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## Between Holocaust and Homeland

*Agnon's "The Sign" as Inauguration Story*

ALTHOUGH BY MOST ACCOUNTS S. Y. Agnon is considered the greatest Jewish writer of the twentieth century, his work has little to say about the Holocaust. He wrote prolifically until his death in 1970, yet aside from a few shorter texts, his work does not directly engage what many regard as the transformative experience of the Jewish people in modern times.<sup>1</sup> It was long thought that, because Agnon's artistic world was shaped so much earlier and was influenced by the devastation of the first world war rather than the second, the Holocaust, although deeply felt, left little visible imprint on the body of his work. What Agnon had to say about the destruction of European Jewry, it was argued, was already said in his magisterial novel *A Guest for the Night*, which appeared in installments on the eve of World War II.

It was a case, as it turns out, of looking for something in the wrong place. If one hypostasizes the literary response to the Holocaust from the works of such writers as Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Aharon Appelfeld, then, indeed, the Agnon corpus has little to say about the Holocaust. Agnon was interested in neither representing the horrors of the camps nor meditating on the breakdown of culture and belief nor exploring the problematics of theodicy nor examining the deformed inner lives of survivors. On the basis of the enormous amount of posthumous writing published in the 1970s and 1980s, it became clear that in the years after World War II Agnon was devoted to an enormous

project that quite radically redefined what it means to respond to the Holocaust.

That project took shape in the works *‘Ir Umelo’ah* (The city and fullness thereof) and *Korot Bateinu* (The beams of our house), in which Agnon undertook an epic retelling of the traditions associated with his Galician hometown Buczacz and with his family. Although none of the narratives in these hundreds of pages of texts refers to the Holocaust explicitly, I argue—following the lead of Dan Laor<sup>2</sup>—that Agnon mounted this effort as an alternative to forms of memorialization that brought destruction and loss to the forefront. For Agnon, the path was not lamentation, martyrology, theodicy, or conventional forms of consolation but the re-creation in words of what is lost in fact.

This epic re-creation is very special to Agnon, and it is a hybrid mixture of traditional and modernist elements that are very far from nostalgic ethnography. The term I use to describe it is the *imaginative chronicle*. On the one hand, Agnon is consciously drawing on the classical model of the *pinkas*, the communal register in which the public affairs of European Jewish communities were inscribed together with anomalous events and instances of deviance. (Mikhah Yosef Berdichevsky was a precursor also much attracted to the *pinkas* form.) On the other hand, playing against the grain of traditional authority is the full battery of ironic counterpoints and intertextual subversions that one knows from Agnon's earlier work. Nostalgia rubs shoulders with nightmare, hagiography comports with the grotesque, and the rule of divine providence is sometimes trumped by the absurd. The result is a magisterial achievement, that might be called "the epic story of one town."

Yet it is a achievement whose hybrid aesthetic is as yet understood very little. Cracking the code of *‘Ir Umelo’ah* is not a technical academic exercise but a task of great cultural moment. What Agnon tried to accomplish in the posthumous volumes *‘Ir Umelo’ah* and *Korot Bateinu* remains unique even at a time when the appreciation of the variegated responses to the Holocaust in the Yishuv and the state has vastly widened and deepened. One is in a position now to know something of how information was shaped in the media and what political leaders

were thinking and doing, and one is beginning to understand something of the experience of the survivors in Israeli society. The responses of religious Jews are coming into focus more slowly, however. In the ultra-Orthodox world the impulse to replicate and amplify the culture of learning and its institutions is clear enough. The world of religious Zionism in which Agnon was located, however, is more complicated and more interesting because of the simultaneous identification with the religious culture that was destroyed and with the redemptive possibilities of the new state.

While one awaits a full critical account of Agnon's project of imaginative chronicling, one can profitably turn one's attention to a very special text from this corpus that reflects on the origins of the entire project. The long story "The Sign" can be taken as an inauguration story that puts forth Agnon's account of how he was called to become the chronicler of Buczacz after its destruction. "The Sign" is an autobiographical story in which the Agnon figure describes his response to the news of the destruction of Buczacz by the Germans on the eve of Shavuot in 1943 (the year is not mentioned explicitly) and then recounts a mystical experience occurring that same night in which the eleventh-century poet Solomon ibn Gabirol appeared to him and composed a piyyut (religious poem) to perpetuate the memory of Buczacz. The poem's alphabetical acrostic bearing the town's name is the "sign" of the story's title.

"The Sign" first appeared in its entirety in the 1962 collection *Ha'esh Veba'etsim* (The fire and the wood); it was reprinted as the concluding story of *Tr Umelo'ah*. It was the interpretive intuition of Agnon's daughter and executrix Emuna Yaron, who edited and shaped the posthumous volume, that this story of the destruction of Buczacz provided the proper tragic coda for the epic collection. The reading of "The Sign" I am proposing does not quarrel with Emuna Yaron's placement of the story, which is brilliant and powerful in its own way, but privileges another moment in the text. By placing the story at the end of the cycle, Emuna Yaron stresses its function as a tragic elegy for Buczacz; in my view, the revelation of Ibn Gabirol and the poem he inscribes are key elements that stress the story's role in initiating a process

of memorialization rather than bringing it to closure. If I were disassembling and reassembling *Tr Umelo'ah*, I would, therefore, put "The Sign" in the first position.

Admittedly, my position is an interpretation as well. It is nowhere explicitly indicated in the text that Ibn Gabirol's poem is meant to serve as an example of the kind of memorializing creativity that the Agnon figure is expected, or authorized, to carry forward now in his own idiom. Yet, as I demonstrate, strong internal evidence pointing in this direction rests on an identification of the narrator both with the old hazzan (cantor) in Buczacz and Ibn Gabirol and with the entire institution of piyyut as the authentic figure for Jewish religious art. Support comes also from the publishing history of the text. The publication of the story in 1962 with its forty-two chapters was preceded eighteen years earlier by the publication in *Moznayim* (Iyyar/Sivan [May] 1944, 104) of a one-page text, also called "The Sign," whose matter corresponds to the last chapters (35–37 and 40–42) of the present story.

