



**Jeffrey Saks, Shalom Carmy, eds.** *Agnon's Tales of the Land of Israel*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021. 236 pp. \$29.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-72527-887-5.

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I have seldom enjoyed a scholarly anthology as much as this compilation of essays emphasizing the role of the Land of Israel in the life and work of literary Nobel laureate S. Y. Agnon. I enjoyed it in part because of the unusual variety of approaches from librarians, translators, rabbis, and academics representing diverse types of institutions, but also because it complements the recent emphasis on Agnon's tales about the Holocaust and the eastern European town he left behind as a youth. It is important to assess the diasporic experience in Agnon's life and work, and as such, the diasporic turn was a welcome and necessary corrective to any narrow Zionist focus on his worldview and fiction. However, in light of his choice to write in Hebrew, live in Israel, and orient even his diasporic tales toward a grand vision of national redemption in Zion, this volume is a welcome reminder of Agnon's main commitments.

Emerging from a conference that was hosted at Yeshiva University's Center for Israel Studies in New York to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Agnon's Nobel Prize, this volume contains twelve chapters, a foreword, and prefaces. The last chapter, "Agnon at Yeshiva University," recalls his historic visit to New York in 1967, a year after the Nobel, to receive an honorary doctorate in

Hebrew letters from Yeshiva University. Reflecting on this visit, Shulamith Z. Berger underscores that Agnon's characteristic "blend of traditional Jewish piety and Jewish modernism" appealed to the students and faculty of the Modern Orthodox Yeshiva University, as did his evocation of their shared ancestry in a destroyed European Jewish world and their mutual commitment to Jewish life in Israel (p. 197).

Nonetheless, one of the volume's coeditors confesses that until late adulthood he had found Agnon's stories "evocative rather than inspiring" (p. 3). Shalom Carmy, a faculty member at Yeshiva University, was enchanted by Agnon's narrative style, which "seemingly without effort, and without straining for effect, drew on all the layers of the Hebrew language, bringing to life a rich tapestry of Jewish life from the Middle Ages down to the mid-twentieth century" (p. 1). Yet when Carmy sought spiritual guidance to sustain his youthful quest for a non-ironic sense of wholeness, he turned to the works of Catholic novelists like Graham Greene, whose faith struck him as unmediated by irony (p. 1). Greene's characters suffer from "harsh, brutish" childhoods, "blighted from the cradle" (p. 9). By contrast, Agnon's characters go to hell "on tourist visas"; God is seated "in His

heaven” and good deeds form a bulwark against despair (p. 9). Only in later years did Carmy begin to appreciate the power of Agnon’s optimism, recognizing that “the true hero of Agnon’s work is not any individual but the Jewish people as an organism” toward which Agnon directs both his faith and criticism (p. 16).

Since Talmudic times, as Safrira Lidovsky Cohen observes, “the Hebrew term *ge’ulah*, redemption, [has signified] the end of exile and a return to independent Jewish life in the Land of Israel” (p. 18). This is the vision that animates Agnon’s fiction, even as he warns against moral weaknesses that jeopardize its consummation. Lidovsky Cohen traces this dynamic in Agnon’s signature story, “Agunot,” from which he coined the unique name that he later adopted officially, having been born Shmuel Yosef Tzatzkes.[1] He wrote “Agunot” upon emigrating as a young man to Ottoman-controlled Palestine in 1908. There, he encountered an entrenched religious Jewish community—the Old Yishuv—and Jewish immigrants who wished to bring about the *ge’ulah* in a more practical manner. Agnon’s “Agunot,” however, does not end well for any of its characters: the father in the story abandons Jerusalem, and his family and beloved study house collapse after the daughter’s failed marriage to an unsuitable man.

Lidovsky Cohen frames the story’s denouement within the historical, geographic, and ideological circumstances of the land to which Agnon immigrated in 1908. He then left it for a hiatus of twelve years, from 1913 to 1924, in Germany, after which he settled permanently in Jerusalem where he remained until his death in 1970. The signature story inaugurates Agnon’s lifelong commitment to transforming Judaism from a potentially “moribund creed” into “a vibrant national culture of continuation and change” (p. 39).

