Their friendship was also the basis of a joint scholarly undertaking, the "Corpus Hasidicum," which, though it was never completed, became the focus of their relations for many years.

Like Agnon's acquaintance with his eventual publisher and benefactor, Salman Schocken, his relationship with Buber was an outgrowth of his extended stay in Germany, where he moved in 1912, four years after immigrating to Palestine from his native Galicia. However, his

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² Other members included Gershom Scholem, Dov Sadan, E.M. Lüfschitz, Ephraim E. Urbach, and Samuel Bialoblocki.

contacts with Buber actually began several years earlier. As we learn from their correspondence, Agnon wrote to Buber from Jaffa in 1909, seeking his assistance with the publication of his first widely acclaimed story, "Agunot," in German translation:

With a glad heart I have received news from Mr. Radler that you are ready to concern yourself with my "Agunot" and help it find a good home. I have taken the liberty of sending you the translation of this story, which was done by Dr. Ernst Müller. Please do with it whatever you think proper.³

Buber complied with Agnon's request, and the story "Seelenverbanung" was published within a year in the Berlin Zionist weekly *Die Welt*,⁴ of which Buber was an editor. *Agunot* thus marks not only the beginning of Agnon's "official" career as a writer, but also his first introduction to the non-Hebrew-reading world. This initial contact made Buber a natural address for Agnon to seek out as soon as he arrived in Germany in November 1912. Ten years Agnon's senior, at 34, Buber was already a noted and admired figure within German Jewry, which viewed him as a spiritual leader. His books in German on Hasidism had been well and widely received, and his 1909–1911 lectures on Judaism before the Bar-Kokhba Association, in which he called for a revitalization of Jewish life in Central Europe, had left a profound impression on his contemporaries. In his memoirs of Buber,⁵ Agnon relates that he had heard Buber's name even as a youth in his home town of Buczacz, in a remark by the *gabbai* of the local *beit midrash* ("Rabbi Solomon Buber gave us old legends, but his grandson Martin Buber is rousing us with new words"), and again when his neighbour, Hayyim Gottfried, showed him a legend about a *dybbuk* published by Buber in a Viennese journal. Agnon had also seen the pamphlet written by Buber, Chaim Weizmann, and Berthold Feiwel calling for the establishment of a Hebrew University in Jerusalem. In Palestine,

³ N.N. Glatzer and P. Mendes-Flohr (eds.), *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue*, New York: Schocken 1991 (henceforth: *Letters*), no. 84, p. 120. Mr. Radler was a Zionist essayist and friend of Agnon who wrote under the pen name R. Benjamin. Dr. Ernst Müller, who translated the story into German, was a teacher in the Mikve Israel school at the time.

⁴ *Die Welt*, XIV, No. 10 (11 March 1910), pp. 209–210.

⁵ "Zikhronotay 'al Buber," in *Me'atzmi el 'atzmi*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1976, pp. 268–272.

too, Agnon had often heard Buber's name, mainly in connection with his studies of Hasidism. Having come to Germany not as a passing tourist but in order to develop his creative work and establish himself (at least for a few years), Agnon had a clear interest in meeting Buber and becoming his intimate.

And so it came about that shortly after his arrival in Germany, Agnon presented himself at Buber's home in the Berlin suburb of Zahlendorf, bearing a letter of recommendation from a noted man of letters in Palestine.⁶ The impression of that first meeting remained etched in Agnon's memory for many years to come:

I came to Buber's home. A maid speaking broken German led me into a room mottled by light and shadow, so that the pictures on the walls and the volumes glinting from the bookcases seemed to be playing hide-and-seek with my gaze. Since I had come looking for the master of house, I did not examine its contents, but I had a feeling that everything in this house was where it should be, and I, too, though I had come but for a brief visit, was where I should be. After a little while, the master of the house entered. He was of less than average height, with a fine-looking beard and fine-looking clothes. Had he not been bareheaded, I would have said that I might have seen him in Jerusalem, at the Western Wall. He greeted me pleasantly and asked my name, which the maid had given as Aharon instead of Agnon. When he heard who I was, his warmth was redoubled, and he told me that just yesterday he had been visited by ..., a well-known Hebrew writer then living in Berlin, who had extolled my book *Vehayah he'akov lemishor* to him. I was happy to hear this writer's compliments of me to Buber, after he had already written in praise of my book to R. Benjamin.⁷

Agnon became a regular visitor in Buber's home, first serving as a Hebrew tutor to his son, Rafael. This occupation, which for him was a source of livelihood, opened the Buber household to him and put him

⁶ In his memoir of Buber, published after Buber's death, Agnon could not recall whether it was Solomon Schiller, Jacob Tahon, or R. Benjamin who had given him the letter. In any event, when he met with Buber again some time later, it was through the intervention of R. Benjamin.

⁷ "Zikhronotay 'al Buber" (above, note 5), p. 270.

on familiar terms with its members. As long as the Buber family lived in Zahlendorf, Agnon was a very welcome guest, as he was later to be a frequent comer to the Buber home in Heppenheim, a small town near Frankfurt where Buber moved in 1916.⁸ Agnon did not forget his debt to Buber and commemorated his fiftieth birthday by dedicating to him a story, "Rabbi Ephraim's Hospitality," in which the main character is a paragon of this particular virtue.⁹ Nevertheless, it was not only for the sake of his company that Buber befriended Agnon. It quickly became clear that the young writer's expertise, skill and perseverance could be of great help to Buber's own work, as we learn from the letters Agnon sent Buber, first to Berlin and later to Heppenheim. Thus, in a letter dated 29 December 1914, Agnon reports to Buber on some bibliographical searches he had carried out at Buber's behest, adding that:

If this list is insufficient, I am quite willing to add more books to it, of verses, sacred and profane, by the great poets of Israel, or of sayings from the poetic and visionary literature of the Middle Ages, as far as I am able to obtain, for the sake of your estimable project. (no. 3)¹⁰

On the basis of this letter, we may infer that Buber had indeed asked Agnon for assistance, though it seems that Agnon himself was interested in broadening the extent of his services, perhaps in order to strengthen his ties with Buber, or to increase his income. Similar references stand out in further letters from Agnon to Buber:

I am ready and willing to give you what little assistance I can in proofreading. (no. 7). If heaven shall have mercy upon me ... I

⁸ The late Rafael Buber told me this in a conversation at his home in Jerusalem on 8 April 1989. Several other matters related in the following pages are drawn from that conversation.

⁹ S.Y. Agnon, "Rabbi Ephraim makhnis orhim," published in *Hapo'el hatza'ir*, XXI (1928), Nos. 16–17, pp. 15–16. The story is preceded by the dedication "A Gift to Martin Buber on the Occasion of His Fiftieth Birthday."

¹⁰ The letters from Agnon's "German period" not quoted from the English edition of *The Letters of Martin Buber* (see above, note 3) are noted by their numbers in E. Yaron (ed.), "Mikhtavei S.Y. Czaczkes (Agnon) el Martin Buber: 1909–1924," in *Kovetz Agnon*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1994, pp. 55–99. Buber's letters to Agnon were consumed in the fire that destroyed Agnon's home in Bad Homburg in 1924.

shall come for several weeks to stay in one of the towns in your neighbourhood, and I shall place myself at your service to the extent of my strength and capability. (no. 8)

During his prolonged hospitalization in 1916 in the Jewish hospital in Berlin, Agnon again repeated his offer to proofread Buber's writings:

If you have already begun the printing of your books, you might send the proofs to me at the hospital, and I am at your disposal at any time and will send the corrected proofs right back.¹¹

From the wording of the letters, we may assume that Agnon had indeed been asked to assist Buber with technical work, and that he served Buber as a constant source of information on subjects of their common interest, primarily Hasidism. In 1918, Buber even suggested to Agnon, who was living in Leipzig at the time, that he move to the vicinity of his new home in Heppenheim. This invitation was presumably extended not only for social purposes but, primarily, to enable Buber to take advantage of Agnon's good services.

Buber himself had acquired a profound admiration for Agnon even before they met, as evidenced by his response to Agnon's request that he publish "Agunot," and by his praise, in a letter to R. Benjamin, for Agnon's first book, *Vehayah he'akov lemishor*. Their personal acquaintance, coupled with Buber's firsthand knowledge of Agnon's work in Germany, must only have strengthened that admiration. In her introductory essay to Buber's collected letters, Grete Schaeder writes:

No-one corresponded more fully to Buber's conception of the ideal storyteller than his friend of many years, the Hebrew novelist S.Y. Agnon.¹²

Schaeder's statement indicates that Buber's respect for Agnon sprang from his basic cultural assumptions. Buber, who had initiated the "Jewish renaissance" in Germany at the beginning of the century, sought to create a bridge between modern, westernized Jews and Jewish tradition, which he identified with the cultural heritage of East European Jewry. He had come to regard Polish Jewry, widely seen as primitive and unsophisticated, as a community "bursting with

11 *Letters*, no. 179, p. 198.

12 G. Schaeder, "Martin Buber: A Biographical Sketch," in *Letters*, p. 22.

enthusiasm and creativity" from a cultural point of view, and he demanded a categorical change of attitude towards it.¹³ This conviction also explains the regard which men like Salman Schocken and Gershom Scholem had for Agnon, whom they saw not only as a gifted writer but also as a cultural hero, embodying in his writing and in his whole being the heritage of East European Jewry, the despised "Ostjuden" who had suddenly become, in those years, an object of admiration.

As early as 1916, Buber gave unambiguous public expression to the special favour in which he held Agnon. That year saw the publication of *Das Buch von den polnischen Juden*, edited by Agnon and Aharon Eliasberg, which included Buber's German rendering of several hasidic stories about R. Moshe Leib of Sassow.¹⁴ Buber's participation in a collection edited by the young Agnon in itself expresses a degree of recognition of his status. However, Buber's principal gesture towards Agnon was his public appreciation in the form of an "Open Letter" addressed to Leo Hermann, editor of a literary anthology entitled *Treue*. This short piece, entitled "Über Agnon," was printed together with a group of stories by Agnon, in German translation, which was included in the collection. Buber had this to say about the author of the stories:

Dear Leo Hermann, You have asked for a word about our friend Agnon. Just a word, not an essay. Here it is: Agnon is consecrated to matters of Jewish life. There are others who are as knowledgeable about these matters as he, but their knowledge is barren. There are still others who feel about these matters as he does, but their feeling is vague. Agnon is among the few who have consecrated themselves to matters of Jewish life. This consecration (*die Weihe*) is neither cerebral nor sentimental; it is passionate and firm. That is what Agnon is like. Consecration: I do not mean the false kind, which makes much of itself and is tinged with histrionics, but a genuine consecration: it is quiet,

13 P. Mendes-Flohr, "Orientaliut vemistikah: Ha'estetikah shel mifneh hame'ah hatesha'esreh vehazehut hayehudit," in *Mehkarei Yerushalayim bemahshevet Yisra'el*, III (IV), Jerusalem: Magnes 1984, p. 68. See also M. Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Germany*, New York-London: Yale University Press 1996, pp. 23-31.