## I

In a briefer format the 1944 text describes the revelation of the Ibn Gabirol figure to the narrator, an exchange about the neglect of piyyut, the narrator's grief over the destruction of his city, and the enunciation of the poem with the Buczacz acrostic.

Ordinarily, one might view such an earlier fragment as a sketch or a *jeu d'esprit* that the writer intended to return to and develop some day. The content of the fragment, however, makes much larger claims. In describing the revelation of Ibn Gabirol to him, the narrator takes pains to state that this was an event that actually took place. It is not a literary artifice or a sketch for a story or the retelling of a wonder tale or a neo-hasidic folktale. It is, rather, the transcription of a mystical experience that transpired at a particular time and place. What the modern reader is to make of it and which reading procedures and intellectual frameworks are to be drawn upon to process the event are serious questions deferred until later. For now one can say that the 1944 fragment is presented as the description of a profound and true autobiographical expe-

rience, a kind of privileged generative kernel, around which the story “The Sign” grew up and, by virtue of its placement at the end of the story, in which it was consummated. The essence of this experience is not grief and mourning but transcendence and poetic creativity. The 1944 fragment, in sum, gives strong support to a notion of the text not as an elegy but as an inauguration story in which a calling is confirmed.

## 2

If it can be said, then, that Agnon “grew” the story backward from its transcendental conclusion, one can clearly see how Agnon grew it in two parts. He first made the manifestation of Ibn Gabirol one of several different kinds of visionary events that the narrator experiences when he is alone in the synagogue on the night of Shavuot. He then provided the events of that night with a prehistory that unfolds on the eve of the holiday and lays out the set of seemingly irreconcilable oppositions that will be resolved, or at least mitigated, at the narrative’s conclusion. This section comprises chapters 1–24; the events that transpire that night comprise the remaining eighteen.

The first half of “The Sign” is dominated by a stark and seemingly unyielding set of oppositions (Shavuot vs. Destruction and Talpiyyot vs. Buczac), whereas the second half moves a mediating term (piyyut as a figure for sacred art) from the margins to the center of the story that is finally proposed as a transcendental resolution.

Shavuot	vs.	Destruction	}	Piyyut
Talpiyyot	vs.	Buczac		

Whether one is persuaded by this resolution, however stirringly it is presented, is ultimately a matter of the metaphysical world from which a reader responds to the text. Yet when it comes to the binary tensions, there can be no doubt that Agnon has unflinchingly thematized the central problems of religious Zionism after the Holocaust.

This is nowhere more apparent than in the juxtaposition—and a

struction of Buczac. The destruction of Buczac was not accomplished in one stroke—it was briefly taken by the Red Army before being reconquered by the Germans—and the terrible news was surely not received in one stroke.<sup>3</sup> Agnon’s staging of this intersection between the claims of the holiday and the force of the news is a deliberate effort to sharpen the contradictions and to place the autobiographical narrator between the horns of a seemingly implacable dilemma.

On one side there is Shavuot both as a joyful festival and as a celebration of the giving of the Torah. The holiday joy (*simhat yom tov*) is formalized through a series of prescribed behaviors, and the narrator presents himself as a kind of “halakhic man” whose affective life is shaped by religious duty. After midday on the eve of a festival the law prohibits a person who has lost a child or a parent from mourning, that is from performing the various behaviors attendant upon being a mourner. So, too, the narrator of the story, having received the news of his city’s destruction after midday, self-consciously enjoins himself from any expressions of grief. He registers the news and puts it away while he turns his efforts to the preparations for the holiday. One then hears much about the new summer clothes he dons in honor of the holiday, the decoration of the house and the synagogue with branches and greenery, his attendance at festival prayers, the holiday family meal with special dairy dishes, and, later, his return to the synagogue for the *tiqqun leil shavuot*, the all-night study vigil.

Counterposed to the holiday is the crushing enormity of the reported catastrophe.<sup>4</sup> In the words of the narrator in the opening chapter: “Tens of thousands of Israel, none of whom the enemy was worthy even to touch, were killed and strangled and buried alive; among them my brothers and friends and family, who went through all kinds of great sufferings in their lives and in their deaths.”<sup>5</sup> The subject is not the destruction of European Jewry as a whole but the destruction of that one community that had been his whole world until he left for Eretz Yisrael at the age of eighteen and had continued long afterward to serve as the font of his imagination. Surely he would have been only human had calamity of such unprecedented proportions and personal meaning cast some pall on the holiday festivities. Even “halakhic man” might be for-

given in this instance for a perfunctory observance of the commandment to rejoice that meets the letter but not the spirit of the law.

Yet the narrator is militant in his refusal to give sorrow any quarter.

I made no lament for my city and did not call for tears or for mourning over the congregation of God whom the enemy had wiped out. The days when we heard the news of the city and its dead was the afternoon before Shavuot, so I put aside my mourning for the dead because of the joy of the season when our Torah was given. It seemed to me that the two things came together, to show me that in God's love for His people, He still gives us some of that same power which He gave us as we stood before Sinai and received the Torah and commandments: it was that power which stood up within me so that I could pass off my sorrow over the dead of my city for the happiness of the holiday of Shavuot, when the Torah was given to us, and not to our blasphemers and desecrators who kill us because of it. (Chap. 2)

The rhetoric of intentionality is striking. Where one might have expected the straining of fierce emotion against the strictures of the law or, at least, the grappling with a powerful ambivalence, there is single-minded assertiveness and a proud, if not prideful, sense of his capacity to put aside (he'evarti) sorrow for the mandated happiness of the day. Although he acted without hesitation, his achievement required strength and resolve (koah), and it is through this quality of power that he interprets the deeper meaning of the arrival of the terrible news on the eve of Shavuot. God gave the Israelites the strength to stand before Him and receive the Torah at Sinai, and it is that same store of strength, the power to sustain revelation, from which the narrator draws his capacity to put aside his sorrow. Thus, a metaphysical loop is created that links the Revelation with the Holocaust: because of the Torah that God gave at Sinai, Israel are killed by the enemy, and also because of the event at Sinai, the narrator is vouchsafed the strength to defer his mourning over that killing.

