Erica Brown • Shira Weiss
Editors

An Ode to Joy

Judaism and Happiness in the Thought of Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks and Beyond

palgrave
macmillan

CHAPTER 31

Joy, Sorrow, and Emotional Equilibrium in Agnon

Jeffrey Saks

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' observation that, "It is easy to speak to God in tears; it is hard to serve God in joy," reflects his ability to communicate the deep truths of religious experience in elegant aphorisms.[1] It is equally challenging to capture the complexities of human life in the medium of literature when cast in a joyous hue. Literature portrays human existence, and it more often does it well when recalling Tolstoy's adage that "Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." To get at a literary portrait of the good life, and to do so in a compelling way, the outlines of joy are often cast in relief against unhappiness, tragedy, sorrow, and suffering. If literature can be used as a lens to look back at ourselves as thinking, feeling, and spiritual beings, many of its best and most effective exemplars do so as cautionary tales. This may be particularly true for literature that depicts religious experience—think Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Flannery O'Conner, Graham Greene, Marilynne Robinson, and while we're at it, the Bible itself, with its own panoply of unhappy families. While the first impulse of an author is almost always aesthetic, literature, in the formulation of R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "generally help[s] to

J. Saks (✉)
ATID/WebYeshiva.org & Agnon House, Jerusalem, Israel

E. Brown, S. Weiss (eds.), *An Ode to Joy*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-28229-4_31

develop our spiritual personality. Time and again, [it intensifies] our insight into basic problems of moral and religious thought.… [It] deepens our understanding of man: his nature, functions, and duties."[2]

If, as the witticism goes, "Jews are like everyone else, only more so," then certainly Jewish literature *not only* but *even* more so. From Yiddish literature's well-placed *bitterer gelechter* [bitter laugh] through even much of contemporary Hebrew writing, we are reminded that modern authors depicting the Jewish experience would often take their heroes "beyond comedy into madness…[asking] the readers' pardon for having been able to rescue the humor from its end in tragedy."[3]

In the works of S.Y. Agnon, Hebrew literature's only Nobel laureate, the tragic, even when foregrounded with humor, was the author's most often chosen register to best explore the Jewish condition in the transformations it underwent in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This says as much about that millennia-old literary genre as it does about that Jewish condition. As Ariel Hirschfeld observed:

> For many generations tragedy was the most serious literary genre examining the existential human condition and the questions which emanate from it: what is man and for what is he destined, what is human evil and from whence does it spring—and to sketch a portrait of mankind evolving throughout history. More than that, tragedy connects identity and belonging; it is the active center which binds Western civilization as a continuum of culture and tradition, transcending nations, languages, and geography. Tragedy's status, despite all the many religious and political transformations in the West, remains on the artistic frontlines, unaffected by historical, religious, or philosophical transformations.[4]

It is not surprising, therefore, that Agnon rarely depicts scenes of unbridled joy. To demonstrate, we will survey a few central passages in two of his better-known works to experience his depiction of joy, harmony, and emotional equilibrium. As I have noted elsewhere, despite his distillation of the classic Jewish bookshelf into the mold of modern literature, the Hebrew master was not writing a contemporary *Guide of the Perplexed*. Nevertheless, reading his work offers insight into the life well-lived as part of the religious quest.

In his 1950 novella, *Tehilla*, Agnon introduces his readers to one of the greatest figures of modern Hebrew literature.[5] At age 104, the title character is an "old woman, as comely an old woman as you have seen in all

your days. Righteous she was, and wise she was, and gracious and humble too: for kindness and mercy were the light of her eyes, and every wrinkle in her face told of blessing and peace." As the senior citizen par excellence of the *Yishuv HaYashan* in Jerusalem's Old City (the story is set in 1924–25), she is a model of virtue. As the story slowly unfolds, we come to learn of the many trials and tribulations, suffering and agony she has borne over her long life. As she dictates her autobiography of woe to the narrator, who is recording it for delivery to the next world, we come to understand something about the relationship of joy and sorrow.