14 M. Buber, "Aus dem Leben des heiligen Rabbi Mosche Leib von Sasow," in S.Y. Agnon and A. Eliasberg (eds.), *Das Buch von den polnischen Juden*, Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag 1916. According to Gershom Scholem and Dov Sadan, Agnon was in fact the principal editor of the volume.

humble, and loyal. That is Agnon. His vocation is to be the poet and chronicler of Jewish life; of that life which is dying and changing today, but also of the other life, still unknown, that is growing. Galician and Palestinian, Hasid and pioneer — in his true heart he carries the essence of both worlds in the equilibrium of consecration. Shall I say how we esteem him? We love him.¹⁵

From Agnon's point of view, Buber's words were like a public "seal of approval" bestowed upon him by the greatest spiritual authority of the day. Indeed, a personal reminiscence by Gershom Scholem shows the effectiveness of Buber's statement, which focussed his attention, and that of many of his contemporaries, on Agnon's presence in their midst and its significance. Scholem relates that when he ran into Agnon for the first time in the library of the Jewish community in Berlin, he recognized immediately that:

this was the writer Agnon from Palestine, about whom Buber had written of late that he bore within himself the destiny and true meaning of the mystery of Judaism, and great and wonderful things were to be expected of him in Hebrew literature.¹⁶

On another occasion, Scholem again recalled Buber's well-known words and wondered aloud about their significance:

It was not so clear what Buber meant by the term *Weihe*, a word he often used to describe the pinnacle of exaltation. It referred both to priestly consecration and to sanctity born of piety and devotion.¹⁷

Apart from this, Buber used his social connections to help Agnon, whose acquaintance with Salman Schocken was at least partly due to Buber's mediation.¹⁸ He also used his editorial positions on Agnon's behalf. Many of Agnon's stories were published in German translation

15 L. Hermann (ed.), *Treue: Eine jüdische Sammelschrift* (Faithfulness: A Jewish anthology), Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag 1916, p. 59.

16 G. Scholem, "Rashamim vehirhurim (leyovlo shel S.Y. 'Agnon)," *Devarim bego*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1976, p. 463.

17 Idem, "Yemei Agnon beGermaniah," *ibid.*, p. 466; for an abbreviated English version of this essay see "Agnon in Germany: Recollections," in idem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, New York 1976.

18 As related by Schocken's son, Gershom Schocken, in his introduction to S.Y. Agnon-S.Z. Schocken: *Hilufei 'iggerot*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1991, p. 6.

in Buber's journal, *Der Jude*, and in the annual *Almanac* published by Schocken Press, of which Buber was an editor. Buber thus played a central role in Agnon's reception in Germany.

Agnon, for his part, was not indifferent to Buber's special regard for him. He responded to Buber's remarks about him in a postcard dated April 12, 1916:

I have read your commendation of me in Leo Hermann's anthology, and it was splendid and glorious to me to be mentioned favorably in the writings of my lord, whose understanding of poetry is incomparable. ... I do hope that I shall fulfill your kind words in my stories yet to come. (no. 6)

We may well suppose that Agnon's meeting with Buber influenced the path he took in those years, for he did his best — as he declares in the above statement — to fulfill the expectations of Buber and his circle. Buber's radiant presence both in his new surroundings and in his private world must have been a significant factor in his decision to give priority in his writings to representing the culture of the East European Jewish past, and in his heightened interest, during that period, in hasidic themes (as expressed in "Hanidah," "Sippurei Polin," "Hakhnasat Kalah," and other works). This was the highest ideal of Buber and his contemporaries, and Agnon was the man who was called upon to realize it.

ii

The principal meeting point between Buber and Agnon was their common interest in Hasidism. Agnon, a native of the hasidic heartland in eastern Galicia, had been exposed to hasidic tradition throughout his childhood and youth at the *klaus* of the Chortkov Hasidim, where his father regularly attended services. According to one account, the young Agnon even once travelled with his father to visit the Rebbe.¹⁹ From the outset of his literary career, influenced to no small degree by Y.L. Peretz, Berdichewsky, and Yehuda Steinberg, Agnon sought ways of integrating the hasidic tradition into his creative work.

19 On Agnon's hasidic background see the "Afterword" by Agnon's daughter and son-in-law, Emuna and Hayyim Yehuda Yaron, to his *Sippurei haBesht*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1986, p. 219.

Buber, though he was born in Vienna, was also exposed to the hasidic tradition in his early years, at the home of his grandfather, the scholar Solomon Buber, in the city of Lwow in Galicia. It was these impressions that first stimulated his interest in Hasidism, leading him eventually to study it methodically. Even as a young scholar, Buber was already known as the principal spokesperson in Germany of the hasidic heritage. His books in German on the Baal Shem Tov (1907) and on Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav (1906) were best-sellers, and they sparked, in the words of Paul Mendes-Flohr, "a veritable revolution in the consciousness of the Western Jew."²⁰ At least in the central-European Jewish context, no one was more widely identified with Hasidism and its literature than Buber, and he buttressed this image by labouring ceaselessly over this material, both by translating and publishing collections of hasidic lore and by writing critical and interpretive studies.

Discussions of Hasidism naturally became a central element in the communications between Agnon and Buber, even though the dissimilarity of their background and experience in this regard became evident very early on in their acquaintance. Agnon wrote about this contrast in his reminiscences of Buber:

Once, in the course of a conversation with Buber about Hasidism, I told him a story. After I had finished, Buber took out a notebook, looked in it and then picked up an unbound book and showed me the same story in print. The same thing happened with most of the stories I told him. I had a little more luck with the teachings I recounted, since many of them were not so familiar to him, or else he knew them in different versions. Buber would transcribe every story he found in those hasidic collections, including each different version. All this was new to me, both because of Buber's systematic method and because I had never seen so many collections of hasidic stories assembled by a single person. Until that day, I didn't know that there were so many published collections of hasidic stories. I knew the stories from hearing them; only the doctrines had I learned from books.²¹

20 Mendes-Flohr, "Orientaliut" (above, note 13), p. 72.

21 Agnon, "Zikhronotay 'al Buber" (above, note 5), pp. 270–271.

From Agnon's recollection, it would seem that Hasidism, and particularly the hasidic tale, was a living oral tradition for him, while for Buber it was a literary tradition with which he had familiarized himself from printed books. Their meeting thus not only enabled them to carry on a dialogue on the subject of Hasidism, but also exposed each of its partners to sources of information with which they had previously been unfamiliar.²² What they had begun in conversation was taken up in their correspondence as well. A perusal of Agnon's letters to Buber, particularly those from his years in Germany, reveals that they were written in a unique style, which might be called one of "hasidic discourse." Though they touch on other matters in the realm of Judaica, their contents are principally concerned with Hasidism, be it historical information, bibliographical material, hasidic anecdotes, or even elucidations of Agnon's own attitudes towards Hasidism and its devotees. This dialogue began many years before Buber and Agnon undertook their collaborative project and continued for many more years simultaneously with it, and not necessarily in direct relation to the work they planned to publish. Particularly in the early period, this enabled Agnon to keep up his close relations with Buber, which was then in his direct interest. From Buber's point of view, Agnon was a source of varied, authentic, and vivid information, which was of great value to his continuing work on Hasidism. Buber acknowledged this on several occasions, among them the preface to his book *Befardes hahasidut*:

Of great importance ... is the material provided to me over many years by S.Y. Agnon. Just now, as I write this preface, I have opened up the bundle of his postcards to me from 1921 through 1924 and spread them out before me. What a wealth of living tradition!²³

22 See Z. Greis, "Hareka hayehudi lepe'iluto shel Buber be'itzuv hasippur hahasidi," in *Mehkarei Yerushalayim befolklor yehudi*, XI–XII (1990), pp. 46–56. According to Greis, "Agnon's description deserves careful attention. It implies that he had learned from books, rather than from oral tradition, only the theoretical teachings he related to Buber. He was surprised, then, by the existence of written and printed versions of the stories, which he had naively thought to live only in the minds of the tellers and their listeners, since he knew them only from hearing them."

23 M. Buber, *Befardes hahasidut: 'Iyyunim bemahashavtah uvehavayatah*, Jerusalem: Bialik Institute 1945, p. v. See also Buber's acknowledgement of Agnon's

According to Rafael Buber, his father frequently sought to tap Agnon's familiarity with hasidic lore and his understanding of Hasidism in general. Indeed, a look through the postcards to which Buber refers shows that Agnon served him as an important source of information on Hasidism, and not only by dint of his transmission of the "living tradition." In February 1916 — still very early on in their correspondence — Agnon sent Buber information on the birthplace of the Baal Shem Tov, based on material cited in an article by Balaban (no. 5). On another occasion, in November 1921, Agnon sent Buber a postcard from Bad Homburg giving specific answers to "several of [Buber's] questions," particularly about matters to do with Hasidism (no. 47). In a September 1921 postcard from Wiesbaden, Agnon refers Buber to *Midrash rabbah* as the source for material incorporated in a hasidic story "on Rabbi Zusia and the birds" (no. 42). In another postcard, sent from Berlin in June 1917, Agnon reports to Buber that several issues of the journal *Yerushalayim*, edited by Leopold Zunz, cite "writings" on hasidic subjects, including the Seer of Lublin, and he refers Buber to several books giving "background material" on the period of the Seer (no. 12). In a December 1917 postcard from Leipzig, Agnon writes that he has a pamphlet entitled *Matzmiah yeshu'ot*, by Mendel Ravitzky, containing several articles on Jewish learning and Hasidism, and he offers to send it to Buber (no. 17). Information of a similar kind appears in another postcard sent from Leipzig in March 1920, in which Agnon relates that:

I have found a volume entitled *Beit tzaddikim* (Pressburg 1918) containing several writings recorded by the Rabbi of Rizhyn, attributed to the Baal Shem Tov and the Maggid, and also the testament of the Maggid, a letter from his son, and other material of this kind. (no. 28)

From reading Agnon's postcards and letters, it would also seem that he provided Buber with a service similar to that he rendered Schocken by acquiring books for him, thus contributing to the growth of Buber's splendid and unparalleled library in this field, which remains with us to this day.

assistance with his work in progress: M. Buber, *Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge*, Frankfurt a/M: Literarische Anstalt 1922, p. xi.