As noted in one way or another by every contributor to this volume, Agnon advocated a modernization of Jewish life, especially in Israel. On the other hand, he was also concerned about the

consequences of a hurried national renewal that did not take Jewish traditions sufficiently into account. Tension between the past and the present, tradition and modernization, Israel and diaspora, are recurrent themes throughout this volume, for indeed they are the principal threads that stitch Agnon’s enterprise together. This tension is especially evident in Agnon’s longest novel about the Land of Israel, *Only Yesteryear* (*T’mol Shilshom*). [2] This epic novel, published in 1945, harks back to the first decade of the twentieth century, when Agnon had landed in Ottoman Jaffa as a very young man. Reflecting back on this period, Agnon emphasized the same tragic clash that he had targeted in “Agunot” between hasty allegiances and conservative desires that jeopardize an effective renewal of Jewish life.

The volume’s centerpiece—twice as long as any of the other chapters—is devoted to a discussion of *Only Yesteryear* by Hebrew literature’s most sensitive translator, Hillel Halkin. Aside from explicating this complex novel, Halkin offers freshly translated passages of key junctures in a manner that allows an English reader to experience the texture of Agnon’s allusive style and nuanced worldview. To mediate between modernizing impulses and conservative beliefs, Agnon crafted a literary vocabulary that draws on an extraordinary range of intertextual sources. In an interview with Jeffrey Saks, Avraham Holtz discusses the arduous task of identifying those sources in his annotated editions of Agnon: “I knew I needed to develop an apparatus to organize all the information, and I found a model in Gifford and Seidman’s annotated edition of Joyce’s *Ulysses*” (p. 103). When discussing the final layout with the publisher, though, they decided to print the main text surrounded by commentary, in a manner that mimics a page from the Talmud. One wonders what Agnon would have said about that co-opting of sacred sources to adorn his fables.

Steven Fine teases out Agnon’s subtle critique of a “menorah craze” that gripped Israel in the

1950s, “when belles-lettres, academic studies, archaeological discoveries and visual representations of the biblical lampstand were central to the Jewish public agenda” (p. 43). This was largely a reaction to the seven-branched candelabra from the Ancient Temple, depicted as conqueror’s spoil on Titus’s arch in Rome, which was chosen as one of the symbols for the modern state. However, Agnon’s “Tale of the *Menorah*” is oddly set in Buczac, the European town where he was born, rather than in Jerusalem, where the ancient menorah once stood.[3] Moreover, this fictional story is about a menorah gifted by the king of Poland to the town’s synagogue, a gift that discomfits Buczac’s pious Jews because of the rabbinic injunction against reproducing Temple vessels, even for decorative purposes, so as to await the divine *ge’ulah* before trying to repair all that had been broken and scattered. Fine argues that the menorah in Agnon’s story serves as a reminder that an ancient symbol of this magnitude cannot be casually reincorporated into Israel’s midst without reflecting on the history and reasons for the destruction of the ancient commonwealth. At the same time, the tale highlights a distinction between modern Zionists and traditional lovers of Zion, namely that modern Zionists decided to dispense with traditional strictures and procrastinations.

In a more conciliatory vein, Alan Mintz’s chapter, “Hometown and Homeland,” traces a dialectic between Agnon’s commitment to Israel and his commemoration of the history of his birth town. Currently located in western Ukraine, Buczac had been a thriving Jewish community when Agnon was young, before it was decimated during World War I and subsequently obliterated during World War II and the Holocaust. Upon his untimely death in 2017, Alan Mintz (z”l) had been preparing scholarly interpretations and critical editions of Agnon’s Buczac stories. His contribution to this volume therefore places this diasporic dimension into conversation with Agnon’s attitude toward Zion. Focusing on the ending of *A Guest for the Night* (*Ore’ah nata lalun*), where Agnon’s

semi-autobiographical narrator returns to Jerusalem after visiting his birth town, Mintz underscores that its conclusion is predicated on the redemptive mythical notion that “the synagogues and the study houses of the diaspora will eventually be transported, fixed, or replanted” in the Land of Israel (p. 117).[4] In 1938 when Agnon was writing *A Guest for the Night*, he was especially tormented by his inability to protect the townspeople left behind in Europe. This ending was therefore a “consolation” that functions as “a kind of coda” for his major diasporic novel (p. 117).