Strength in its various guises is a key motif. In addition to designating the narrator's control over his mourning, it recurs over and over again in the description of the settling of Talpiyyot, Agnon's new neighborhood south of the Old City, and in the response to the Arab disturbances in the late twenties and thirties. It is stressed again in the narrator's ability to sustain his parlous encounter with the shade of Solomon ibn Gabirol. In the early sections of the story, however, how one is to take his assertions, especially as they become more and more assertive, is not at all certain. When the narrator returns home from the synagogue to begin the festive meal with the blessing on the wine, he remarks, "This says a lot for a man; his city is wiped out of the world, and he doesn't even dilute his drink with tears" (chap. 8).<sup>6</sup> This kind of self-flattery begs the question and opens the possibility of an ironic reading of the narrator's renunciations. Does he put aside his grief in favor of the joyous rituals of the holiday because this indeed "says a lot" for a man's spiritual strength, or does he do so because he is overwhelmed by the enormity of the tragedy and seeks to escape into the familiar rituals at hand? Religious fortitude or psychological denial?

This is not necessarily an either/or determination. One might, for instance, invoke a model of conscious and unconscious behavior. At the same time as the narrator affirms his allegiance to the authority of commandment over calamity, he is in the throes of inner turmoil and disbelief. This simultaneity of outward faith and inner shock would explain why the narrator interpolates mentions of the loss of his city and the depravity of the enemy at almost every turn as he goes about the rituals celebrating the giving of the Torah.<sup>7</sup> Another approach would focus on the readers' response to the text. Seasoned Agnon readers trained on the tales in *Sefer Hama'asim* (The book of deeds) and on the novel *A Guest for the Night* coming across this late text would likely be alert to the evasions of the autobiographical persona and its advertisements for itself. Although on a first reading of the story such readers might be moved by the narrator's high resolve, during a second reading they would surely be attentive to the dynamics of denial and inner cleavage.

The second thematic opposition in “The Sign” juxtaposes Talpiyyot with Buczacz. If the opposition between Shavuot and the destruction, with its encounter between the eternality of revelation and the finality of the Holocaust, centered on time, this second contrast centers on space, symbolic and real. The great figure in Agnon’s autobiographical myth is the movement *mibayit levayit*—from the home of his parents in Buczacz in the heart of the millennium-long settlement of Jews in Eastern Europe to the house he built and rebuilt in Talpiyyot, a neighborhood in the new Zionist settlement outside the Old City of Jerusalem at the center of the Land of Israel. In between was the long sojourn in Germany, wandering from one temporary domicile to another. And so the body of Agnon’s work, its monuments great and small, array themselves around these poles. Within that corpus “The Sign” is singular in its insistence in making these two spaces encounter one another in an hour of extremity when they can no longer be cultivated by the imagination separately.

In the progression of the narrative, Buczacz and Talpiyyot are related to one another in a kind of envelope structure. (It should be noted that the name Talpiyyot is never used in the story; the place is always referred to as *hashekhumah* [the neighborhood]. The name Buczacz is mentioned, but only twice, being referred to as *‘iri* [my city] throughout. The story effaces proper names—this applies to the narrator as well—in favor of archetypal signifiers with the exception of Solomon ibn Gabirol, whose name bears special status.) The story begins with the description of the present Shavuot in Talpiyyot (chaps. 1–10); it then incorporates an account of Shavuot in Buczacz (chaps. 11–16), and then returns to tell the history of the neighborhood from the turn of the twentieth century to the present. In the enclosure of the envelope, the narrator’s childhood discovery of Ibn Gabirol’s poetry is recounted, and this becomes the bridge to the mediating and even redemptive role of sacred poetry that further connects and transcends the narrator’s two homes, one destroyed and the other being built.

celebration of this particular Shavuot is presented, in fact, as a kind of final arrival. “In all the days I had lived in the Land of Israel, our home had never been decorated so nicely as it was that day. All the flaws in the house had vanished, and not a crack was to be seen, either in the ceiling or in the walls. From the places where the cracks in the house used to gape with open mouths and laugh at the builders, there came instead the pleasant smell of branches and shrubs” (chap. 3). Later in the story the narrator relates that his apartment was ransacked in the Arab riots of 1929 and that he returned to the neighborhood to build a house there. The present moment of the story marks the completion of that process of “settling” that had been begun long before. All human dwellings are imperfect, the narrator implies, and their imperfections mock the intentions of their builders. But on this Shavuot, whether because the cracks have been repaired or are merely being camouflaged by the branches and shrubs, the narrator sits in his house with his family around the holiday table in an act of proprietary consummation.