Apart from this, Agnon sent Buber a continuous stream of hasidic anecdotes, making their correspondence of unique literary value. In some of the letters and cards, the anecdote is added as a postscript; in others, it comprises the entire content of the missive. From a rhetorical point of view, the hasidic anecdote played a critical role in formulating the "hasidic discourse" between Agnon and Buber. Thus, for example, Agnon sent Buber a postcard from Berlin in 1916 offering to come and work with him. The postscript is a hasidic saying: "Russia is the refuse of the Land of Israel; Galicia is the refuse of Russia; Romania is the refuse of Galicia; and the German lands are the refuse of Romania. Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn" (no. 8). In a postcard whose content did not concern Hasidism, sent from the hospital, Agnon writes in a postscript: "And so as not to leave the paper blank, I want to set down for you a delightful story about the blessed and holy Baal Shem." Here, of course, appears the anecdote (no. 9). A postcard sent from Leipzig in 1919 contains no greeting and no signature; its entire content is a brief story about the "prodigy of Sokhochov," the son-in-law of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (no. 22). A March 1921 postcard from Frankfurt is taken up almost entirely by a story about Rabbi Velvele, while personal matters, mainly Agnon's expression of gratitude for the hospitality Buber had shown him, are relegated to a postscript (no. 35).

Some of Agnon's letters to Buber report on his actual contacts with Hasidim, declaring his intention to transmit the information thus gathered to Buber, and sometimes doing so in the letter itself. In a letter sent from Wernarz in southern Bavaria in September 1917, Agnon writes:

From a hasidic talk that I heard from my friend, a rabbi and *dayan* [rabbinic judge] ... it may be that they already appear in a book, but I have recorded them in any case; perhaps your grace will take pleasure in them. (no. 14)

Agnon had evidently heard the hasidic anecdote quoted here at an actual gathering in which he had recently taken part. Elsewhere, Agnon informs Buber from Nuremburg in September 1919 that "tonight I am going to celebrate Simhat Torah with the Hasidim, and with any luck I shall hear some hasidic talks, which I shall most likely transmit to you" (no. 21). Agnon writes very openly about his own inner life in a letter sent from Leipzig in March 1920, in which he tells Buber about

the experience of his visit to the Boyaner Rebbe, who had taken up residence in Leipzig:

Yesterday, on the holy Sabbath, I went there for the third meal and was called to the Torah at the afternoon service. I sat there through the close of the Sabbath and after ... and I heard several hasidic talks, but it is difficult for me to record them in writing, because my nerves are fevered, and I am beset with trouble, torment and confusion. However, I shall relate one thing I heard, because it is brief, and this is it ... (no. 27)

What follows, of course, is an anecdote.

The dialogue between Buber and Agnon thus centred from the first on the realm of East European (or, more precisely, Galician) and hasidic Jewish culture. Agnon, both during his sojourn in Germany and after, was certainly aware of Buber's eclectic personality and his wide-ranging scholarly interests: philosophy, theology, biblical studies and Bible translation, eastern religions, Zionist thought and leadership, political thought, and more. However, it is unlikely that he took any real interest in Buber's broad conception of Judaism, or in his approach to culture in general. Agnon's relationship with Buber was sustained principally by one element alone, and that was Buber's work in the area of Hasidism, which had its roots in the traditional East European background they both shared. His admiration of Buber's work in this field is clearly evident in a letter to him from January 1928, responding to the publication of one of Buber's books on the subject:

Your speech frequently achieves such a level of simplicity, that you might be one of the very first Hasidim, a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov of blessed memory. You have raised the hasidic homily to the status of world legend.²⁴

From Buber's point of view, his encounters with Agnon disclosed his concealed inner being — that of the East European Jew, which all his life sustained him and attracted his deepest yearnings. "I am a Polish Jew," he was later to confess,

and though my own family was "enlightened," I was influenced in childhood, when one is most impressionable, by the milieu of

24 This letter, under the title "'Al Buber," was published in the daily newspaper *Davar* on 10 February 1928, and reprinted in *Me'atzmi* (above, note 5), p. 257.

the Sadigora Hasidim, and in the days of my youth by the similar milieu of the Chortkov Hasidim. Perhaps there are other threads as well, less given to perception.²⁵

Buber thus saw Agnon, born in eastern Galicia (and among the same Chortkov Hasidim with whom Buber had come in contact) as the Jewish writer *par excellence*, whose creative work provided a powerful modern vessel for transmitting Jewish culture in its East European (and specifically Galician) version. He had first encountered Agnon in the story *Vehayah he'akov lemishor*, and he published in *Der Jude* several of Agnon's outstandingly "Polish" works, such as "Hanidah" and parts of his "Sippurei Polin." Of the four volumes Agnon published in 1931, Buber saved his greatest praise for Agnon's first novel, "Hakhnasat Kalah" (later translated into English as *The Bridal Canopy*), a hasidic epic set in Eastern Galicia: "Reading 'Hakhnasat Kalah' in particular gave me great pleasure. I did not read it at one sitting but stopped repeatedly ... again and again it gave me the same quiet, pure pleasure."²⁶ This work, for him, represented the very image of the "true storyteller" (as he called Agnon on several occasions) whom he had chosen to engage in dialogue.

iii

The ongoing discussions between Agnon and Buber on the subject of Hasidism, well documented in their correspondence, were the soil from which sprang the idea of their undertaking a joint project in this field. The plan was to create a comprehensive, multi-volume anthology, in Hebrew, which would comprise a representative sampling of hasidic literature, both stories and theoretical discourses, in a form adapted to the needs of the modern reader. In a 1962 memorial essay about Y.H. Brenner, Agnon relates, from a distance of several decades, how the idea was born:

In those days, I conceived a great plan to compile all the stories of the Hasidim and arrange and adapt them in such a way as

25 M. Buber, "Le'inyan 'Gog uMagog' (A Response to Baruch Kurzweil)," *Ha'aretz*, 8 December 1944.

26 *Letters*, no. 403, p. 383.

to make them accessible to all. I approached Martin Buber, who was well versed in [hasidic stories] and had many books of them, and suggested that we do this book together. He liked the idea and agreed to collaborate with me. I began working on it, and soon had one volume ready for press (it was burnt in the fire that consumed my house in Bad Homburg, along with all my manuscripts and books).²⁷

Though Agnon does not mention the date, it must have been around the beginning of 1922, as we may infer from a letter he sent on 7 March 1922 from Bad Homburg to Heppenheim, in which he refers to earlier exchanges between himself and Buber on this subject:

I have wanted to write to you several times, but, as usual, I have been busy and did not manage to do so. I wanted to ask you if you still wish to work on the book "Sifreihem shel tzaddikim." I have thought a great deal about this project, its great value and so on, and if you could free yourself for a few hours, we might discuss the arrangement of the work and so on. (no. 49)

The ambition to publish modern anthologies of Jewish texts also fitted in with the ideals espoused by Jewish nationalist groups in Germany at the time. Literary and publishing ventures of this kind were meant directly to serve the process of spiritual revitalization of the new, "post-assimilatory" generation. Agnon himself had gained experience in this area during the period of his work for the Jüdischer Verlag, which saw the production of at least three such anthologies, the one on Polish Jewry and two volumes devoted to the festivals of Passover and Hanukka; preparations evidently began on a fourth collection, on the festival of Purim, but it was never published. On Schocken's initiative, Agnon undertook already in 1916 to prepare a comprehensive anthology on Jewish culture — the provisional title was "On the Jew" — but for some reason he never carried out this commitment.²⁸ Agnon had also once planned to issue a "Chrestomathy" on Hasidism under the auspices of the Tehiah publishing house, established in Berlin on the eve of World War I and managed by Leo Motzkin, where he worked as an editor. The publishing house was short-lived, however, and the

27 "Yosef Hayyim Brenner behayyav uvemoto," in *Me'atzmi* (above, note 5), p. 140.

28 See S.Y. Agnon–S.Z. Schocken (above, note 18), p. 19.

"Chrestomathy" plan died with it. Although all the projects mentioned here — both those that were completed and those that were not — were based on the initiatives of publishers or patrons, Agnon seems to have appropriated Bialik's idea of literary compilations. This was later to come to expression in his intensive and carefully arranged work on an extensive series of monumental anthologies, including *Yamim nora'im*, *Atem re'item*, and *Sefer, sofer vesippur*, which he published entirely on his own initiative.

From Agnon's point of view, asking Buber to join him in preparing the hasidic anthology was a very clever move, not only because of Buber's own expertise and experience in this area (he had already published several collections of hasidic stories), but also — and perhaps principally — because of his renown. Although Agnon was already considered a Hebrew writer of note and had been published in German as well (to no small degree thanks to Buber), the gap in standing between him and Buber was enormous. Buber was one of the most outstanding and influential Jewish thinkers in Germany, and his many books, articles, and lectures had been widely acclaimed. In Zionist circles, he was a spiritual leader and guide of unequalled importance. He was highly regarded among non-Jews as well, and his books had a readership within the German audience at large.²⁹ Publishing an anthology together with Agnon also suited Buber's interests well. He had always given Zionism a "cultural" interpretation, in the spirit of *Ahad Ha-Am*; and the launching of cultural enterprises of

29 Buber's popularity within the German public is reflected in an anecdote related by Agnon himself in a speech he gave in Buber's honour at his eighty-fifth birthday party; see "Sippur ma'aseh," in *Me'atzmi* (above, note 5), pp. 265–268. In another context, Agnon went so far as to attribute to Buber decisive influence upon the attitudes of Germans and German Jews towards Polish Jewry:

During the Great War, many Jews were displaced from Poland by the German Empire and exiled to Germany, where their garb, sidecurls, and beards made them look odd. They were helped then by Martin Buber's reputation, because he said they were Hasidim, and the Gentiles then looked upon them more favourably. There were German-born Jews, too, who knew of Hasidism from Buber's writings, and this familiarity proved beneficial to [the Polish Jews], because [the German Jews] did not scorn them as they previously had, before Buber published his books on Hasidism and the Hasidim. (From a late, unpublished and unnumbered manuscript in the Agnon archives)

various kinds, including literary compilations, was an integral aspect of the projected nationalist-Zionist renaissance. As spokesperson of the "Democratic Faction" established at the Fifth Zionist Congress in 1901, Buber argued against Herzl that the first priority of the Zionist movement, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora, should be the nurturing of Jewish culture. This conception stood behind his work in the area of Hasidism, and it also explains his attempts to initiate joint projects with East European Jewish intellectuals such as Berdichevsky and Horodecky for the preservation of this heritage. These efforts, argues Zeev Greis,

attest to his sense of national responsibility, and to his feeling that his work was intended not only for a readership of intellectual, assimilated German Jews and of non-Jews, but also for the broader Jewish community, which wanted to preserve and utilize the people's literary assets. The Jewish community therefore required an established organization that would see to the compilation and arrangement of these literary works, for the benefit of the contemporary generation and those to come.³⁰

Buber's response to Agnon's proposal was immediate. Work on the project was soon under way, as attested by the content of Agnon's report to Buber, in the same year, on a meeting between himself and Bialik, who was also living in Bad Homburg at the time. On that occasion, Agnon was already able to show his distinguished visitor something of the work he had done together with Buber. "When Bialik was at my home," Agnon wrote, "I showed him the beginning of the work, and he was enthralled with its beauty and import ... and he went on to say that all the books of this generation would be forgotten in a hundred years, but ours would live a thousand years" (no. 54). On 25 Tammuz of that year (21 July 1922), Buber and Agnon signed an agreement with Bialik, representing the publishing house of Moriah-Dvir, to set the guidelines for the publication of the "Book of Hasidism":

The Editors undertake to provide *Sefer hahasidut* [The Book of Hasidism] to the aforesaid Publishers, in four or more volumes,

³⁰ See Greis, "Hareka hayehudi" (above, note 22), p. 52. On Buber's "cultural Zionism" see A.E. Simon, "M.M. Buber vehayhadut hagermanit," in idem, *Ya'adim, tzematim, netivim: Haguto shel Mordekhay M. Buber*, Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim 1985, pp. 42-45.

comprising the finest of the stories of the Hasidim and the basic elements of their doctrines. [They will produce] one volume per year, each of about twenty printer's sheets, using the format of *Sefer ha'aggadah*.³¹ [The stories will be] redacted and edited by the aforesaid Editors and supplemented with an Introduction.

The aforesaid Publishers undertake to print the aforesaid volumes as quickly as possible, subject to the delivery of the manuscripts by the Editors to the Publishers, so that each volume will be published within a year of its submission. Furthermore, the Publishers will make an effort to issue each volume not later than six months from the day of its submission.³²

This agreement goes on to list further stipulations regarding the number of copies to be printed, the fees to be paid the editors and their undertaking not to offer the work to any other publisher, a projected young people's edition, translation rights, and so on. By the beginning of the summer, it would seem that the grandiose project, about which Agnon was still writing to Buber with some hesitation in March, had entered the practical stage.

The nature of the contacts between Agnon and Buber from this time on were largely dictated by their joint project. They met from time to time, in Heppenheim, in Bad Homburg, and sometimes even in Frankfurt, and they continued to correspond. In November 1922 Agnon wrote to Buber, "Please write to me when I can come to you, so that we can start working according to the plan. Bialik is pressing me to fulfill our commitment to him" (no. 52). In January 1923, just before a journey to Halle, Agnon wrote: "And when I have returned safely, with God's help, to Bad Homburg, I shall write to you at length concerning our joint project. I hope that you have already begun to work on it. Everyone who hears about it says that it is well worth doing" (no. 53). In July 1923, Agnon was awaiting Buber's arrival in

³¹ The famous anthology of *midrashim* compiled by Bialik and Y.H. Rawnitzki, published in English translation as *The Book of Legends* (English transl. by William G. Braude), New York: Schocken 1992.

³² The contract itself (in the handwriting of Esther Agnon) is in the Buber archives. A photograph of it appears in A. Barshai, "Deyokno shel S.Y. Agnon," in *Haromanim shel S.Y. Agnon*, Tel Aviv: Open University 1988, pp. 51-52.

Bad Homburg, evidently in connection with the project: "Would you be so kind as to bring with you some books to work on, as my wife, with God's help, is about to begin working again" (no. 57). From this we learn that Esther Agnon was also involved in copying the material.

In 1923, Agnon sent Schocken a report on the progress of his work: "I am now preparing all of my writings for press. I am also busy on most days with the books of the Hasidim, which I am preparing together with Buber." In December of the same year, Agnon complained to Schocken about the burden of this work (as he often did regarding projects that did not involve his own original creative writing): "Between you and me, my own works have become so extensive that my work with Buber seems like a bother."³³ In February 1924, Agnon wrote to Buber: "Please be so kind as to let me know if you will be coming to Frankfurt in the near future, because I would like to discuss with you the arrangement of several stories concerning which I am not sure how to proceed. Please also be so kind as to bring with you everything we still require for the book on the Baal Shem Tov" (no. 59). Agnon did leave for Frankfurt at around this time, as we gather from another of his letters to Schocken: "Tomorrow I am going to Frankfurt, where Mr. Buber will be waiting for me, because we have some work to do together. Truth to tell, this work takes me out of my own world and my own work, which is my principal work, but since I have begun, I hope I shall not desist."³⁴ In May, Agnon asked Buber to send him some books and materials connected with the Baal Shem Tov, including Horodecky's edition of *Shivhei haBesht* and "a list of the remaining books concerning the Besht." "Once I have these things," he says in closing, "I shall soon be able to complete our book." In another card, written in June, Agnon draws the attention of his collaborator to a letter he had received from Shemaryahu Levin concerning the "Book of Hasidism." Throughout this period, Agnon continued sending Buber a constant stream of information on Hasidism, including anecdotes, bibliographical references, and historical data; only now the aim of sending him these items was to serve the purposes of their joint project.

From these few communications, it is difficult to determine their method of working together, but it would seem, particularly from the

33 S.Y. Agnon–S.Z. Schocken (above, note 18), p. 144.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 146.

wording of his May 1924 letter to Buber, that Agnon did most of the work on preparing the first volume, "Stories of the Baal Shem Tov."³⁵ The work on this volume was completed in about two years. At this point, however, an unexpected calamity occurred which ultimately doomed the entire project: On 6 June 1924, a fire broke out in Agnon's home in Bad Homburg, and all his books and manuscripts were burnt. At the end of July, Agnon sent Buber the charred remains of the manuscript, preserved to this day in the Buber archives.³⁶ After the fire, Agnon decided to relinquish the project entirely. His resignation appears in a letter to Bialik, signed "A brand plucked from the fire by the name of S.Y. Agnon." Agnon wrote:

I hereby inform you that I must desist from the composition of the Book of the Hasidim. The first volume was entirely ready, apart from the Table of Contents, when my residence caught fire, and all my books and manuscripts, including the Book of the Hasidim, were consumed. ... I am terribly sorry to have disappointed you, and I beg the forgiveness of your dear soul.

Agnon also returned the advance payment of \$100 that he and Buber had received from Bialik.³⁷ Much later, Agnon was to give a full account of this traumatic event in a central section of his acceptance speech at the December 1966 Nobel Prize awards ceremony in Stockholm, in which he also mentions the loss of the "Book of Hasidism": "... and among the books that were burned were a large novel, of sixty printers' sheets ... and a book I had done with Martin Buber."³⁸ Buber himself, who apparently was informed personally by Agnon of his decision, responded to it in a letter sent on 13 June to his friend the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig:

35 Buber and perhaps also Agnon had the assistance of Nahum Glatzer, then one of the younger teachers at the Frankfurt Lehrhaus, who was recommended for the job by Franz Rosenzweig. See P. Mendes-Flohr, "Knowledge as Service: An Appreciation of Nahum N. Glatzer," *Jewish Studies*, XXXI (1991), p. 29.

36 Buber wrote about this to Franz Rosenzweig in a letter of 29 July 1924; see *Letters*, no. 315, p. 320. The manuscript bears the number Ms. Var. 350/14-xi in the Martin Buber Archives in the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

37 See H. Be'er, *Gam ahavatam gam sin'atam*, Tel Aviv: Am Oved 1992, pp. 225–227.

38 *Me'atzmi* (above, note 5), p. 86.

He is giving up the plan "for years," and that probably means forever. I cannot try to persuade him otherwise, for I feel the blow too strongly myself, and I cannot think of collaboration with anyone else — there is no one.³⁹

Four days later, on 17 June, Rosenzweig — then on his deathbed — sent Buber an illuminating reply, in which he rejects both Agnon's decision and Buber's willingness to accept it.

I had not heard about Agnon's misfortune until you wrote. From day to day I become less able to accept the fact that the "Corpus" is not to be done. If secretarial help were obtained for copying the texts, it would not involve so much work. I have no clear conception of the disposition of the work, but, as I say, the more I think about it, the more definitely I see that we cannot let it be "simply erased" ... Frederick the Great rewrote the *History of the Seven Years' War*, which his valet had used for kindling; and Carlyle's *French Revolution* was also a second draft — the complete first draft was burned while in the possession of [John Stuart] Mill. No, death alone erases, not fire.⁴⁰

All that was left from the fire were forty-one charred pages containing stories and sayings attributed to the Baal Shem Tov. It is difficult, of course, to ascertain whether this is all the material or only part of it. Most of the stories are copied in Agnon's handwriting, a few in that of his wife, Esther, and a few more are in the handwriting of two other people whose identity remains unknown. They are all written in black ink, and some of them contain corrections, all in Agnon's handwriting. Each story or saying is written on a separate page, with the opening word of each passage underlined twice for emphasis. The stories have no headings, and there is no way of knowing what their order was to be, or whether they were categorized. The titles of the books from which the stories were taken are usually written in the margins. Despite the poor condition of the manuscript, several of the stories can be identified. A few of them were eventually to be included in Agnon's own later edition of *Sippurei haBesht*.⁴¹

39 *Letters*, no. 305, p. 314.

40 *Ibid.*, no. 306, p. 314.