It is indeed a mistake, as both Alan Mintz and Steve Fine show, to separate Agnon’s approach to Israel from his approach to Europe and the destruction of Jewish communities there. Even during Israel’s extraordinary period of growth in the 1950s and 60s, when there was little official impetus to mourn the diasporic communities that had been lost to genocide, Agnon insisted on writing both about Israel and the diaspora. Like Fine, Mintz suggests that by refusing to give up a diasporic axis, Agnon was responding to a secular Zionism that, rather than perpetuating “a grand or golden tradition,” was forging ahead without careful regard for certain aspects of traditional Jewish life that Agnon held dear (p. 118). Indeed, he was a complex thinker who subtly criticized what he loved, yet tempered all that he criticized.

Jeffrey Saks, research director of the Agnon’s House in Jerusalem and co-editor of this volume, reflects on the Nobel Prize speech that Agnon delivered in 1966. In Stockholm, Agnon declared that “as a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem, and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the exile. But I always regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem” (p. 129). Saks detects in these lines a response to Psalm 137, “By the rivers of Babylon,” which expresses the desperation of the exiled Judeans, who “sat and wept ... How can we sing the songs of the Lord/while in a

foreign land?” During the Nobel ceremony, Agnon broke with protocol to directly address the king of Sweden by greeting him with an ancient Hebrew formula that distinguishes between a mere king of flesh and blood, and God. Agnon cautioned Israel’s foreign minister not to interfere, quipping that “when he receives the Nobel Prize, he can write his own acceptance speech,” and proceeded to deliver part of his speech dramatically in Hebrew, the rest being read in translation on his behalf (p. 128).

Like several contributors to this volume, Moshe Simkovich underscores Agnon’s characteristic appeal to traditional Jewish sources, “sometimes explicitly, sometimes through veiled reference, and often tongue in cheek” (p. 146). This intertextuality was Agnon’s main tool for deepening the connection between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, across a long history and traditions that are manifested in a rich textual heritage. On the flipside, Laura Wiseman demonstrates how cunningly critical Agnon could be of Jewish society and its government affairs. A decade before the declaration of the State of Israel, he published a series of satires about local “politics, bureaucratic committees, and public works,” using them to criticize “society’s herd instinct enacted at the expense of individual autonomy, and at times that of collective welfare” (p. 151). Under the rubric of the *Book of State* (*Sefer HaMedinah*), they are essentially parables narrated tongue in cheek by a Lord of the Book of State (Ba`al Sefer HaMedinah).[5] Their precise meaning is elusive and multidimensional, yet as Wiseman argues, they also refer self-reflexively to Agnon’s own sense of responsibility toward the conscientious development of the Hebrew language in Israel.

Wendy Zierler draws our attention to yet another type of intertextual conversation undergirding Agnon’s compositions. She compares Agnon’s poignant story “Tehilla,” about a pious, quasi-mythical old lady in Jerusalem, with “HaSavta Hanye” by the Hebrew writer and contemporary

of Agnon, Devorah Baron.[6] Baron’s story preceded Agnon’s, and it too recounts—albeit in a condensed form and within a diasporic setting—the harrowing life of a pious woman who had lost all her children and wealth, yet refuses to complain against heaven and instead spends her days doing good deeds and spreading joy around her. Zierler’s comparative analysis is enhanced by her translation of Baron’s story for this volume.

Although English-language readers will not be able to fully corroborate whether “it is impossible to love the Hebrew language without loving Agnon as its extraordinary impresario,” as Shalom Carmy declares, this edited volume certainly brings out the paradoxes of a religious man who expressed ambivalence about God and religion; a strong representative of Israel who mocked the apparatus of statehood; and a gifted wordsmith who skirted yet encompassed the great challenges of his era with a fine stroke of irony (p. 1).

#### Notes

- [1]. Agnon, “Agunot,” in *Elu veElu* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 327-37.
- [2]. Agnon, *T’mol Shilshom* [Only Yesteryear] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1945).
- [3]. Agnon, “Ma`aseh haMenorah” [Tale of the Menorah], in *Atidot: Rivon le-Noar* (Winter 1956-57): 3-11.
- [4]. Agnon, *Ore’ah nata lalun* [A Guest for the Night] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1939).
- [5]. Agnon, “Prakim shel Sefer HaMedinah” [Chapters of the Book of State] in *Samuch Ve-Nireh* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1951). Wiseman refers most extensively to “Kelipat Tapuah Zahav” [Orange Peel], originally published in *Haaretz*, December 22, 1939.
- [6]. Dvora Baron, “HaSavta Hanye,” *HaOlam* 3, no. 33 (September 15, 1909): 8-9; Agnon, “Tehillah,” in *Ad Henah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1952): 138-60.

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