The house and its natural surroundings are presented in pastoral, even Edenic terms. Like the rivers that watered the original Eden, the neighborhood is refreshed by special winds that blow from different directions. The house “stands in the midst of a garden where there grow cypresses, and pines, and, at their feet, lilies, dahlias, onychas, snapdragons, dandelions, chrysanthemums, and violets.” The fruits and vegetables that grace the holiday table in abundance are brought from near rather than afar. The neighborhood is its own locale but it is situated overlooking the site of the destroyed Temple. More-than-natural conditions obtain in this garden as a reward for the hard work, self-sacrifice, and vigilance of its planters. “It is the way of pines and cypresses not to let even grass grow between them, but the trees in our garden looked with favor upon our flowers and lived side by side with them, for they remembered how hard we had worked when they were first beginning to grow” (chap. 9). The overflowing responsiveness of nature to human efforts reverses the curse on Adam after the sin in the Garden, according to which, toil will have no reliable issue. It reverses, too, the terms of the usual disheartening comparisons in Hebrew literature be-

arid intractability of the Land of Israel (*mashber hanof*). Stressed above all is the ownership of the land as represented by this house and this garden. In Buczacz the greens that bedecked the synagogue had to be obtained from gentile gardens. In Talpiyyot, in contrast, the situation is described with the utmost proprietary concision—*ani migani sheli laqahiti* (from my very own garden I have taken).

When the narrator returns to relate the history of the neighborhood (chaps. 19–24) after describing Shavuot in Buczacz, the tone is very different. The language of mythic overdeterminacy is exchanged for the more practical voice of the chronicler. These lengthy chapters form a distinct expository block that is interpolated within the present narrative. The section tells of the Turkish Jewish veterinarian who first took an interest in the area, the devastation of World War I, the manipulations of land speculators and absentee owners, the outbreaks of Arab violence, and, finally, the cooperative resolve of four chief families who succeeded in domesticating the wildness of the place and creating the garden suburb that is now the narrator's proud bower. At the center of this narrative, despite the usual acknowledgments of God's grace and God's help, is a very this-worldly story that returns the reader to the theme of power. It is not Zionist functionaries who settled the neighborhood but determined individuals who were motivated by attachment to the place rather than by ideological schemes. They dug in and stood up for themselves against their adversaries, and the narrator counts himself squarely among them.

## 4

Enfolded between the pastoral account of Talpiyyot and the political one is the Buczacz narrative, which is presented as an oral communication from the narrator to the members of his family (who remain anonymous and featureless) at the holiday table. The narrative is marked by a pronounced shift in focus. It begins with an ethnographic portrait of the community as a whole (chap. 11),<sup>8</sup> then proceeds to narrow the focus to the experience of the children (chap. 12), and, finally (chaps. 13–15), concentrates on the particular case of the narrator's

own artistic stirrings as a child and his discovery of the poetry of Ibn Gabirol. This movement is experienced by the reader not as a considered exposition that passes from the general to the particular but as a shift that is compelled by an inner emotional urgency. Pausing before homing in on himself, the narrator says, *Harbeh harbeh harbeh yesh li lesapper 'al otam hayamin. K'an l'o asapper ela' me'inyano shel yom* (I have so very much to tell about those times—but here I'll tell only things that concern this day) (chap. 13). But the narrator has, in fact, been speaking about matters relating exclusively to Shavuot. So whence the need to redirect himself? It would seem that, despite his intention to paint a broadly informative picture of holiday observances in Buczacz, he feels that he has not yet succeeded in recounting the real *inyan* (the real "thing") (in the singular in the Hebrew) of the day. The epic story of Buczacz and its religious life is another project, a massive commitment to which this story bears a special relationship, but not the exigent matter at hand. So when the narrator resumes his story and approaches the account of his artistic beginnings, he has managed to refocus himself and proceed in the direction in which he must go.

What the narrator tells his wife and children about this matter is less important than what he keeps from them. He tells them that in honor of the holiday he would gather leaves and branches from the forest and fashion them with cord into the shape of a Star of David and that the old men of the *kloyz* (prayer house), who were known for their reticence, would enthusiastically praise his work with the words "Fine. Fine. The work of an artist, the work of an artist." What he "purposely" (*mehokhma*) does not tell his family concerns his first—and ostensibly naive, sentimental, and jejune—attempts to write poetry in the aftermath of the holiday: "When I saw the faded leaves falling from the Star of David I would be overcome by sadness, and I would compose sad poems."<sup>9</sup> The coy embarrassment over his juvenile efforts at poetry writing only calls attention to their role in laying down the connection between the narrator, as both child and man, and the consummate religious artist Solomon ibn Gabirol. It is significant that this connection, which becomes a defining empathic identification, is presented (in chaps. 14 and 15) only after the narrator has finished regaling his family

with tales of Buczacz. He has arrived at the “thing” itself, and it is too fraught to be part of a round of nostalgic reminiscences.

The figure of Ibn Gabirol enters the story because it is the narrator’s longstanding custom on the night of Shavuot to read that poet’s *azharot* (a long sacred poem that versifies the 613 commandments of the Torah). (This practice is idiosyncratic, if not exactly deviant, because a canonical anthology of readings exists for the Shavuot vigil that he is declining to use in favor of Ibn Gabirol’s poetry.) The recollections of the narrator’s childhood discovery of Ibn Gabirol are organized around several common themes that become central in the story’s final moment: power, empathic imagination, and poetry as advocacy. The narrator encountered the poetry for the first time when as a child he came across the following line of Ibn Gabirol’s at the beginning of the morning service in a new prayer book given him by his father: *Shahar avakeshkhā tsuri umisgavi / lifnei gedulathkha e’emod va’ebabel* (At dawn I seek Thee, my rock and tower / Before Thy greatness I stand and am confounded).<sup>10</sup> The boy presciently grasps that the poet seeks God because he cannot easily find Him and that, once he does, the experience of God’s presence is far from beatific. But it is not the theological paradox the boy ponders but the romantic agony of the figure of the poet. “As I lie down at night I see this saint rising from his bed on a stormy windblown night. The cold engulfs him and enters into his bones, and a cold wind slaps at his face, ripping his cloak and struggling with its fringes. The zaddik [Hasidic spiritual leader] strengthens himself to call for God. When he finds him, terror falls upon him out of fear of God and the majesty of his presence” (chap. 14). The poet’s fortitude in the face of adversity prefigures the courage the narrator will later be called upon to display, just as it resonates both with the stoic strength he has already revealed and with the iron resolve shown by the settlers of Talpiyyot.