41 For example, the story about R. Michal of Zlotchow on p. 24 of the manuscript may be compared with the story "Hatikkun" on p. 94 of *Sippurei*

Surprising as it may sound, Rosenzweig's words, though they were addressed to Buber, did not go unheeded. In an unpublished manuscript by Agnon recounting the episode of the "Book of Hasidism," we find the following testimony:

Thirty-six years ago, Marin Buber and I were working on a large book that was to contain all the stories of the Baal Shem Tov, his disciples and their disciples. But then a fire broke out in my house, and all my possessions were burnt, including all my writings that were still in manuscript, and with them the great book of the stories of the *tzaddikim*, which was ready for press. I fell ill and lay abed. Martin Buber came to visit me on my sickbed and said to me, in the name of Franz Rosenzweig, that what had happened was catastrophic, but it need not be fateful, and it was my duty to reconstruct the book. I marvelled at these two wise men, who supposed that they would revive my spirit by speaking reasonably to me.

Some days later, I rose from my sickbed and went to pray at [the court of] the saintly rebbe of Husiatyn, of blessed memory, who dwelt at the time in Bad Homburg, the city of my ruined abode. A Hasid, learned and God-fearing, approached me and said, "Do not despair; you will yet write more and greater things than those that were burnt." I said to him, "You offer me small comfort; what remedy is there for eighteen years' work lost?" He said to me, "'Better one spicy pepper [than a basketful of squash]'; the main thing is not the quantity but the quality." The saintly rebbe, of blessed memory, heard this and nodded his head.⁴²

haBesht; the story of "The Contentious People of Tarnopol" on p. 28 of the manuscript with "Mesiah lefi tumo" on p. 28 of *Sippurei haBesht*; and the story about R. David Perkis on p. 36 of the manuscript with the story about him on p. 86 of *Sippurei haBesht*.

42 This essay is in one of the containers of *Sippurei haBesht* in the S.Y. Agnon Archive in the Jewish National and University Library. These containers bear the numbers 4: 1270. I believe that this essay was written as a preface to Agnon's book, *Sifreihem shel tzaddikim* (see below, note 67, and the text there), but in the end he replaced it with a different preface. Part of the manuscript is quoted in "Afterword" (above, note 19), pp. 220–221.

It is difficult to gauge the impact of Rosenzweig's words precisely, but shortly thereafter Agnon did indeed decide to make a fresh start on the "Book of Hasidism." He and Buber seem to have come to an agreement on this matter even before Agnon left Germany for Palestine.⁴³ The relatively sparse correspondence between Agnon and Buber in the years following his "German period" contain several references to the subject of the "Book of Hasidism," though they appear at fairly lengthy intervals. Agnon's first report to Buber in this regard is in a letter from June 1926, almost two years after his departure. "My dear Sir," he wrote,

Having received your regards from Scholem, I beg you to reassure me that you have not put our joint project on ice. Before my emigration to Palestine, you told me that you would have the tales of the Besht copied in your house and that I would need only to make stylistic corrections and prepare the tales for the press.

Agnon goes on to report to Buber that

one can hear beautiful and good stories here and find almost all the hasidic books, because there are many Hasidim in the country and one or another of them owns any book one may be looking for.⁴⁴

Buber's response to this inquiry was unambiguous:

I have not abandoned our joint project, and I have already had an almost complete copy of all the Besht stories made; that is, it is complete as far as my own library is concerned. The copy that young Glatzer has prepared is very clean and neat. I am now in the process of putting the manuscript in order. Shall I send it to you as soon as I am finished?⁴⁵

Buber's promise was carried out in full: Glatzer, who had been involved in the project in the past, transcribed almost two hundred stories concerning the Baal Shem Tov, and these were sent to Agnon. The stories were transcribed from over forty collections of hasidic stories

43 *Ibid.*, p. 221

44 *Letters*, no. 348, pp. 342–343.

45 *Letters*, no. 349, p. 344.

(not including *Shivhei haBesht*), and they were gathered into fascicles arranged according to the sources from which they were taken.⁴⁶ Glatzer's work gave a real impetus to the progress of the "Corpus Hasidicum." In an August 1927 letter to Buber, Agnon speaks no longer of a plan but of things already accomplished:

On the very day I received your letter, I sent you copies of all the hasidic tales in my possession. The work took a long time because the copyist was overburdened, and he completed the job only a few days ago. ...

I have sent you copies of the entire material that you gave me, and as soon as you send me the other stories we can get to work. For my part, I am adding great and good stories which I have heard here in Jerusalem from old Hasidim. I shall send you copies of these. One thing more: please send me a table of contents, for who else has your ability to enliven a book by means of an elegant arrangement?⁴⁷ Once I receive the rest of the books and the table of contents, I shall have no rest until I have completed all of the work. You had intended to give the hasidic stories a detailed evaluation. Do you already have it in writing?⁴⁸

Amazingly enough, however, after this energetic and optimistic letter the correspondence between Agnon and Buber diminished even further, and the joint project was mentioned in it but little, and then on one side only. Buber was the first to mention it, almost as an aside, in a short letter to Agnon from 30 March 1928:

My work on the translation of the Book of Samuel, with all the difficulties in the texts, forced me to put aside our hasidic writings; I may now hope finally to approach them again, so as to send you a clean manuscript.⁴⁹

If any of the promised material was actually sent, however, there is not a murmur of it in the correspondence between the two, and it is doubtful that they took advantage of Agnon's working visit to Germany in 1930 to do anything in this regard. Two years later Buber apologized once

46 Glatzer's manuscript is preserved in the containers of *Sippurei haBesht*.

47 Cited up to here from *Letters*, no. 360, pp. 352–353.

48 *Yggerot*, II, p. 261.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

more for the delay, in words that testify explicitly to his intention to finish the work. The letter is dated 12 April 1932:

But now I will also tell you why I have not sent you the order of the contents for the first volume of "Corpus Hasidicum." The reason is that my own work absorbed all my time and energy. ... Fortunately, Schocken Verlag ... is providing me with a research assistant beginning May 1st, and he will be able to relieve me of much technical work. On the basis of the expected easement, I hope to be able to tackle the "Corpus" again. If all goes well, I will give you details about it in May. In addition to establishing the order of the tales, I want to have the *torot* copied and to put them in systematic order right away. Perhaps it will be possible to prepare a German and an English edition at the same time.⁵⁰

Though Agnon, for his part, does not refer to the subject in his letters to Buber from this period (in which the motif of Hasidism is again prominent), it is mentioned several times in his correspondence with others. Thus, for example, after the damage to his home during the 1929 riots, he wrote to his wife, Esther:

I got out almost all of the manuscripts, apart from the Book of Hasidim that I did with Buber. That book was so scattered ... that it was too hard to gather it up.⁵¹

It is strange that this important information was not brought to Buber's knowledge. On the other hand, Agnon informed his wife in 1932, evidently following Buber's letter to him, that he had of late gone back to working on the hasidic stories: "The work on the Book of Hasidism is getting done; I spend time on it daily."⁵² The practical significance of this statement seems to be that Agnon at that time set about editing the same stories that Glatzer had transcribed, which had meanwhile been typed. These stories are indeed to be found in the Agnon archives, edited and corrected in pencil in his handwriting, with a copy of the corrections written in ink by Dov Sadan (Stock), who served as Agnon's

50 *Letters*, pp. 383–384. The research assistant to whom Buber refers in his letter was Dr. Moshe (Moritz) Spitzer.

51 S.Y. Agnon, *Esterlein yakirati*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1983, p. 156.

52 "Afterword" (above, note 19), p. 221.

secretary in the early 1930s.⁵³ In a biographical essay published in 1934, Agnon's close friend Abraham Yaari testified that:

He has also reconstructed the "Book of Hasidism," which was burnt; the first part, containing all the stories of the Baal Shem Tov, is ready for press, and Agnon is continuing to work on the subsequent volumes.⁵⁴

That same year, the matter of the "Book of Hasidism" arose in the correspondence between Agnon and Schocken. On 15 April 1932, Schocken wrote to Agnon:

I hear from Dr. Glatzer that you are working on part of the old project on Hasidism that you had discussed with Buber. I would be grateful if you could let me know — perhaps with examples — how your current plan looks and how far your work has progressed. It interests me from several points of view.⁵⁵

Agnon himself was unable to reply to this letter, because he was injured a few days later in a traffic accident near his home in Jerusalem. The reply was therefore written by Esther Agnon, who informed Schocken that "Agnon was already working on arranging the material, and he intends to go back to working intensively on it." The letter emphasizes, however, that the Dvir publishing house had contractual rights to the work.⁵⁶ In June of the same year Agnon wrote to Schocken, "Unfortunately, my illness has deprived me of my strength to work, and I began only this week to deal with the Book of Hasidism." He adds that his intention is to issue the book in several editions, one with commentaries and alternate versions of the stories, another, popular, edition "for the people to read," and perhaps yet another edition for young readers. Agnon asks to know Schocken's intentions with

53 Sadan lived in Jerusalem from 1930 through 1934 and served, among other occupations, as Agnon's secretary. See his introduction to the published exchange of letters between him and Agnon, "Mevo'ei kevutzat 'iggerot," *Ha'universitah*, XXV, Spring 1981, pp. 23–24. Sadan's initials even appear in the margins of some of the stories. This material, too, is in the containers of *Sippurei haBesht*.

54 A. Yaari, "S.Y. Agnon: 25 shanah le'aliyato uleyetzirato," in P. Lahover (ed.), *Sefer hashanah shel Eretz-Yisrael* (1934), Tel Aviv: Shem 1934, p. 282.

55 S.Y. Agnon–S.Z. Schocken (above, note 18), p. 280.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 282.

respect to the book, though he once again notes his and Buber's joint commitment to Dvir.⁵⁷ Again, in the same month, he writes:

I will be travelling tomorrow, God willing, to Hadera. For the last few days I have been working on the Book of Hasidism, and I am bringing that work with me to Hadera, where I will be staying for about three weeks. I hope to send you a large part of it for your perusal early in the autumn.⁵⁸

But just when it seemed that work on the "Book of Hasidism" was nevertheless gathering momentum, and that the project was on its way to publication, it was struck down once and for all: Bialik, who was to have been the publisher, withdrew from his earlier commitment, and Schocken, who had seemed ready to assume the initiative, never did anything about it. In a letter of 10 July 1932, Agnon reported to Schocken on the termination of the agreement between himself and Bialik:

Last week, when I was with Bialik (he had asked me to come to a meeting concerning the writings of S. Ben Zion), I reminded him about the Book of Hasidism. He responded that Dvir no longer has the means to publish it, and that he gave us his permission to have it published elsewhere. We have only to return to Dvir the advance that Buber received — fifty dollars, if I am not mistaken.⁵⁹

The meeting between Agnon and Bialik took place in the summer of 1932, that is, exactly ten years after the contract between Bialik, Buber and Agnon was signed in Bad Homburg. It is not clear why Bialik withdrew from the project, and whether it was in fact the ten years of delay that led him to do so. In the opinion of Haim Be'er, the initiative for terminating the agreement actually came from Agnon, who wished to get free of the tangled relations between himself and the revered poet, and preferred to pass the execution of the plan over to Schocken.⁶⁰ However, it is strange that Schocken himself, who had shown such interest in the project during those months — restrained, so it would seem, only by the authors' prior commitment to Dvir —

57 *Ibid.*, p. 283.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

59 *Ibid.*, p. 285.

