

*Mesorat  
Menachem*

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## Our Life and the Length of Our Days

I had the good fortune to be a *talmid* in Rav Menachem Genack's *Yoreh De'ah chaburot* at Yeshivat Rabbenu Yitzchak Elchanan in 1992–93 (5753). That Spring, Yeshiva University and the entire Jewish world suffered the staggering loss of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zt"l*. Having sat at the feet of R. Genack that year, we had the privilege of imbibing the Rav's Torah from one of its most reliable and dedicated secondary sources. With the Rav's passing we were witness to our own Rebbe mourning his great master, and the remainder of our *shiurim* for that season took on the moral force of a (hopefully successful) visceral transmission of the *Mesorah*. Having decamped from New York the following year for *Aliyah*, I had regretfully few opportunities to maintain a connection with R. Genack. This was corrected years later by my appointment as editor of *Tradition* in 2019. As R. Genack is a long-time member of our journal's Editorial Committee, my role has brought me back into contact with him, and afforded me the benefit of my teacher's wise counsel.

To be sure, in preparing ourselves for the rough realities of the rabbinate with R. Genack we *talmidim* often observed among ourselves the irony that so much of our study in his classroom was “merely” theoretical. I can still “say over” the *chakirot* about the “two aspects” of *melicha*, but honestly I have never been within *arba amot* of a piece of non-salted meat, and am fairly certain I'd fail a practical test of actually kashering it! And yet, knowing that our Rebbe was the person on whose shoulders the real-world responsibility of insuring the properly supervised kosher food supply for American Jewry, we felt secure that we were being fed the right balance of theory and practice. The accomplishments of my classmates from that year's *chabura* in the realms of Torah education and Jewish leadership are enough, I hope, to give R.

Genack satisfaction.

Recalling R. Genack in this way, as his illustrious rabbinic career enters its next phase, I am drawn to the story of another righteous man tasked with the provision of kosher comestibles for his community. “The Angel of Death and the Shochet” is a short story by the Nobel laureate Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon.<sup>63</sup> It tells of an old shochet whom the Angel of Death comes to take when the ritual slaughterer has arrived at the end of his days (be not alarmed by the story’s title nor its plot: we are certain R. Genack will enjoy long life and good health). When the shochet meets the Angel of Death, the old man asks to delay the angel’s task in order to slaughter an ox, inspect the meat, and prepare it for the Sabbath, so that the Jews of his town might eat and rejoice with fine kosher fare. After receiving a brief reprieve and finishing his work, the shochet meets the angel again and requests another delay (“as long as the Angel is not worried lest his knife lose its sharpness”) so that he can eat a meal, rest, and prepare himself for death in the customary way rather than dying unprepared: “Far be it from me to deceive you, particularly at the end of my life. Everything that I have requested, I have done only for the sake of observing the commandments of the Torah and for the performance of good deeds.” And here we see the request for a meal and rest, presumably in the service of the body, is nothing more than the elevation of the soul. For the fellow to partake in his meal, proper hand-washing with a blessing is required, and no good Jew sits down to dine without a *sefer* on his table from which he learns a chapter of Mishnah; laying down upon his bed is the necessary prerequisite to the recitation of *Keriyat Shema*. The story goes on, and can stretch in its telling; indeed, that’s exactly what Agnon did in expanding it from its first published version. But to abbreviate, before the Angel can carry out the sentence, the shochet has obtained extensions well into Shabbat. He prays in the synagogue, studies Torah, reads the weekly portion, and then returns home to eat dinner with his wife. The Angel of Death returns once more. The shochet asks that the angel allow him to hang on until after Havdalah so that he can perform *melaveh malkah* with family and guests. Again the angel consents but warns the old man not to try any tricks. After Shabbat, the shochet escorts the “Sabbath Queen” with a proper feast with his sons, daughters, sons-in-law, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and the needy who came to join him, with nothing more than the intention to nourish his little *luz* bone, sustained only at this weekly Saturday evening meal, from which he will merit

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63 Originally published in Hebrew in the *Ha'aretz* newspaper (1953), and expanded for book publication as “*Malakh Ha-Mavet vecha-Shochet*,” in S.Y. Agnon, *HaEish vecha-Eitzim*, 242–271; the earlier version translated to English as “*The Angel of Death and the Shochet*,” in S.Y. Agnon, *The Outcast & Other Tales*, edited and annotated by Jeffrey Saks, 82–95.

bodily resurrection at the end of days. After the celebration, he goes to sleep, his soul ascends to God, and by divine mercy the Almighty grants him even more years of life toward the enterprise of Torah and *mitzvot*.