The boy’s capacity for empathic imagination is evinced on a later occasion when he hears the old hazzan intone a *geulah* (a *piyyut* based on the blessing for redemption after the *Shema* in the morning service), which begins: *Shiviyah ‘aniyah bi’evets nokhriyah* (Poor captive in a for-

not a figure for the people Israel but a “poor captive girl who must have been in great trouble,” and he does not understand why neither God nor the people of his city takes action to deliver her and the poor old hazzan as well, “who stood, his head bowed, begging and praying for her.” Sometime afterward, when the boy is thumbing through the big *siddur* (prayer book) in his grandfather’s house, he comes across the same *geulah*, and joyfully he grasps visually what he could not have grasped aurally. The alphabetical acrostic composed by the first letter of each line marks this, too, as a poem by Ibn Gabirol.

Despite its juvenile expression, the image of Ibn Gabirol the boy constructs in his mind is of the utmost consequence for one’s interpretive options at the conclusion of the story. Feeling sorry for the poet, he remarks, “As though he didn’t have enough troubles himself, searching for God and standing in confusion before Him, he also had to feel the sorrow of this captive girl who was taken as a slave to a foreign country” (chap. 15). The poet’s greatness, then, consists in his capacity both to sustain the vicissitudes of his own search for God and also to feel the suffering of others and to advocate for their needs. Such is the model of the poet-advocate, which incorporates, with variations and transformations, the linked figures of Ibn Gabirol, the old hazzan, and the narrator himself.

In wondering why the plight of the poor captive girl is not alleviated by God or the people of his town, the boy reins in the disturbing logic of his thoughts by simply saying *getsat qasbeh* (it is a little difficult [to understand]). The term, which is used in three other contexts later in the story (chaps. 26, 33, and 37), grows with each repetition from a barely noticeable tic to a theologically laden gesture. The term *getsat qasbeh* is drawn from the dialectical lexicon of the Tosafists who use it to introduce a contradiction in the text of the Talmud that needs to be resolved. Agnon is appropriating the term from its legal context and is deploying it theologically as an expression of intentional radical understatement. Take, for example, this passage from the conclusion of chapter 26, “The Eternal had a great thought in mind when He chose us from all peoples and gave us his Torah of life; it is, nevertheless, a bit

kinds of people who take away our lives because we keep His Torah.” A more pointed formulation of the problem of collective theodicy cannot be imagined. Both facts are true: God chose Israel, and God created those whom the narrator earlier calls “our blasphemers and our desecrators, a filthy people, blasphemers of God, whose wickedness had not been matched since man was placed upon the earth” (chap. 1). Yet after forthrightly acknowledging the problem of evil, the narrator, as it were, walks away from it by allowing the mystery to dispose itself under the sign of the term *gestat qashveh*.

Is Agnon through his narrator playing the naïf? To the contrary, I argue. His use of euphemism and understatement signal a considered decision to decline engaging the issue of theodicy in favor of alternative responses to the catastrophe. Trying to probe the ways of God’s justice, it is implied, is a fool’s game from which no gain can be gotten. Agnon pushes the discussion away from the theological crisis created by the catastrophe and toward the relationship with the lost object—his city and all it represents. How to use the imagination to remember the lost object is exactly the lesson the narrator has modeled for him by Ibn Gabirol at the story’s conclusion.

## 5

Is the narrator himself vouchsafed a revelation as he sits alone in the synagogue on the night of Shavuot, the night during which Israel prepared itself for the awesome revelation the next day and the night ordained by kabbalists for a solemn vigil and the opening up of the heavens? The answer is yes, but it is not a divine revelation and it comes only after other forms of vision have been attempted and exhausted. This last major section of the story (chaps. 25–42) has a distinct three-plus-one structure. The narrator experiences in sequence three different forms of imaginative experience before the singular revelation of Ibn Gabirol takes place at the end: reverie, memory, and nightmare. They represent different options, some voluntary and some involuntary, for mounting a response to the destruction of Buczacz. Each in a

sense is tested and found inadequate. The answer eventually comes from elsewhere.

In the first of these sequences, the narrator closes his eyes and systematically conjures up in his mind the entire male population of Buczacz according to their fixed places in the city’s synagogues. He acknowledges avoidance and fantasy as motives for doing so. It is becoming increasingly difficult for him to maintain the partition between the holiday and his shock over the obliteration of Buczacz, and he shuts his eyes “so that I would not see the deaths of . . . my town and its slain, how they are tortured in the hands of their tormentors, the cruel and harsh deaths they suffer” (chap. 27).” The other motive is more fantasy-laden: “When I close my eyes I become, as it were, master of the world, and I see only that which I desire to see.” In response to a threatened loss of control, the narrator has recourse to a technique of infantile regression. He shuts out the world and creates a space over which he has mastery.

What he does with this self-assumed mastery is to fashion a simulacrum of the lost city according to an ideal of sacred order. In this version of Buczacz—and there are many others in Agnon’s work—the city is imagined as a *qehilah qedoshah* (a holy community) that exists by virtue of its synagogues in which each household has its appointed place. After summoning up each of his townsmen and, literally, putting him in his place, the narrator experiences something of the joy that he associates with the future resurrection. “I felt a taste of that day as I stood among my brothers and townspeople who have gone to another world, and they stood about me, along with the synagogues and the Houses of Study in my town.” Best of all, the people of his town look at him “without a trace of condemnation in their glances” (chap. 28). Despite their suffering expressions, there is even one smiling old man whose expression seemed to say, in accordance with an anecdote in the writings of Nahman of Bratslav, “*Ariber geshprungen*,” that is, “‘we have jumped over’ and left the world of sorrows.”

