Grappling Again with the Handles of the Lock: On the Hundredth Anniversary of ShmuÊ¾el Yosef Agnonâ€™s Ê¿Al *kappot hamanÊ¿ul*

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Grappling Again with the Handles of the Lock

On the Hundredth Anniversary of Shmu'el Yosef Agnon's *'Al kappot haman'ul*

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> [Hirshl] was on one of his circuits of the house when he heard the garden gate swing open. It had been blown by the wind, which was followed by Blume, who had stepped out of the house to close it. "Who's there?" she asked when she saw someone standing in the street.
>
> "It's me," Hirshl said.
>
> Blume recoiled and retreated into the house.
>
> Hirshl felt utterly crushed, utterly mortified. What am I doing, what? he moaned again and again, seizing his head with his hands. Rain began to fall, striking his face; his whole body was drenched with sweat; yet he remained where he was. Not that he expected Blume to come out again to comfort him. Having come this far, however, he refused to abandon his post. . . . Hirshl rested his head on the handles of the lock [*'al kappot haman'ul*] and began to cry.
>
> —Agnon, *A Simple Story*[1]

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This powerful passage in Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon's well-known tale of star-crossed love, *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*), positions the heartbroken Hirshl Hurvitz so near, yet separated by the garden gate from the object of his love, the enchanting Blume Nacht. Resting his tear-filled head "on the handles of the lock" evokes that biblical image of the Lover and the Beloved in Song of Songs:

> I was asleep but my heart was awake: Hark! my lover knocks.—Open for me, my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one. For my head is drenched with dew, my locks with the drops of the night.—I have put off my gown, how can I don it? I have bathed my feet, how can I besmirch them? My lover pulled back his hand from the latch, and my heart raced within me. I rose to open for my lover. My hands dripped myrrh and my fingers liquid myrrh, over the handles of the lock (*ʿal kappot hamanʿul*). I opened for my lover, but my lover had slipped off, was gone. My breath left me when he spoke. I sought him but did not find him. I called him but he did not answer (Song of Songs 5:2–6).[2]

The encounter between the Lover and the Beloved is thwarted at the *kappot hamanʿul*, which in the Bible refers to the locking mechanism, not so much what we today call the "door handle." Her tarrying to answer his knock, to open the door, causes their reunion to be aborted; by the time she opens for him he has "slipped off," and all that remains as she stands alone in the doorway is the echo of his voice, which causes her breath to leave her—*nafshi yatsʾah*, interpreted rabbinically as the loss of her soul itself (see figure 1).[3]

Agnon situated these themes and symbols in his love stories from his very earliest writing, including short pieces penned in Yiddish and later in Hebrew while still an adolescent in Buczacz and with greater force and frequency upon his arrival in Jaffa. Most well known is their appearance in the early classics, "ʿAgunot" (1908, from which Shmuʾel Yosef Czaczkes assumed the new penname-turned-proper-name, "Agnon") and *Vehayah heʿaqov lemishor* (*And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, 1912), but they run throughout his canon from beginning to end. The Agnonic love story almost never concludes with "happily ever after"; it usually has some indeterminate ending, or more frequently, ends with some kind of frustrated

Figure 1: "Hirshl rested his head on the handles of the lack [*ʿal kappot hamanʿul*] and began to cry." Illustration by Yosl Bergner from *A Simple Story*, courtesy of the estate of Yosl Bergner.

love or interrupted union. Something will stand in the way, the door will remain metaphysically closed, the love between the two partners (which may or may not be one-directional or reciprocated) goes unactualized. Here in *A Simple Story*, Tsirl Hurvitz, Hirshl's overbearing Jewish mother, stands between him and Blume, a girl beneath the family's aspired-to station; in *Bidmi yameha* (*In the Prime of Her Life*),

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an unhappy arranged marriage with Mr. Mintz blocks Leah from Akavia Mazal. In the following generation, when Mintz's daughter Tirtza attempts to repair her now-dead mother's missed romantic opportunities, the characters all discover that the clock cannot—or perhaps should not—be turned back. And here, this theme as it plays itself out in love stories intersects with the great preoccupation in Agnon's writings: the idea that the past can never be recaptured, even as it exerts its influence over the present and the future. In the felicitous wordplay of Nitza Ben-Dov, Agnonic love stories depict *ahavot lo me'usharot*, the title of her important book on the subject, the double meaning of which transmits both unhappy as well as unsanctioned love.[4] This is not unrequited love, but misaligned relationship—separated by time, location, condition, or class. In situating the stories within his dense intertextual engagement with Song of Songs, Agnon was mindful that that text more than any other biblical work resides and transmits on two wholly different planes in the Jewish literary imagination.