The story also plays on the triangular relationship between the ox, the shochet, and the Angel of Death, echoing the Passover favorite “*Chad Gadya*”: If *ata ha-shochet ve-shachat le-tora*—the slaughterer slaughters the ox—then the procession of time dictates that the Angel of Death will soon enough catch up with that shochet, as sure as dogs bite cats and sticks strike dogs. But the ditty’s concluding verse, that *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* will put an end to death, assures the righteous shochet that his own demise is part of the natural order and Divine plan, only to culminate with redemption and resurrection, should he merit it. It is noteworthy that, in this tale, the Angel of Death is portrayed not as the terrifying force so common in Jewish folklore, but as a gentle and learned figure—a Divine emissary rather than a malevolent henchman. He quotes sources and speaks to the shochet with reasoned arguments. As our protagonist-shochet knows the Angel’s arrival is inevitable, his presence is not feared by a righteous one occupied with *mitzvot*. While the story platforms our belief that repentance, prayer, and charity avert an unfavorable decree, as evidenced by the shochet’s behavior, note that he is not acting in order to reverse the decree which hangs over him. He’s not trying to pull one over on the Angel of Death (or He who sent him); rather, we witness one whose “life and length of days” is occupied in the sincere service of God.

Agnon’s greatest achievement as a modern Jewish author was in drawing upon the canon of the classical bookshelf, distilling it down, and pouring it into the mold of modern literature. Here, the “soup” he serves is made from the “bones of the ox” in Midrashic traditions about the death of Moses, although perhaps unexpectedly, the shochet merits that which even the greatest prophet did not.<sup>64</sup> With those motifs serving as the skeleton upon which Agnon builds his tale, it is not surprising that it is often read as conveying a devout, religious message: by observing *mitzvot* and living a righteous, honorable life, one’s days can be prolonged, and death may be pushed down the road. After all, the narrative describes how the old shochet’s faithful observance and good deeds lead to his being granted extended life. And yet, there is an irony, since the shochet sometimes speaks of mundane things (e.g., eating and sleeping, to say nothing of butchering an ox) during serious spiritual moments, and

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64 Among the most pertinent *mishrashim*, see *Shemot Rabbah* 34:29, *Tanchuma Va’etchanan* 3, and the midrashic compilation *Midrash Petirat Moshe*; see also Yaakov (Gerald) Blidstein, *Etzev Nevo: Mitat Moshe be-Midrashei Chazal*. The trope is similarly applied to various Talmudic figures delaying or “outsmarting” death: *Shabbat* 60a; *Moed Katan* 21a; *Ketuvot* 77b; *Bava Metzia* 85a; etc.

some critics see this disparity as highlighting a gap between daily life (*chayyei sha'ah*) and the deeper meanings the narrator seeks to convey. But it not need be so. After all, the great theme of the Rav's *Halakhic Man* (and implied in so much of his other writing) is the inherent or potential sanctity of daily human life—even the messy, corporeal, animalistic realities of the slaughterhouse. It is there that the halakhah is actualized, and where halakhic men, such as R. Genack, actualize the spiritual within the physical. With that in mind we wish him the same fate as the *shochet* of Agnon's story:

And since the study and observance of the Torah and the performance of its holy commandments and of good deeds are precious in the sight of the Lord, He permitted the *shochet* to live on, and added many years to his life. And during all these years the Angel of Death found in place of him transgressors deserving death because they violated the Torah and its holy precepts. May our portion be not among them but rather with those faithful ones who worship His holy name and do His will out of love.