What the Agnonian narrator first experiences sitting alone this night in the synagogue is recognizable as a reverie. It is not a dream; he



is awake as his mind expands in a bubble of imaginative fantasy. The motive for the fantasy is the pain of separation and the inability to admit the enormity and finality of the loss. The people of his town are not murdered but resurrected, and he, their belated offspring who left long ago for Eretz Yisrael, stands firmly among them welcomed without reproach for his survival. That this is also a reality of his own making, a resurrection brought about by the force of his imagination, testifies to the source of infantile narcissistic omnipotence that energizes this scene. But the energy of denial soon fades, and “bit by bit the people of my town began to disappear and go away,” like lights going out as a battery drains. Shaken out of the reveries, the narrator does not try to “run after them,” for he now acknowledges that “a man’s thoughts cannot reach the place where they were going” (chap. 29).

The second moment is memory. The narrator stays with the image of Buczacz as a liturgical community, but now in a willed act of remembering he focuses on the exemplar of that dimension of the town’s religious life: the old hazzan as he intoned the geulah “Shevayah ’aniyah.” This is a re-remembering of the childhood encounter with the poetry of Ibn Gabirol related in chapter 15, and it will recur with a different emphasis in chapter 39. In the earlier recollection the emphasis was on Ibn Gabirol, the author of the poem, and on the boy’s empathy with both him and the poor captive described in the poem. Here the focus is the old hazzan as a mediating figure who performs the ancient sacred songs as a means of pleading Israel’s case for redemption before God. He does not compose the texts he intones; he is not a creator. It is his gift for expressivity that distinguishes him and also sets up a contrast between his tear-stained *tallit* (prayer shawl) and the narrator’s dry eyes. Like the poor captive of the poem, the hazzan was once imprisoned by the Czarist authorities, but, unlike the poor captive, he was redeemed. The governor could not abide the implacable sad singing that came from the hazzan’s cell and set him free.

The second part of the memory concerns the morning (the first sabbath after Passover), when as a young boy the narrator first heard Ibn Gabirol’s geulah chanted by the hazzan. He wakes up, dresses, and,

father, who never took their eyes off me, didn’t see me go out” (chap. 31). Outside he is also entirely alone. After the birds have finished singing, he is drawn by the sound of the well. “‘I’ll go hear the water talking.’ For I had not yet seen the waters as they talked.” He goes to the well where the water is running, “but there was no one there to drink,” fills his palms with waters, recites the blessing, drinks, and goes off to the Great Synagogue (as opposed to the *kloyz* or the old *beit midrash* [study house] that were his regular places of prayer) and hears the old hazzan reciting the “O Poor Captive” hymn for the first time.

The innocence of this moment would seem to jar with the meditations on death and destruction that surround it. Yet Agnon is asking the reader to see this childhood experience in its relationship to the immediate crisis of the adult narrator. The aloneness of the boy as he stands apart from his parents and the community on that sabbath morning parallels the aloneness of the narrator as he sits by himself in the synagogue on this night of revelation and destruction. The animate, talking well is a figure for the abundance of the world and its natural poetry as they are present to the receptive sensitive mind. Like Moses turning to investigate the burning bush, the boy seeks this special source and drinks deeply from it. And it is but a few steps from the talking well to the hazzan’s imploring melody. The boy engages the plenitude of the world at the same time as he feels empathic stirrings for the poor captive, whose unredeemed suffering, both metaphysical and historical, he does not yet know through his own experience. Now, at a time after innocence and in the midst of catastrophe, the adult narrator is faced, utterly alone, with unredeemed suffering that is not a poetic trope but a horrid reality. Can the words of Ibn Gabirol and the tears of the old hazzan avail him now?

Yet before Ibn Gabirol’s ghostly intervention, a third experience overtakes the narrator—nightmare. Studying alone late at night, he dozes off and dreams. What is cast up by the unconscious is very different from the gratifying reassurances offered by the reverie. For readers of Agnon who know *Ore’ah Natah Lalun*, *‘Ad Henah* or any of the stories in *Sefer Hama’asim*, this is familiar ground. In the dream logic the

longs to see” (chap. 32), yet it is a Buczacz that is vastly different from the one he has recently repopulated in his mind’s eye with each man re-installed in his rightful place. Now the old study house is abandoned except for two old timers who respond to the astonished narrator’s questions by explaining that “[a]fter the first destruction a few Jews were left; after the last destruction not a man from Israel was left.” After he realizes that he has been speaking to the dead, he goes off and next encounters a group of the sick and afflicted who are crying out to a rebbe (a Hasidic rabbi) about the persecutions of Israel and the failure of redemption. The rebbe, who the narrator knows left for the Land of Israel six or seven generations ago, responds by offering a distinctly Zionist/post-Holocaust exegesis of the verse from Psalms (29:11), “May God give strength to His people; may God bless His people with peace.” “[B]efore God will bless His people with peace,” explains the rebbe, “He must give strength to His people, so that the Gentiles will be afraid of them, and not make any more war upon them, because of that fear” (chap. 33).

The nightmare measures the depths of the narrator’s denial of the catastrophe. That Jewish life in Buczacz was decimated after World War I (the “first destruction”) was difficult enough to accept; to admit that it was utterly obliterated after the “last destruction” is impossible. Worst of all is the narrator’s being excluded from the world of Buczacz both by his denial and by the grim reality of the destruction. He stands on the outside while the shades of the dead of his town laugh at him.

## 6

The revelatory experience recounted in the last chapters (35–42) of “The Sign” is unique in modern Hebrew literature. The manifestation of Solomon ibn Gabirol to the Agnonian narrator belongs squarely in the tradition of mystical testimonies, and it goes far beyond anything the lexicon of modern fiction has to offer by way of epiphanies or heightened moments of realization. The narrator takes pains to assert over and over again that this is not a literary conceit but that it is really happening. “It could not have been a dream,” the narrator avers,

“because he specifically [*beferush*] asked me what I was doing here alone at night” (chap. 37). What the modern reader does with this assertion is another matter, but there is no escaping the claim the text is making for an ontological status that is something different from “story” or “literature.”