> Even as she spoke, her face clouded over with grief.
>
> Your joy has passed away, I said.
>
> She was silent for a moment. Then she said: Yes, my son, I was joyful, and now it is not so.
>
> Yet even as she spoke, the light shone out again from her face. She raised her eyes and said: Blessed be He, Who has turned away my sorrow.
>
> Why, I asked, were you joyful, yet afterwards sad, and now, joyful again?
>
> She said, very gently: Since your words are not chosen with care, I must tell you, this was not the right way to ask. Rather should you have said, "How have you deserved that God should turn away your sorrow?" For in His blessed eyes, all is one, whether sorrow or joy.
>
> Perhaps in the future, said I, my words will be chosen with care, since you teach me how one must speak. "Happy is the man who does not forget Thee." It is a text of much meaning.
>
> She said: You are a good man, and it is a good verse you have told me; so I too shall not withhold good words. You asked why I was joyful, and why I was sad, and why I now rejoice.

She corrects the narrator's misunderstanding, despite one's outer demonstration of happiness, who is to say what her actual default emotional state truly is. If indeed he encounters her as joyful, he overlooks the effort which must be exerted by her to find balance against her inherent sorrowful existence. At this point, Tehilla explains at some length her custom to recite a daily portion of the Psalms. She measures out the passage of time and her long life through its daily recitation. That day, having unintentionally recited two days' worth of psalms she began to question if her time in this world was not speeding toward its end, and this was cause for sorrow. (Note her name, Tehilla, means a Psalm; the use of the given name Tehilla in Israel was clearly influenced by this story's wide and enduring popularity.)

> I glanced at her, wondering to myself by what path one might come to a like submission. I thought of the men of ancient times, and their virtuous ways; I spoke to her of past generations. Then I said, You have seen with your own eyes more than I can describe in words.
>
> She answered: When a person's life is prolonged for many days and years, it is granted him to see many things; good things, and yet better things.[6]

Tehilla's wisdom has been acquired from a long life well-lived, but one fraught with trauma and grief. She is wise, not learned. She can read from the Siddur and Psalms but requires the use of the narrator-scribe to compose her epistolary life story. Nevertheless, there is theological depth to her words. Surely, we hear echoes of Mishnah *Berakhot* (9:5):

> One is obligated to recite a blessing for the bad that befalls him just as he recites a blessing for the good that befalls him, as it is stated: "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5)… Some say, it may be explained that "with all your might" means with every measure that He metes out to you; whether it is good or troublesome, thank Him.

This quality of emotional harmony and equanimity, embodied by Tehilla, is often present in our lives, aspirationally, if not fully achieved in fact. We may locate an articulation of this ideal (and potential source of influence on Agnon) in the writings of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook.[7] Not only need we keep balance in our sense of how God's providence manifests itself in the world, for joy or sorrow as observed by us, but in all matters interpersonal as well. R. Kook identifies this emotional state with the quality of *hishtavut*, from the root *sh-v-h* (as in *shaveh*, equal)—a type of equanimity.[8] The Ba'al Shem Tov had rooted this trait in Psalms (16:8): "I have set the Lord (*shiviti*) before me always," a verse which serves as a motto for all service of God, identifying a sense of mindfulness of God's presence in all life situations, good and bad.

> In all that befalls a person, whether others praise him or denigrate him…in all manner of things he should say 'This, too, comes from Him may he be exalted,' since it is proper in God's eyes that it should occur. Therefore, one's intentions in all things should be for the sake of Heaven, because in fact there is no difference [between good and bad, joy and sorrow]—indeed this is a very mighty level to achieve.[9]

A properly balanced spiritual-emotional keel, as depicted through Tehilla, is achieved when one is mindful that our *experience* of reality is filtered through subjective human emotions and values—but in fact from God's exalted perspective it appears quite differently. R. Kook amplifies these ideas, describing the state of inner balance he strives for in the face of the brutal attacks and withering criticisms to which he was subjected:

> As for myself, thank God, I do not derive pleasure from the praise of others, neither am I pained or pay heed when disparaged. Praised be His exalted name, ongoing engagement with moral study and the inner works of our holy Torah has brought about this good trait in me.[10]