The Mishnah reports that the rabbis had an ambivalent attitude to Song of Songs, which generated a debate about whether or not to incorporate it into Holy Scripture in the first place (m. Yadayim 3:15). The endorsement of no less a figure than Rabbi Akiva was necessary to overcome negative critique. While some rabbinic texts assert that Akiva's opinion ultimately prevailed because of the ascribed authorship of the song to King Solomon (Seder Olam Rabbah 15), others could reconcile themselves to the song only by opting for an allegorical reading that subverts and supersedes the plain reading (*peshat*), according to which the book simply celebrates romantic and sexual love (most famously articulated in Rashi's commentary to Song of Songs). Although this traditional preference for allegory may not be historically accurate in terms of the actual rationale for the biblical canonization of Song of Songs, it no doubt left an imprint on Agnon's absorption and use of the theme. The Song his narrator presents is one that has been filtered through the interpretive lens of the rabbinic imagination.

Indeed, the multivalent meanings of this text and the vacuum that opens between the two layers of reading both enchanted Agnon as a tyro author and served as a model, which he emulated in all of his writing, never passing on the opportunity to communicate on multiple levels simultaneously. As Amos Oz described it, from Agnon he learned that an author must "cast more than one

shadow" in his writing.[5] In the case at hand, following the lead of Song of Songs, Agnon delivers human love stories with eros, if not blatant sexuality, which can be and have been read and interpreted allegorically as reflections on the condition of the Jewish nation, especially in the generation of the Second Aliyah and the return to the Land of Israel and its reunion with the "Beloved"—God—as played out in modern Zionism. If the midrashic (and kabbalistic) meaning of Song of Songs shows the Israelite attempt to repair the breach of exile by delivering the Shekhinah from the diaspora and attaining the lost cosmic harmony through the reunion in the "marital bed" as represented by the Temple in Jerusalem, it is not a farfetched reading to understand a story like "ʿAgunot"—whose plot plays out in a misaligned love triangle in Jerusalem, with a woman caught between suitors who represent Jerusalem Jewry and the *alter heym* (old, Eastern European home) but unsuccessful in forming a bond with either—as a repurposing of the template fixed in the Song.[6] (This Zionistic eros also serves as an undercurrent in other stories of that period treated in this special issue of *Prooftexts*, such as "Leilot" and "Aḥot" as well as the important story "Givʿat haḥol.")

It is therefore no surprise that, when Agnon published his collection of love stories in Fall 1922, he titled the volume *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*. Even before the appearance of the phrase in chapter 23 of *A Simple Story* (published only in 1935), he had identified it as the unifying theme for the stories he had and would go on to compose in this genre.[7]

While the November 2022 conference on which this issue is based was timed with the centenary of *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul*'s publication, we did not limit ourselves to the specific stories of that original volume but used it as a springboard for discussion of these themes across Agnon's work. As for the volume that had appeared a century earlier, the Berlin-based Jüdischer Verlag produced a slim paperback book that was seventy-two pages in total and contained six stories, each of which had been published earlier in newspapers or journals; all underwent varying degrees of substantive revision or retitling for inclusion in the publication.