What the reader is told of this experience is easy enough to summarize. Ibn Gabirol appears to the narrator from between the staves of the Torah scrolls of the Holy Ark and communicates with him through a kind of special telepathy in which the poet’s words are imprinted in his mind. The poet asks him, “What are you doing here alone at night?” and the narrator explains that it is the eve of Shavuot and that he is reciting the *Azharot* of Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol. A lull of uncertain duration ensues, and the narrator recalls the sorrow he had felt as a child for this poet who had bravely sought God only to stand confounded in His presence. He begins to sing the *geulah* about the poor captive in the melody he learned from the old hazzan, and he remembers the Sabbath morning when he was first struck by its beauty. But his voice chokes and he breaks down in tears. The poet asks, “Why are you crying?” and the narrator answers, “I cry for my city and all the Jews in it who have been killed.” The poet draws close to him and takes the sorrow of the city upon himself. He says that he will make a sign (*siman*) so that he will not forget the name of the city, so he proceeds to compose a poem in rhymed verse whose strophes begin with the letters of the city’s name. If it were not for the power of this poem, the narrator avers, his own soul would have been extinguished like those of his townsmen.<sup>12</sup>

The narrator’s breakdown is the key moment because it sets in motion the exchange of empathy that results in the composition of the poem. The entire story is founded on an increasingly extreme and insupportable tension between the horror of Buczacz’s extinction and the refusal to violate the protocols of the holiday. Finally, the tension snaps and the narrator weeps. The catalyst for this breakthrough is complex and overdetermined, but what it is *not* is also significant. It is not the unburied corpses and the murdered loved ones or any of the imagery of atrocity. It is, rather, a nexus between the narrator’s own childhood and the powerful beauty of *piyyut*. The memory returns to

him of the sorrow he felt for Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol who had to seek God so courageously and who, in turn, had to bear the sorrow of “that poor captive girl.” He summons his strength to say to the poet who now appears before him: “ ‘In our town, wherever they prayed in the Ashkenazic rite, they used to say a lot of piyyutim. The beauty of each piyyut has stayed in my heart, and especially this “Poor Captive,” which was the first geulah I heard in my youth.’ I remembered that Sabbath morning when I had stood in the Great Synagogue in our city, which was now laid waste. My throat became stopped up and my voice choked, and I broke out in tears” (chap. 39). The world in which piyyutim are said has been laid waste, and their beauty remains only in his heart and not in the home he has built for himself in the new Zionist polity. Piyyutim, as a figure for the artistic vocation of Jewish religious life, were created by the great religious bards of the Middle Ages and kept alive in the integral liturgies of communities such as Buczacz so that a boy like Agnon could have the kind of transformative experience he had on that Sabbath morning long ago. It is the shattering of this axis that overcomes the narrator’s denial and opens the floodgate of tears.

It also overcomes some of the spiritual boasting inherent in the prideful claims that he could go about the business of observing the holiday despite the awful news. The narrator bows his head, lowers his eyes, and says to the poet, “In my sorrow and in my humility, I am not worthy, I am not the man in whom the greatness of our city can be seen” (chap. 39). This time the gesture is sincere and free from posturing. Fully admitting the enormity of the loss for the first time, he feels puny and cut off from what has been the source of his imaginative and spiritual power. It is only once the poem has been composed and recited that the true proportions of the crisis are exposed.

The hairs on my flesh stood on end and my heart melted as I left my own being and I was as though I was not. Were it not for remembering the poem, I would have been like all my townsfolk, who were lost, who had died at the hand of a despicable people, who trampled my

people until they were no longer a nation. But it was because of the power of the poem that my soul went out of me. And if my town has been wiped out of the world, it remains alive in the poem that the poet wrote as a sign for my city. And if I don’t remember the words of the poem, for my soul left me because of its greatness, the poem sings itself in the heavens above, among the poems of the holy poets, the beloved of God. (Chap. 41)

The narrator’s reflection on the significance of what transpires is presented as a recessive series of conditional clauses (“If not this, then this”). It is only the poem and its power, to begin with, that stand between the narrator’s capacity to endure and his becoming “lost” like the people of his town. The crisis, which has been slowly gathering beneath the cover of his denials and now threatens to destroy him, has been averted by the production of the poem. Unlike the narrator, it is too late for the city. Nevertheless, the city acquires a kind of virtual existence, for although effaced (*nikkhhedah*) from the earth, it exists in the poem with the special sign.

The problem is retrieval. The story and the ordeals it describes are not magically resolved by this Jewish version of *deus ex machina* with its revelation from between the Torah scrolls. True, the magisterial eleventh-century poet has descended from the heavens and composed a poem that saves the life of the narrator by offering his city a kind of reprieve from being forgotten. But where is the poem now? “Because of the greatness of the poem” (*mehamat gevurat hashir*), the narrator was too agitated to remember the words.

The poem is lodged in the heavens “among the poems of the holy poets” where it sings itself before God. The concluding chapter of “The Sign” stresses the inaccessibility of the poem and the burden that rests upon those who are left down below.

Now to whom shall I turn who can tell me the words of the song? To the old hazzan who knew all the hymns of the holy poets?—I am all that is left of their tears [*hareni kaparat dim’atam*]. The old hazzan

rests in the shadow of the holy poets, who recite their hymns in the Great Synagogue of our city. And if he answers me, his voice will be as pleasant as it was when our city was yet alive, and all of its people were also still in life. But here—here there is only a song of mourning, lamentation and wailing for the city and its dead. (Chap. 42)

Like the exile of the *Shekhinah*, piyyut has been removed to the heavens to the *beikhal hashiv*, which is the abode of the holy poets and their sublime poems. What is left on earth is a very different kind of poetry that, in the exigency of the present moment, is charged with the task of lamentation and mourning.