60 Be'er, *Gam ahavatam* (above, note 37), pp. 290–293.

now did nothing to realize the opportunity that had come his way. In any case, the end of the matter was the final burial of the project.

The formal termination of the agreement between Buber and Agnon opened the way for each of them to work independently on a project of his own. The first to do so was Buber. After publishing numerous anthologies of hasidic material in German and acquiring an international reputation in this field, he decided, following his emigration to Palestine in 1938, to prepare a Hebrew edition of "The Book of Hasidism," the result being his well-known volume, *Or haganuz*:

For the impetus to prepare this new comprehensive work I must credit the air of the land of Israel. Our Sages say that it makes one wise. I received something else from it — the strength to begin again. Out of this new beginning, after I thought my work on hasidic lore had come to an end, this new book was born.⁶¹

Despite this declaration, it is clear that the book — as Buber himself hints in his preface — is based largely on his previous books in German, principally *Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge* (1921) and *Das verborgene Licht* (1924), to which he refers in the Introduction.⁶² Moreover, large parts of the book were in fact translated from German, with the assistance of M.A. Zack.⁶³ The book itself consists of fifty-two units, each of them containing a selection of stories revolving around the image of one of the founding fathers of Hasidism: the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Yehiel Michal of Zlotchov, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, and so on. The plan is the same as that chosen for *Der grosse Maggid und seine Nachfolge*, and even the title is borrowed from *Das verborgene Licht*. To the Baal Shem Tov himself, whose image was central to the collaborative project throughout the years that Buber and Agnon worked on it, Buber devoted only thirty-five pages. He prefaced the material with a comprehensive Introduction

61 M. Buber, *Or haganuz*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1947, p. 13.

62 Cf. M. Buber, *Die chassidischen Bücher*, Verlag Hellaer 1928. This volume includes, among other things, the two books by Buber cited above.

63 "In giving them [i.e., the stories] their fitting Hebrew form I was greatly assisted by Mr. M.A. Zack, to whom I wish here as well to express my heartfelt gratitude" (*Or haganuz*, p. 13). In the later editions of *Or haganuz* Buber no longer mentions Zack by name. For reasons known only to himself, he also refrained from mentioning Agnon, as he had in other books dealing with Hasidism.

setting out his views on Hasidism and sketching the images of the great Rebbes who constitute the book's principal characters. Shortly after the appearance of the book in Hebrew, an English edition was published, and a German edition two years later.⁶⁴ The book was a best seller in all three languages and has since been through many more editions.

The publication of *Or haganuz* (or at least, the news of Buber's intention to publish it) seems to have propelled Agnon, too, to reopen the forsaken files of the "Corpus Hasidicum," although, unlike Buber, he never succeeded in completing his work. The simultaneity of his effort with Buber's becomes apparent from an examination of the archival evidence: next to the corrected copies of the stories collected by Glatzer in the Agnon archives, we find dozens of hasidic stories copied out in Agnon's handwriting, which, by their content, were evidently intended for inclusion in an anthology of "Stories of the Baal Shem Tov." Interestingly enough, the stories are written out on the backs of the final proofs of the novel *Tmol Shilshom*, which was published toward the end of 1945, and we may thus infer that they were transcribed around that time.⁶⁵ But this new spurt proved temporary, and the material remained in its handwritten state for a long time thereafter. Only at the end of the 1950s did Agnon once more declare his intention to publish the book, though this ambition, too, was hedged, as we see from two letters written during this period to his friend Dov Sadan, who had been a minor partner to the work since the early 1930s. The first letter is dated 3 February 1958:

In honour of Buber's eightieth birthday, I have begun writing my reminiscences of him. After all, I have known him for over forty years, and for many years we were very close. We were also going to collaborate on a six-volume series containing all the stories of the Hasidim. Now that hasidic lore has come upon prosperous days, I am disinclined to return to my book, which has long been lying in manuscript in a locked cellar for preservation.

Agnon expressed himself in a similar vein in a letter from 1959:

64 M. Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim — The Early Masters* (English transl. by Olga Marx), New York: Schocken 1947; idem, *Die Erzählungen der Chassidim*, Zurich: Manesse 1949.

65 This material, too, is in the containers of *Sippurei haBesht*.

From here on in I shall return to my story and to my two large books, *Atem re'item* and *Sefer, sofer vesippur*, and, if God gives me strength, to the stories of the Baal Shem Tov, which have been lying in Mr. Schocken's cellar for nearly thirty years but still leap just as strongly in my heart. Or perhaps I shall leave them because the subject has become so fashionable, or because next year will be the two-hundredth anniversary of the passing of the Baal Shem Tov.⁶⁶

The hesitation expressed in these letters may explain why Agnon put off returning to the abandoned material, even though the time would seem to have been favourable. The ultimate result of that delay was that he never succeeded in finishing the book.

Nevertheless, Agnon did mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the passing of the Baal Shem Tov with two publications. The first was a small collection of a very specific character entitled *Sifreihem shel tzaddikim*:

To mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the departure of our Rabbi, Light of Israel, R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, whose soul is secreted in heaven's coffer, I have collected a hundred and one stories about the books of his disciples and their disciples, how they came to be written and what the *tzaddikim* of the generation had to say of them. Some of the stories I have copied from books, others I have written from hearsay. In all of them I have preserved the intent rather than the literal text.⁶⁷

66 The first letter is preserved in the Dov Sadan Archive in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. The second is printed in "Afterword" (above, note 19), p. 222. The letter bears no date, but in the opinion of Raphael Weiser it must have been written early in 1959.

67 S.Y. Agnon, *Sifreihem shel tzaddikim: Me'ah sippurim ve'ehad al sifreihem shel talmidei haBesht veshel talmidei talmidav*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1961. The citation is from the preface. This book was eventually incorporated into the anthology *Sefer, sofer vesippur*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1978. The collaboration between Agnon and Buber is mentioned in the manuscript of the preface (see above, note 42), but not in the printed version. There is also a slight difference between the passage cited here and the version of the same passage appearing in the manuscript: "And now, to mark the two-hundredth anniversary of the departure of our Rabbi, Light of Israel, R. Israel Baal Shem Tov, whose soul is secreted in heaven's coffer, I said to myself, 'Everyone is writing things in his memory, and I have written nothing. What shall I

In the same year, a series entitled "sippurim na'im shel Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov" was published in the monthly literary journal *Molad*. It consisted of several hasidic stories in a free rendering by Agnon, which had been published in various newspapers and journals since the early 1940s. Agnon chose to dedicate this series to "Martin Buber, may God preserve him and give him life!"⁶⁸ The long-awaited collection *Sippurei haBesht*, however, appeared only after Agnon's death, the eleventh of his posthumous volumes, published in 1987 — that is, almost seventy years after Agnon and Buber began their collaborative work in Germany. According to the editors, Emuna and Haim Yaron, about 75 percent of the book was based on the stories that Buber sent to Agnon already in 1926 (adapted by Agnon, in accord with the agreement between them), with the rest of the material added by Agnon himself. The texts cited in the volume are collected from seventy-eight hasidic books, by no means relying only on *Shivhei haBesht*, the best-known source on the Baal Shem Tov. They are arranged in an order determined by Agnon: the first and third parts are devoted to the Baal Shem Tov himself — the first to the story of his life, the third to his wondrous deeds — while the second is devoted to "his disciples, the members of his circle and his opponents" and treats such figures as R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoye, the Maggid of Mezritch, and R. Michal of Zlotchov, who are also treated at length in *Or haganuz*.

In general, then, we may say that the publication of *Or haganuz* on the one hand and *Sippurei haBesht* on the other came in a way to make up for the abandoned "Corpus Hasidicum," the collaborative effort of Agnon and Buber. We must recall, however, that the original contract signed with Moriah-Dvir in Germany spoke of a comprehensive four-volume anthology, which was to be the authoritative reader of hasidic literature — a goal that is hardly realized by these two volumes.

do?' I went to the chest of my writings and took out some material from my book, *Sefer, sofer vesippur*"

⁶⁸ *Molad*, XVIII, nos. 144–145, August–September 1960, pp. 357–364, reprinted with additions in *Ha'esh veba'etzim*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1962, pp. 89–137. These stories are mainly free renderings by Agnon based on hasidic traditions. In this regard see Malka Shaked's discussion of two of the stories in this series, in *Iyyunim besippurei S.Y. Agnon: Madrikh lamoreh*, Jerusalem: Ma'alot 1986, pp. 12–36. It is interesting to note that most of the stories included in this series were first published between the years 1946 and 1949, just when Agnon temporarily renewed his work on *Sippurei haBesht*.

The cessation of their collaborative work on the "Book of Hasidism" did not disrupt the relations between Agnon and Buber. Though their correspondence lapsed for a few years, their ties, both oral and written, were renewed immediately upon Buber's immigration to Palestine in 1938, and they lacked none of their former overtures of mutual respect and esteem. Shortly before Buber's arrival, on 7 February 1938, Agnon sent him a letter brimming with accolades on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, which fell during that month:

Together with all those who esteem you, I am pleased to congratulate you upon reaching old age while constantly at work and piling up mighty accomplishments, whose worth is known and valued by many of the greatest of our people, and by many of the greatest scholars of the nations.

Agnon also apologizes in the letter for not having managed to prepare a story for the occasion to dedicate to Buber. Buber, on his part, honoured Agnon, who celebrated his fiftieth birthday during the same year, with an article published in *Moznayim*, in which he once more lauded Agnon's unique powers, in the same vein as he had in his letter to Leo Hermann twenty-five years before.⁶⁹ He also dedicated to Agnon a short piece published in the daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*.⁷⁰ On Buber's seventieth birthday (in 1948) Agnon honoured Buber by dedicating to him the story "Shalosh shevu'ot," which was later included in the cycle "Sippurim na'im shel Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov," also dedicated to Buber (yet another indication of Agnon's identification of Buber with Hasidism).⁷¹ Agnon turned sixty in the same year, and Buber celebrated him in a short article.⁷² When Buber reached the age of seventy-five, Agnon once more sent his congratulations — this time, too, adding an apology for not having finished a work entitled "Avdei haShem," which was to have been published for the occasion in

⁶⁹ M. Buber, "Hamesapper," *Moznayim*, VII, nos. 1–5, Nisan–Elul 5698 (1938), pp. 604–606.