Two of the offerings ("Mesubbin" and "Mitato shel Shelomo Yaʿaqov") had been drafted prior to Agnon's departure from Jaffa for Germany in 1912 and were both published in the *Hatsefirah* newspaper in April 1913; another, the gothic

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"Ḥuppat dodim" was a reworking of an earlier story then titled "Haḥuppah hasheḥorah" and first appeared in *Hashiloaḥ* in July 1913. Two other stories had been published even earlier in *Hapoʿel hatsaʿir*: "Aḥot" (November 1910) and "Torah ugedulah" (May 1912). The latest piece, "ʿOvadiah baʿal mum" (first published in the New York–based journal *Hamiqlat* in 1920) is the most significant in the collection and portrays social class and poverty as the source of the title character's lovelorn and naïve suffering. Not for nothing have critics pointed to parallels with Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Gimpel the Fool," as both stories deal with a physically deformed protagonist, endowed with an almost preternaturally innocent capacity to believe in the good of others against all odds, including their sexually faithless would-be partners.

By the time the relevant stories were included in the 1931 first edition of Agnon's collected works, now issued by the author's patron, Zalman Schocken, as the first major undertaking of his newly established publishing house, the contents had been reworked, and the book carried as its title what had formerly been its subtitle: *Sippurei ahavim*, a phrase with an antiquated biblical resonance that bears a mildly erotic sexual tone, as in Proverbs 5:19: "Love's doe (*ayelet ahavim*), a graceful gazelle, her breasts ever slake your thirst, you will always dote in her love."

By this point three of the shorter pieces ("Mesubbin," "Torah ugedulah," and "Mitato shel Shelomo Yaʿaqov") had been removed from the collection and repurposed as short stories within the larger frame of Agnon's then–newly published first novel, *Hakhnasat kallah*—whose sprawling narrative of the search for marriage matches contained many dozens of freestanding episodes of love lost and found and frustrated. Of all of these stories, only "Mesubbin" could be pointed to as an exception to the template of *ahavah lo meʾusheret*. Originally published as a Passover story (under the title "Haseder"), it tells the story of the impoverished and lonely *shamash* Mekhl and the wealthy widow Sarah Leah. It is a sentimental love story of two people finding comfort in each other's company on what would have otherwise been a holiday feast observed in solitude. As they have no one else to celebrate with, the two unite over the Passover Seder and end the evening having found companionship (and ultimately marriage), while reciting the customary chapters of Song of Songs at the Seder's conclusion. The biblical verses serve as both text and intertext:

> The Order of Passover came to its appointed end. The whole town was silent; the moon spread a canopy of light over the house of Sarah Leah. . . . And the fantasy that is root and branch of Man led them to imagine that here was a strip of the Land of Israel, and they were calmly and happily singing the Song of Songs.[8]

In its original forms (in the 1913 and 1922 editions), this story is exceptional for its "happily ever after" ending, with the couple drowsily sitting in comfort at Seder's end. The balance that is brought to the cosmos with the union of two lonely souls, as with the Song's Lover and Beloved, even effaces—if only in their imagination—the division and split between diaspora and return to the Holy Land, which reaches out a metaphorical hand to envelop the exile (the imagined strip). However, by the time "Mesubbin" was repurposed to fit within the frame of Reb Yudel's adventures in *Hakhnasat kallah* (1931), Agnon had neutralized the harmonious and tender ending by adding a coda. Many chapters later, the reader discovers that the happy couple has divorced because Mekhl could not bring himself to leave Galicia, and Sarah Leah heads off to Erets Yisraʾel alone. The happy story is subverted and the author reverts to form; the handles of the lock are once again closed, and it is the tension between the Land of Israel and the exile which stands in the way. If, as Dr. Johnson quipped (as reported by James Boswell), second marriages represent the "triumph of hope over experience," then in the final version of this story we witness that hope dashed on the rocks of bitter Jewish historical experience.

While some short pieces were excised for the first *Collected Works*, other stories were added to expand the volume to 295 pages. The most significant additions were "Givʿat haḥol" and *Bidmi yameha*, the former being an exemplar of the neoromantic love stories of the Jaffa period, and the latter one of the most outstanding and enduring classics of early twentieth-century Hebrew literature, a work that cast a long shadow over many subsequent authors, especially Oz, who credited its influence on his writing in general and on his early breakthrough novel, *Michaʾel sheli* (*My Michael*, 1968).