In Agnon's writing, the worldview of Rabbi Kook may have been best captured in the character of Reb Menahem HaOmed, in that epic novel of the Second *Aliyah*, Agnon's magnum opus, *Temol Shilshom* (in English as *Only Yesterday*). The novel is a portrait of Isaac Kummer, a young immigrant to Palestine, struggling to obtain *hishtavut*, yet torn between different worlds. Against that main character the reader encounters Reb Menahem—a pious farmer, pitchfork in one hand, a Talmud in the other—as one of the few to obtain peace of mind and synthesis in personality, precisely through the actualization of the values of religious Zionism (of its day): a combination of settling the soil while maintaining traditional beliefs and lifestyle.[11]

Menahem is only one of a string of characters in the Agnonian canon pulled between different worlds. Among these figures, however, it is Menahem, who stands out as one of the very few to achieve balance, the often sought and rarely found value of *hishtavut*—the serenity that comes from equanimity. Menahem is contrasted with the novel's tragic anti-hero, Isaac, who remains trapped between secular Jaffa and pious Jerusalem, on a horizontal plane, but also between the imperfect realities of terrestrial Jerusalem (*shel matta*) and celestial Jerusalem (*shel ma'alah*), on the vertical plane. Unable to achieve the aspired-for equanimity, Isaac meets a tragic end, bound to a bed (reminiscent of his biblically bound eponym), ravaged by the rabid bite of the demonic dog Balak.

From the very way Menahem denies having reached the "state of equanimity" we can understand precisely how clearly he has obtained it, while Isaac is said to have achieved *hishtavut* upon settling in Jerusalem, particularly at the novel's central scene as he recites Kaddish for his mother at the Western Wall, the tragic conclusion belies this claim, and shows his

achievement to have been fleeting. Most useful for our discussion here, compare R. Kook's description of *hishtavut*, to Menahem's response to Isaac's questioning about how one can live without regret—especially concerning decisions which distanced him from the pioneering (balanced) ideal:

> Said Isaac, When I look at myself, I'm sorry I didn't stand the test and didn't become a farmer. Said Menahem, No matter what, you would be sorry. Said Isaac, What reason do you have to say that? Said Menahem, Everyone who is sorry about the thing he didn't do will be sorry about every single thing. Isaac asked Menahem, And what could a person do not to be sorry? Said Menahem, You're asking me? I don't know what sorrow is. Said Isaac, That is, you are happy with your lot? Said Menahem, I don't know what happiness is. Said Isaac, That is, you have reached a state of equanimity [*hishtavut*]? Said Menahem, That state I haven't reached, but if a day passes and I'm not ashamed of it, I'm satisfied.[12]

Late in the novel, in a highly symbolic dream following immediately after this final encounter between Isaac and Menahem, Isaac sees himself

> in the street barefoot without shoes, his head bare. He heard the sound of prayer and followed the sound. He came to a two-story house, the bottom story in ruins and you climbed a ladder to the top story where they were praying. And the ladder stood straight. He leaned the ladder and ascended. When he put his head in, the door closed on him from inside and his body was outside.[13]

Literary critic Dan Miron interprets the dream as a symbol for the "tragic vision" of *Only Yesterday* (and, I would add, the tragedy of so many young people of the Second *Aliyah*): the unsuccessful attempt to combine the thesis and antithesis of Judaism—traditional observance and Zionism.[14] Perhaps Agnon had this in mind by juxtaposing Isaac's dream with his final encounter with Menahem: that the tragedy emanates from ignoring the "third harmonizing verse," the potential synthesis, which R. Kook had tried, often unsuccessfully, to communicate to that generation. Isaac is destroyed by the struggle between secular Zionism and a particularly fanatical ultra-Orthodoxy; he is unable to actualize a lifestyle where tradition and modernity, religion and Zionism, and the old world and the new can coexist—the precise value of *hishtavut* as a type of religious life that R. Kook had hoped for.