⁷⁰ M. Buber, "Sefer pil'i," *Ha'aretz*, 12 August 1948.

⁷¹ S.Y. Agnon, "Shalosh Shevu'ot," *Ha'aretz*, 23 April 1948.

⁷² M. Buber, "Le'Agnon," in *Be'ayot hazeman — Bamah hofshit lehayyei tzibbur*, 15 Av 5708, 20 August 1948.

Buber's honour.⁷³ In 1958, when Buber turned eighty, Agnon published an article in *Ha'arets* in Buber's honour, bearing the title "For the Sake of Those Who Ought to Know Buber but Don't" (Leshem 'elu shetzrikhim lehakir 'et Buber ve'ainam makirim 'oto).⁷⁴ In the same year, Buber published an article in the volume *Yovel Shai*, issued in honour of Agnon's seventieth birthday, in which he once again gave expression to his feelings regarding Agnon, three times referring to him as "the true storyteller."⁷⁵ The last word was saved for Agnon, who published a "Tale" about Buber for his eighty-fifth birthday (in 1963).⁷⁶

Throughout all this time, the two maintained their "hasidic discourse." Buber was then finishing his only novel, *Gog and Magog*, whose subject was Polish Hasidism, and he called upon Agnon to help him with the project. He wrote to Agnon in January 1941, as the book was beginning to appear in installments in the daily newspaper *Davar*: "I am burdening you, unwillingly, with this chore. But there is no one else in the country who can help me with it." As far as we know, Buber met with Agnon several times in this regard, went over the manuscript with him, wrote down notes and suggestions for revision, and afterward edited the text on the basis of Agnon's suggestions.⁷⁷

Buber's above-cited articles about Agnon are mainly expansions of the ideas expressed concisely in his 1916 article on the subject, "Über Agnon." In an essay published in honour of Agnon's fiftieth birthday

73 Letter of 2 February 1953: "Everyone is running to congratulate you on your birthday, and I am hiding in my house because I am ashamed to face you — for I still have not paid my debt, namely, the book "Servants of the Lord" that I was planning to dedicate to you ..." *Letters*, no. 622, p. 575. It is not clear to which work Agnon is referring here.

74 *Ha'arets*, 7 February 1948, reprinted in *Me'atzmi* (above, note 5), pp. 257–264.

75 M. Buber, "Hamesapper besha'ah zo," in B. Kurzweil (ed.), *Yovel Shai* (S.Y. Agnon anniversary volume), Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press 1958, pp. 11–12. Agnon responded to this article in a letter to Buber of 4 December 1958: "... I thank you for the fine words with which you saw fit to honour me in the book *Yovel Shai*. I am doubly honoured, in that they are written by a man so intensively occupied with great and exalted things, who has nevertheless found it in his heart to remember and honour me before the writers of my people."

76 *Ha'arets*, 8 February 1963.

77 This subject is discussed in detail in an article by S. Werses, "Hahasidut be'aspeklariah belletristit: Iyyunim be'Gog uMagog' le-M. Buber," in R. Elijor, Y. Bartal, and H. Shmeruk (eds.), *Tzaddikim ve'anshei ma'aseh: Mehkarim behasidut Polin*, Bialik Institute (1994).

in 1938 — an event widely echoed in the Hebrew press — Buber develops the idea of the power of Agnon's relation to Jewish tradition, on account of which he had once spoken of Agnon's "consecration." Buber here describes Agnon as "the true storyteller" and his writing as "true storytelling," thanks to his being endowed with what Buber calls an "epic memory," which, to him, was a precondition for the creation of true literature. Powered by this memory — whose kernel lay in Agnon's hometown of Buczacz — Agnon is able to preserve the continuity of the tradition in his writing, both in treating the remembered reality itself and in writing about the present, whose continuity with the tradition reveals itself to him:

The life of our people is filled with tradition. The holy community of Buczacz is filled with tradition. In Agnon's early writings, everything is wrapped in the dress of tradition as in clothes of fine white silk; everything is adorned with the jewels of tradition. Tradition dims the light of the event. But this is changing. To be sure, Agnon is not leaving the tradition aside. But instead of serving as dress and adornment, it becomes the heart and the mystery of the event, by whose light its own light is brightened. That is how Agnon has become the storyteller we see before us.

In contrast, the last article in this group, written in 1958, has a different thrust. In "The Storyteller at This Time" ("Hamesapper besha'a zo"), Buber seeks to cast Agnon, as he must have come to see him after 1938, as "the chronicler of the present" (a transformation he had foreseen in 1916). In Buber's view, Agnon comprehends in his writings both dimensions of the Jewish present, "the setting Diaspora and the rising *yishuv* in Palestine, the ruin of Buczacz and the building of Tel Aviv." In this context, too, Buber returns again and again to his key phrase, "the true storyteller." Agnon is now awarded this title not because his writing necessarily chronicles the events of the present, but because it succeeds in arriving at the authentic inner essence of the time:

And that is the nature of this storytelling, that it makes things transparent, so that the eye can see in them what lies at the heart of things that are happening at the time, what lies in the essence of a single large collective soul, as it is in its present moment.

It would seem that even in the years after his "German period,"

Agnon, to adopt Grete Schaeder's phrase, continued to fit the description of Buber's "ideal storyteller."⁷⁸

Over against Buber's texts on Agnon stand Agnon's texts on Buber, which combine personal reminiscences with evaluations of Buber's works. The article published by Agnon in honour of Buber's eightieth birthday⁷⁹ is the most detailed and comprehensive of his writings about Buber. The first sections of it relate to various aspects of Buber's work and personality: his singular contribution to "the rebirth of the Jewish people," his achievements as a Zionist leader, the erudition imbuing his creative work ("Buber's learning is drawn from the wisdom of all the world's peoples"), his literary and aesthetic gifts, his unique achievement in translating the Bible (in collaboration with Rosenzweig), his prestige ("of Judaism's outstanding figures, Buber, after Einstein, is the most internationally famous"), and the implications of his reputation for his status as the spokesperson of Judaism to the rest of the world. However, the main portion of Agnon's article is devoted to the subject of Hasidism, which was the only aspect of Buber's work that truly interested him.

Agnon surveys at length the many precedents for Buber's work in this field. In this context, he mentions the names of Bick, Zweifel, Rodkinson, Dubnow, Horodecky, Abraham Kahana, and Hillel Zeitlin. A whole passage is devoted to a detailed description of the work of Aaron Marcus of Bad Homburg, who wrote a "great book" in German on Hasidism and the Hasidim, and in so doing, like Buber, helped spread the appreciation of hasidic culture beyond the Hebraic-Jewish context. Agnon also refers to the three great writers who emerged from the hasidic milieu, Peretz, Berdichewsky, and Steinberg. This discussion sets Buber's work in its historical context, in which he perpetuated a long-standing tradition of grappling with the hasidic universe — a tradition that began with the proponents of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and was continued by the thinkers and writers of the period of Jewish national rebirth.⁸⁰ Agnon portrays Buber's own contribution to the

78 See above, note 12.

79 See above, note 74.

80 In the unpublished letter to Sadan cited in note 66, Agnon remarks: "In all events, I touched there [in his jubilee article for Buber] upon the hasidic literature of the Jewish intellectuals. ... I hope that I shall one day return to the subject, and what I wrote there by way of inference, without bringing evidence, I shall spell out explicitly, on the basis of definitive evidence."

enrichment of this tradition by way of two parables, the first appearing at the beginning of his discussion of the subject and the second at the end. The first of them is as follows:

Now I shall offer a parable. A fine pearl lay in the rubbish-heap. Many were those who passed it by; many were those who trampled it. Buber passed by and took notice; he bent down, picked it up and polished it until its brilliant lustre shone for all to see. Now that it shone so brilliantly, it was set in crowns of poetry and song. The pearl is Hasidism; the rubbish-heap, its disregard; the trampling, the scorn that was its lot. As for Buber's beautification, that is the form he gave it in German translation.

The second parable is none other than one of the stories of the Baal Shem Tov, of which Agnon had this to say: "This tale serves as a parable for what we have been discussing":

The son-in-law of the Baal Shem Tov was from Germany. Once he asked to travel to Germany in order to prostrate himself upon the graves of his ancestors. The Baal Shem Tov told him, "Take along a shofar." ... On his return journey, he lost his way, and when Rosh Hashanah arrived he found himself in a desolate place, remote from human habitation. He was very sad that he had no community with which to pray, but happy that he was able to fulfill the commandment to blow the shofar. Some time later, he returned to his father-in-law, the Baal Shem Tov. The Baal Shem Tov said to him, "That place has been desolate ever since the Six Days of Creation, and the sound of the shofar has never been heard there. Had you not happened to come there on Rosh Hashanah and blow the shofar, it would already have been blotted out of the world."

Both parables speak Buber's praise: The first commends his wisdom in recovering a forgotten, neglected, and even derided cultural tradition and giving it a form that revealed anew its hidden value. The second parable lauds Buber's unique achievement in publicizing the hasidic lore and bringing it to the knowledge of the public at large (to be sure, in the German context); were it not for Buber, Agnon implies, that tradition might have been forgotten utterly.

In light of all these things, we must again ask why, after all, Agnon and Buber never succeeded in realizing their joint endeavour. The

primary and most decisive impediment was undoubtedly the fire in Bad Homburg, if not for which the project almost certainly would have been completed. Thereafter, the geographical, physical distance between the two authors worked against their collaboration. Moreover, during those years both Agnon and Buber found themselves occupied with wide-ranging creative activity, beside which their anthologizing work, despite the interest it held for them both, was relegated to second or third priority. Bialik's withdrawal from the project, and Schocken's subsequent reluctance to take his place, reduced even further the chances that the plan would ever come to fruition. Even so, we cannot but wonder why Agnon and Buber never actually joined forces to revive their forsaken project in the years after Buber's immigration to Palestine, when they were again close together geographically — closer, in fact, than they had been in their Frankfurt days. That this decision was agreeable to them both may be inferred from the fact that Buber's independent publication of *Or haganuz* left the relations between them unperturbed, and their friendship, as substantiated by the information and documents presented above, continued up to the very end.