The second edition of the *Collected Works* (1953) saw the inclusion of what had been a freestanding short novel, *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*), along with some

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other new content and reinstatement of the original title for the collection, *ʿAl kappot ḥamanʿul*, which now totaled 490 pages. The inclusion of two additional modernistic works, "Harofe ugerushato" ("The Doctor's Divorce") and "Panim aḥerot" (literally "Other Faces" but translated as "Metamorphosis"), expanded the contours of the canvas on which Agnon was portraying these "unhappy/unsanctioned" love stories, but did no damage to the underlying multivalent theme he had been portraying throughout his career.

This evolution of the collection, when considered together with other works of parallel and overlapping theme and genre across the canon, cemented the audience's understanding of the character of an Agnonic love story. The central idea was already present in the debut, signature story, "ʿAgunot," from which the author took his pseudonym. It is important to note that our contemporary, colloquial usage of the term *ʿagunah* for a woman "chained" in a marriage (perhaps a folk etymology) to a scoundrel of a man who will not grant her a divorce is not technically precise.[9] In almost every instance in the halakhic literature, an *ʿagunah* is a woman whose husband has disappeared, leaving her unable to remarry absent conclusive evidence of his death. The two circumstances are emotionally opposite. In the contemporary situation, the wife loathes the husband, whose location is often known with certainty; he is rendered all the more loathsome because of his cynical manipulation of the halakhic mechanisms of Jewish divorce to deny the woman her freedom. In the classical case, the woman remains legally and emotionally chained to a husband who has gone missing, whether tragically or intentionally. She longs for his return, listening for footsteps approaching the house, for the knock of her lover at the door, for his call: "Open for me, my sister, my friend, my dove, my perfect one." Agnonian love is forever a story of *ʿaginut*: the two lovers cannot be partnered, yet they remain mystically or mythically bound together, either on the plane of *mashal*, man and woman, or that of the allegorical *nimshal*: God and the nation of Israel; the nation of Israel and the Land; the exile and the return; tradition and modernity; faith and doubt. The pull and tension is painful. An additional lesson Oz says he learned from Agnon is that his writing must "rein in and polish pain." The lesson was understood by the lovelorn, adolescent Hirshl, who "was old enough to know that life was no idyll. . . . The main problem was that everything came about with so much pain."

This special issue of *Prooftexts* was occasioned by the one hundredth anniversary of *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* and an anniversary conference that took place on November 6–7, 2022 at Northwestern University, co-sponsored by the Crown Family Center for Jewish and Israel Studies at Northwestern University, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, and S. Y. Agnon House in Jerusalem. It brings together treatments of this theme of thwarted, ever-suspended, or deferred love with the additional theme of writing and rewriting: an ongoing, never quite completed effort to get a story—its language, plot, implications, and interpretation—ever closer to full realization.

The volume begins with translations of two stories that appeared in the original 1922 Jüdischer Verlag edition of *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* but have never before appeared in English: the slim, Jaffa-based story "Aḥot" ("Sister," 1910) and the longer, European story "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum," the title of which is translated here as "Ovadiah the Hunchback" but literally means "Ovadiah the Blemished," as the term *baʿal mum* evokes the various blemishes that in the Bible disqualify a priest from performing priestly service (Leviticus 21:17)—and, thus, the kinds of impediments or disabilities that might prevent a person from taking action or realizing a goal. These two translations were commissioned specifically for this issue, because several of the scholars who attended our conference and subsequently contributed essays chose to write about them, expanding critical attention to *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* beyond the oft-discussed *Sippur pashut* and *Bidmi yameha*. We are delighted that *Prooftexts* can serve as a forum in which to expand the accessibility and understanding of these important works for an English-reading audience.

The first two essays deal with "Aḥot," albeit but from very different vantage points. Tafat Hacohen-Bick's essay, "'And He Closed His Eyes from the Weight of What He Heard': On the Theology of (Unfulfilled) Incest in the Story 'Sister'" treats the theme of thwarted or unfulfilled love in terms of the theological fear of sin. If late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century culture and philosophy exalt forbidden sinful love as a form of authenticity and freedom, Agnon's "Aḥot" opposes that trend. It ends with fear and sorrow of sin—in this case, incest—rather than its celebration and suggests its relevance as a subject of literature.

