

Don't Rain on My Parade

Shira Leibowitz-Schmidt and Ida Myers

On first reading this short story, we might be led to believe that it is a portrayal from the viewpoint of the chassidim who seem to be wrongfully and harshly judged by Rav Aryeh Leib (Leibush).

However, the story can be read on other levels. One of the characteristics which earned Shmuel Yosef (S.Y.) Agnon the Nobel Prize in 1966 was his subtle use of irony. If we probe beneath the surface of the text of "The Early Mitnagdim" we find ourselves within a countercurrent opposite to the surface of the story.

At first it seems the author is describing Rav Aryeh Leibush as a man who returns the hospitality of the chassidim with a denigrating rebuke. But as Nitza Ben-Dov wrote in *Agnon's Art of Indirection* "for every interpretation there is an equal and opposite reinterpretation." The presentation of Rav Aryeh as a heroic figure may not be as explicit as the view of him as a small-minded ingrate, but it is characteristic of Agnon to present two contrary meanings at the same time.

The first paragraph, seemingly irrelevant, sets the tone of a tall story. Agnon is winking at us as he says that he heard this from his great, great grandfather. If he heard it, for example, at age ten, then his progenitor must have been about a hundred years old. A few sentences later he tells us he heard it from two other sources (a case of "the lady doth protest too much, methinks"?). He drowns us in a floodtide of genealogical details about his sources.

The storm is described in hyperbole: "the whole world was flooded." The story is in the chassidic wonder-worker genre which has roots in the midrash. The Baal Shem Tov in this story is the equivalent of the midrashic Honi Hamaagel in reverse. Honi was a miracle-maker (Mishna Taanit) who, during a drought, drew a circle on the ground and insisted the Heavens rain into his circle. The scholars of the mishna seemed ambivalent about Honi's success as a short-order rainmaker, cowing the Heavens into obeisance. Similarly, the mitnagdim had deep reservations about the miracle-making of chassidic rebbes and tzaddikim. There are Biblical warnings against believing certain types of man-wrought miracles (e.g., Deuteronomy 12). The reader is asked to suspend disbelief in the outrageously unlikely event that the one dry spot in town is the sukkah of the Baal Shem Tov.

In this story two further elements in the Weltanschauung of the chassidim come under implied criticism. Their critics felt they over-emphasized rejoicing in the mitzvot (singing, dancing, drinking). In addition mitnagdim claimed the chassidim were not always particular about details in the performance of mitzvot, e.g., the clapping may have been a violation of a festival prohibition. These are the types of differences that caused the rift between the two groups.

The chassidim had their own reservations about the mitnagdim. They felt the mitnagdim overly stressed study and pedantic observance: "killjoys" in contemporary parlance.

Much of Agnon's language is neutral, so that the text could be read legitimately two ways. For example, in the Hebrew original the word "mitnagdim" (opposition) appears three times. That is the root of the term "mitnagdim" (misnagdim in Ashkenazic pronunciation). Translating it as "aversion" or "hatred" would imply that Rav Aryeh Leibush was mean-spirited and had a personal animosity to chassidim. Translating it as "resistance" could imply that Rav Aryeh had principled reservations about chassidic norms. Such a translation would allow the reader to see him as an heroic figure who put aside his reservations about chassidim in order to be able to properly observe the precept of eating in sukkah, but who was steadfastly true to his principles and took his leave (albeit rudely) when he felt that norms were being taken lightly.

The clash between these two worldviews created waves which can still be observed as ripples where the currents meet.

The Early Mitnagdim*

by S.Y. Agnon

Translated and adapted by Ida Myers and Shira Leibowitz-Schmidt

"Rav of Meizbush, why are you in such a rush?" they queried him. He responded with a dismissive gesture of the hand indicating his reluctance to remain, and cited the first verse in the book of Psalms, "Happy is the man who has never sat in the company of the frivolous." He repeated his words and departed.

Now you see how adamant the mitnagdim were and how intense was their opposition to the Baal Shem Tov. A man clearly sees that the entire world is flooded by torrential rains, and no one can observe the mitzvah of sitting in a sukkah -- even for a moment. Despite this, in the sukkah of the Baal Shem Tov the master and his disciples are sitting, eating, drinking, and celebrating. And here his mitnagdim call them a "company of the frivolous" simply because they are clapping their hands out of a sense of rejoicing in tune with the holiday spirit.

This episode was told to me by Rabbi Meir Khartiner, may he live and be well, my great, great, grandfather from Meizbush. There was a chief justice of the rabbinical court whose name was Rav Aryeh Leib. That was the Rav Aryeh Leib who was the younger brother of Rabbi Nahman of Horodinski, the latter a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov. He is the same Rav of Meizbush who is mentioned in the tales of the chassidim as being an arch opponent of the Baal Shem Tov. To give you an idea of just how great his opposition was, I will recount what I heard from two sources (from my relative Reb Hayim Mordecai Pick, a grandson of the preacher from Zloczow, who was close to the old Rebbe from Harshiatin, and from my uncle, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Khariton of Sede Lavan, named after Rav Aryeh Leib of Meizbush). They both aimed to point out to me the intensity of the opposition of the mitnagdim to the early chassidim.

One year, on the first night of the Feast of Tabernacles it rained so hard that practically the whole world was flooded and it was impossible to sit in a sukkah even long enough to make the blessing over the wine. Rav Aryeh Leibush was sitting in his drenched house, greatly distressed that he could not observe the precept of sitting in the sukkah on the eve of the holiday.

Some townsmen came over and said that in the sukkah of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov it was not raining, and that Rabbi Israel and his disciples were sitting in the sukkah, eating, drinking, and rejoicing.

Rav Aryeh Leibush took a bottle of wine and a kiddish cup; his wife, the rebbetzin, took two loaves of challa and a breadknife, wrapped them in a tablecloth, and handed them to him. With all his might he hastened to the sukkah of the Baal Shem Tov. The rains kept intensifying and coming down without letup. It was a miracle of miracles that he got there at all.

When he entered, he found the sukkah full of chassidim seated around the Baal Shem Tov. They made room for the Rav of Meizbush. He stood up, poured himself a glass of wine, made the blessings over the wine and for sitting in the sukkah, recited the prayer of thanks for having been sustained and preserved for this occasion. Then he washed his hands for partaking of bread and cut into the challah.

Meanwhile, the chassidim were sitting, singing, enjoying themselves, and, brimming with good cheer, they started clapping. Upon hearing this, Rav Aryeh Leibush hastened to rinse his fingers before reciting grace after meals and brushed himself off ready for exiting.

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