In the Jewish worldview, as transmitted by the figures discussed here (admittedly, there are other views both within the *beit midrash* and the literary canon), joy is achieved through *hishtavut*—the peace of mind that comes about through a balanced sense of priorities and commitments. Otherwise, like Isaac suspended out of the window, we become entangled, and sacrificed on the altar of conflict. In 1966, near career's end, Agnon stood on the Stockholm stage to accept his Nobel Prize in Literature. Delivering a curious acceptance speech he reminded the assembled that he "belong[s] to the Tribe of Levi; my forebears and I are of the minstrels that were in the Temple." Had it not been for the "historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land," resulting in the fact that he "was born in one of the cities of the Exile," he would have stood with his

> brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.[15]

Aside from its curiosity as a piece of rhetoric (surely no similar speech has ever been delivered before the crowned heads of Europe), Agnon was articulating something about his craft as an artist and the Jewish response to tragedy and "historic catastrophe." Perhaps the opposite of trauma is not joy, but rather creativity. Because of the unhappiness which was the lot of Jewish Exile, he imagines his life's work as compensation—to compose in prose that which was formerly sung in praise.

If, indeed, we reconceive the scope and sources of Jewish joy in this way, and look back on our individual, communal, and national achievements as creative responses to the vicissitudes of history and individual existence, we may discover that, to paraphrase the musical iteration of Jewish literature's most famous milkman, we have something to be joyful for—even when our hearts lie panting on the floor.

Notes

1. Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation: Deuteronomy* (Maggid Books, 2019), 127.
2. Aharon Lichtenstein, "A Consideration of Synthesis from a Torah Point of View," in *Leaves of Faith*, vol. 1 (Ktav, 2003), 63. I have discussed R. Lichtenstein's championing of the value of the humanities in general, and literature in particular, to achieve and advance a variety of goals advantageous to the religious personality in my "The Best That Has Been Thought and Said by Rabbi Lichtenstein About the Role of Literature in Religious Life," *Tradition* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 240–49.
3. Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 25–26, stated specifically in the context of Sholem Aleichem, but relevant in general for our larger conversation.
4. Ariel Hirschfeld, *Likro et Sh.Y. Agnon* (Ahuzat Bayit, 2011), 167.
5. In English as "Tehilla," trans. Walter Lever in S.Y. Agnon, *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town and Other Novellas*, ed. and annotated by Jeffrey Saks (Jerusalem: Toby Press, 2014), 223–63.
6. "Tehilla," *Two Scholars*, 231–32; note: "good things, and yet better things," *not* "good things and bad things."
7. For background on the influence of R. Kook on Agnon and the presence of his teachings in the latter's writing, see my "A Portrait of Two Artists at the Crossroads: Between Rav Kook and S.Y. Agnon," *Tradition* 49, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 32–52.
8. R. Kook did not coin the term nor was he the first to discuss it, but I choose to situate our discussion on his writings because of their proximity and likely influence on Agnon.

   The earliest source may be the eleventh-century *Hovot HaLevavot* (*Sha'ar Yihud Hama'aseh*, ch. 5). For background on earlier sources and the development of the idea, see Moshe Halamish, *Mevo le-Kabbala* (Elinor/WZO, 1992), 50; and Ohad Teharlev, "*Mateh, Nes, ve-Shurah: Iyyunim be-Middat ha-Hishtavut*," *Akdamot* 1 (1997): 1–8, on its presence in the writings of *Sefat Emet*.
9. Ba'al Shem Tov, *Tzava'at HaRivash*, #2.
10. *Iggerot HaRa'ayah*, vol. I, #43 (p. 42), and cf. *Orot HaKodesh*, vol. 3, #18 (p. 246).
11. S.Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
12. *Only Yesterday*, 571; for Isaac's scene at the Western Wall, 368–69.
13. *Only Yesterday*, 573. The symbols of hats and shoes appear throughout the novel, and may likely be pointing to "that which is above and that which is below" (cf. *Hagiga* 2:1). Isaac being barefoot and bareheaded in the

dream telegraphs his disconnect from both terrestrial and celestial Jerusalem.

14. Dan Miron, "*Bein Shtei Neshamot*," in *Mi-Vilna le-Yerushalayim: Mehkarim Mugashim le-Professor Shmuel Werses*, ed. David Assaf (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2002), 549–608; see at 604.
15. "Shmuel Agnon Banquet Speech" (December 10, 1966), available at: www.NobelPrize.org/prizes/literature/1966/agnon/speech. I have written on this in "Always I Regarded Myself As One Who Was Born in Jerusalem," in *Agnon's Tales of the Land of Israel*, ed. Jeffrey Saks and Shalom Carmy (Pickwick, 2021), 125–34.