The holy poets and the old hazzan may be gone, but the narrator remains, and his relationship to these precursors is not accidental. In stating *hareni kapart dim'atam*, he is not belittling his own belatedness but acknowledging the responsibility that comes with his filiation. Being a kaparah means being a sacrificial replacement for someone. Being a kaparah for the *tears* of others is Agnon's own special construction. In this story the tears of the poets do not refer to wailing and lamentation as much as to the empathic advocacy of sacred art as evinced by the old hazzan's tear-stained tallit and Ibn Gabirol's signature poem. This is the mantle that Agnon through his narrator now assumes as he turns late in his career to compose not in poetry but in prose the imaginative chronicle of his city.

PART THREE

REWRITING THE ZIONIST NARRATIVE

12. Emuna Yaron, ed., *Shai Agnon—Sh. Z. Schocken: Hiltufei igarot 1916–1959* (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing, 1991).

13. Emuna Yaron and Hayyim Yaron, eds., *Sippure habest*, (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing, 1987).

14. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *Sefer Haggadah* (The book of legends), trans. William G. Braude (New York: Schocken Books, 1992).

15. As cited in David Canaan, *Shai Agnon be'al peh* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1971).

#### 4. The Critique of the German-Jewish Ethos in Agnon's *Shira*

1. S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, trans. Zeva Shapiro, with an afterword by Robert Alter (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

#### 5. Between Holocaust and Homeland: Agnon's "The Sign" as Inauguration Story

1. These include *Kisui Hadam* (Covering the blood), which appears in the posthumous volume *Lifnim Min a Hahomah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishing, 1975), 51–104; "Laila Min Halelot" (The night) and, perhaps, "Im Kenisat Hayom" (At the outset of the day) in *Ad Henah*, 171–78 and 207–17.

2. Dan Laor, *Shai Agnon: Hebetim hadashim* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1955), 60–97. See also Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 78–94.

3. See Laor, *Shai Agnon*, 71–73; note also that in the 1944 fragment the narrator has only indistinct knowledge of the destruction of his city.

4. It should be recalled that there is a long tradition of association between Shavuot and catastrophe. Many pogroms in medieval Ashkenaz, from the Rhineland Valley to the Ukraine to Bessarabia, took place during the month of Sivan when the roads had become passable and Easter observances had inflamed anti-Jewish sentiments.

5. Quotations are taken from the graceful and sensitive translation by Arthur Green, which first appeared in *Response* 19 (1973): 5–31; it was reprinted subsequently in David G. Roskies, ed., *The Literature of Destruction* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1989), 585–604, and in Mintz and Hoffman, *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories by S. Y. Agnon*, 378–409.

6. See also the end of chapter 14 when in the midst of telling his wife and children about the observance of Shavuot in Buczac, the narrator observes: "I was able to tell the things calmly and not in sorrow, and one would not have known from my voice what had happened to my town, that all the Jews had been killed. The Holy One, blessed be

He, has been gracious to Israel: even when we remember the greatness and glory of bygone days, our soul does not leave us out of sorrow and longing. Thus a man like me can talk about the past, and his soul doesn't pass out of him as he speaks."

7. Compare Hillel Weiss, "Between Mourning and Commemoration: An Examination of the Stories *Hasiman* and *Left hatsa'ar hasekhar* of S. Y. Agnon" (in Hebrew), in *Diyugan shel halohem: 'Al gevurah vegibborim basifrut ha'ivrit shel ha'esor ha'aharon* (Bar Ilan, 1975), 237: "In my opinion, this story contains no irony or theodicy and certainly no sarcasm."

8. The description of Shavuot in Buczac stresses the change in communal rhythms following Rosh Hodesh Sivan with the coming of warm weather and emergence from the semimourning of the *sefirah* period. Buczac exists under the sign of an innocent epic complementarity between the cosmos and Jewish communal life: "The world is also glad and rejoices with us. The lids of the skies are bright as the sun, and glory and beauty cover the earth."

9. Mintz and Hoffman, eds., *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories by S. Y. Agnon*, 387.

10. Agnon is making an intertextual reference to his earlier story, titled "Hamitpaḥat" (The kerchief), in *Eilu ve'eilu*, 256–67. The prayer book is a gift given by the father upon his return from an extended trip to the great trade fair in Lashkovtz. This episode in *Hasiman* resonates with the theme of the earlier story, which concerns the acknowledgment of the existence of evil and unredemption as a sign of coming of age.

11. The piyyut can be found in Dov Yarden, ed., *Shirei hakodesh lerabi Shelomo ibn Gabirol* (The liturgical poetry of Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol) (Jerusalem, 1973), 2:494–95. For an English translation see Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol, "A Song of Redemption," trans. Nina Davis, in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 8 (1896): 269–70.

12. There are clear resonances here from the tradition of mystical testimony in Judaism. The angelic revelation to Rabbi Yosef Karo on the night of Shavuot stands in the background. A connection to Zoharic mystical experience is conveyed through the term *nitgalfu* (carved, incised) used to describe the way in which every word the poet speaks was "carved into the form of letters, and the letters joined together into words, and the words formed what he had to say" (chap. 35). The risk attendant upon such a transcendental encounter is also stressed. When the narrator takes courage to respond to the poet, he does so *besumi et nafshi bekhapi* at the beginning of chap. 36 and again at the beginning of chap. 38. My thanks to Arthur Green for pointing out these connections.

#### 6. The Unknown Appelfeld

1. *Ashan* (Jerusalem, 1962), *Bagai Haporeh* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1963), *Kefor 'Al Ha'arets* (Givatayim-Ramat Gan, 1965), *Beqomat Haqarqa'* (Tel Aviv, 1968), *Adenei Hanahar* (Tel Aviv, 1971). Translations from these collections are my own. For