The mutual relinquishment by Agnon and Buber of their joint project may, perhaps, be explained by the new circumstances in which they met again in Jerusalem on the eve of World War II. During his years in Germany, Agnon was motivated primarily by his interest as a young writer seeking to link himself with a famous German-Jewish author and collaborate with him in a field of mutual interest. In 1938, however, Agnon at fifty was considered the greatest Hebrew writer of his generation. Working together with Buber at this stage was of doubtful appropriateness to his age and status. The same was true of Buber: After his hasty immigration to Palestine, at the age of sixty, burdened with weighty personal and professional concerns, he no longer had the incentive to invest his efforts in a literary project as demanding as that which he and Agnon had planned during their time together in Germany. To be sure, he did choose to publish *Or haganuz*, but that book was more a summary of his existing works than a new venture. This impression is further borne out by the fact that Buber also failed to carry out another collaborative project on Hasidism, with S.A. Horodecky, though Horodecky, too, immigrated to Palestine on the eve of the war, with Buber's aid.

A further explanation may lie in the differences between Agnon

and Buber with regard to editorial policy: a comparison of *Or haganuz* with *Sippurei haBesht* testifies to Agnon's conservative approach. His intervention in the text is limited to supplying titles, making a few stylistic emendations, adding punctuation and revising the breakdown into paragraphs, translating foreign words (mainly from Aramaic), and so on. His strict insistence upon faithfulness to the original source is evident throughout. It was in fact precisely during the second half of the 1930s that Agnon formulated and refined this rigorous approach, in the course of preparing his anthology, *Days of Awe*. He wrote to Sadan: "The work is greater than I had imagined at the outset ... Bialik, may he rest in peace, made the work easy for himself, and left out things that should not have been deleted. I know why, too."⁸¹ Agnon's method thus differed from that of the author of *Sefer ha'aggadah*, and all the more so from that of the author of *Or haganuz*, whose inspired anthologies were based from the outset on a freer approach to the hasidic text.⁸² It is reasonable to suppose that when they began their collaborative work, Buber was willing to accept the limitations ensuing from the publication of a Hebrew anthology of hasidic stories, and he thus tended to conform to the policy proposed by Agnon. That is how they were able, already in 1924, to complete the first volume ("*Sippurei haBesht*") to their mutual satisfaction, without ever — at least, insofar as we can tell from their correspondence — quarrelling in principle over this issue. But by the time the renewed opportunity arose for them to go back to work on the long-awaited volume, both Agnon and Buber were well entrenched in their differing attitudes toward the task of compilation and therefore preferred to work independently, each according to his own method and approach.⁸³

81 See Agnon's letter of late 1936 to Dov Sadan, published in *Ha'universitah*, XXV (Spring 1981), p. 31. See also Agnon's introduction to *Yamim nora'im*, Tel Aviv: Schocken 1938.

82 See G. Scholem, "Martin Buber's Interpretation of Hasidism," in idem, *The Messianic Idea*, pp. 229ff.

83 The editors of *Sippurei haBesht*, Emuna and Haim Yaron, point to a passage in Agnon's jubilee article for Buber in which the writer takes exception to the "foreign spirit" permeating Buber's adaptations of the hasidic tales (see the "Afterword," especially p. 222). In their opinion, this is the key to understanding the split between Agnon and Buber. It should be emphasized, however, that Agnon's criticism explicitly refers to Buber's early renderings, which were in fact entirely original compositions, for which the hasidic tale served as no more than a point of departure. In this regard see the

The failure to complete the "Corpus Hasidicum" is undoubtedly the great unfulfilled promise of the relationship between Buber and Agnon. Not only were they two of the greatest Jewish thinkers of the century; they were also both modern writers who dealt constantly, each in his own way, with the hasidic heritage, Agnon in his fiction ("Hanidah," *The Bridal Canopy*, "Sefer takhlit hama'asim") and in anthologies like *Sippurei haBesht*, and Buber in his own anthologies, such as *The Legends of the Baal Shem* and *Or haganuz*, and in prose works like *Befarades hahasidut*. Hasidism also constituted the principal content and theme of the relations between Agnon and Buber for decades, and their continuing dialogue on the subject generated a constant process of mutual cross-fertilization. Moreover, the two were actually engaged in the project itself, if sporadically, for a period of ten years. We may certainly assume that if their collaboration for the purpose of publishing the "Book of Hasidism" had come to fruition, it would have enriched the library of modern Jewish literature with a book that would have constituted a primary source for modern Jewish culture, much like Bialik's *Sefer ha'aggadah*.

That assumption is certainly what Bialik had in mind when he told Agnon that "all the books of this generation would be forgotten in a hundred years, but [this one] would live a thousand years." Franz Rosenzweig's distressed response to the fire in Agnon's house in Bad Homburg testifies to the monumental importance attached by this outstanding Jewish personality to the "Book of Hasidism." Moreover, the repeated attempts of Agnon and Buber themselves to keep the project going if they could, rather than recognize it as a failure, well reflect their own appreciation of its tremendous potential. "No, death alone erases, not fire," declared Rosenzweig in 1924. But now that Buber and Agnon have both departed this world, is there anyone who can still pick up where they left off?

Translated by Deborah Greniman

introductory essay of Paul Mendes-Flohr and Zeev Greis to the new English edition of Buber's *The Tales of Rabbi Nahman*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International 1988, pp. ix-xxviii.

However, Agnon's discussion of Buber's method of compiling hasidic anthologies quite clearly emphasizes his orientation towards an international audience, by way of contrast, perhaps, to Agnon's own "local" orientation.

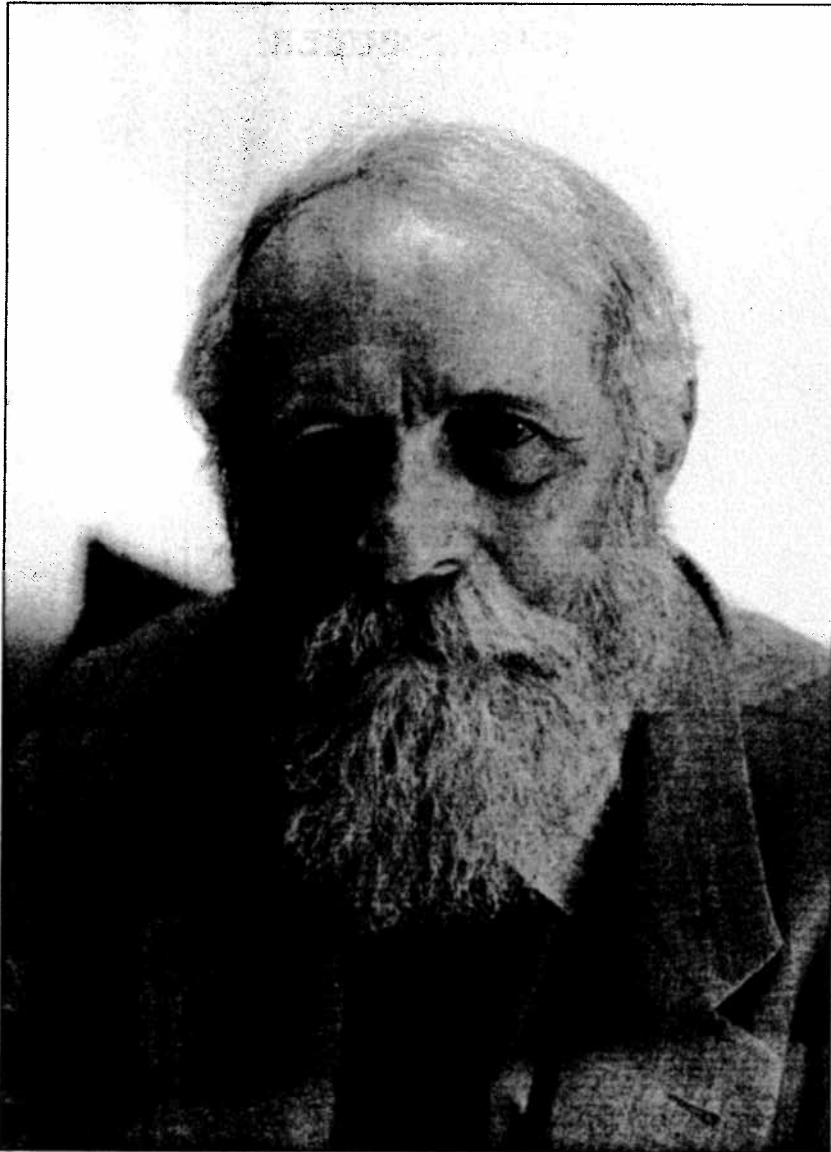
Buber and the Bible: Guiding Principles and the Legacy of His Interpretation

Karl-Johan Illman

Buber's writings on the Bible, most of which he included in the second volume of his collected works,¹ constitute more than a quarter of his literary output. If we add to them his work on the German translation of the Hebrew Bible, we may safely state that Buber's work on the Bible was his most comprehensive single field of production. It would be tempting, then, to focus on a particular topic or text, or to choose between discussing Buber's exegetical work and his translation. However, because we are addressing "the legacy of Martin Buber," I should like at least to try to present a comprehensive view of his entire work on the Bible. The question I would like briefly to address is that of the guiding principles, methods, or hermeneutical devices upon which Buber relied.

In the following pages, I shall argue that we can discern two hermeneutical principles in Buber's work on the Bible which guided it throughout. These two interrelated principles can also be detected in Buber's description of Judaism as an ellipse with two focal points.²

- 1 Buber himself edited his *Werke, I-III*, Munich-Heidelberg 1962-1964, and the volume *Der Jude und sein Judentum*, Köln 1963. These four volumes do not include all his early philosophical works, and some of his late essays were published separately. His most important works on the Bible are: *Königtum Gottes* (1932), *Der Glaube der Propheten* (Dutch ed. 1940, English 1949, German 1950), and *Moses* (Hebrew ed. 1945, English 1946, German 1948). All these are reprinted in *Werke, II: Schriften zur Bibel* (1963).
- 2 See his essay, "Die Brennpunkte der jüdischen Seele" (1932), in *Der Jude* (see previous note), pp. 201-211. In this connection (*ibid.*, p. 205), Buber also speaks about the "doctrine of God's unity" ("Einheitslehre vom Gott"),



Martin Buber

Courtesy of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities

/ MARTIN BUBER /

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