Hacohen-Bick engages with the biblical tradition of the sister as a figure of desire: "my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one." (Song of Songs 5:2). Wendy

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Zierler's "Toward a Sisterhood of the Pen: Sister Stories by Agnon and Baron" examines Agnon's "Sister" (1910) in conjunction with an identically titled story by Devorah Baron (also published in 1910) and considers what happens to the traditional figuration of the Hebrew sister-bride when Zionist literary sisters such as Baron join the literary ranks of their brothers, transforming from mere objects of (erotic) depiction or allegorical representatives of passive suffering to imagining, to writing subjects in their own right. Bringing together the theme of thwarted or deferred love with the theme of writing and revision, Zierler examines how both Agnon and Baron build upon, revise, and attempt to improve their earlier representations of the sister in later fiction—namely, Agnon's *Bidmi yameha* (1923), which in later editions of *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* comes to occupy the place at the beginning of the volume formerly occupied by "Aḥot," and Baron's stories "Hayom harishon" and "Bereshit" (1927).

Marina Zilbergerts builds on these two discussions of Agnon's Jaffa-based "Aḥot" by examining another, perplexing and underexplicated Jaffa-based story entitled "Leilot" ("Nights"). Here, too, the story and the discussion hinge on delaying or thwarting desire, on the level of both plot and style. Focusing on the theoretical approach to eros by Denis de Rougemont, Zilbergerts highlights the surrealistic narrative techniques that Agnon used to defer the reader's narrative gratification and thus sustain the story's erotic charge.

The next three articles in this volume are dedicated to Agnon's "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum." Reflecting the multivalent nature of Agnon's modernist storytelling, two of these essays offer almost diametrically opposed readings. Nitza Ben-Dov traces the motifs of the hunchback and the crutch, as well as the significance of the protagonist's name (Ovadiah), in order to offer a redemptive or recuperative reading of the story's ending. Maya Barzilai focuses on Agnon's writings from the World War I period, specifically on images of physical deformity in this story, as revealing a skepticism about the possibility of healing and restoration. Read together, these two essays add an element of interpretive indeterminacy to the representation of thwarted desire or unrealized love.

Avi Shmidman's essay probes the successive revisions of Agnon's "ʿOvadyah baʿal mum" (1921, 1922, 1931, and 1953) not so much for content and theme, but for Agnon's evolving Hebrew style. Employing a variety of new computational

methods, he discerns a pattern of stylistic alterations in the direction of rabbinic or postrabbinic forms, conforming with the Hebrew style used by rabbinic scholars during the time of the Polish Jewish Council of the Four Lands (1520–1764), a time that Agnon considered a kind of Jewish Golden Age. This stylistic adaptation, one might argue, is its own form of endlessly deferred desire, a yearning for a lost culture in the aftermath of the annihilation of European Jewry due to the Holocaust.

Irit Nazar's "Writing as a Survival Mechanism during War" analyzes the modernist psychological story "Harofe ugerushato" (1941). This account of a doctor's destructive, cruel treatment of his wife, culminating in their divorce, was originally written as part of Agnon's novel *Oreaḥ natah lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*), a depiction of the devastations caused by violence in war. Nazar thus identifies a connection between the psychological violence portrayed in the story and the violence of war, both in Europe and in Mandatory Palestine. According to Nazar, this destructiveness is counterposed in the story by intertextuality, a literary opportunity to "create, write and preserve traditional texts." Love may prove to be unrealizable in the story, but the writing, rewriting, and revitalization of Jewish texts is adduced as a powerful counterforce.

On this same subject of rewriting stories of misbegotten love and other texts in the process, the final essay in the volume, Yael Halevi-Wise's "A Reversed Version of *Bidmi yameha:* A. B. Yehoshua's *Sippur pashut beʾErets Yisraʾel,*" examines Yehoshua's notes for a sequel to Agnon's *Sippur pashut*, a project that was never realized, but that imagined narrative restitution for some of the unresolved and disturbing issues in Agnon's novel, particularly the treatment of Blume Nacht and Hirshl Hurvitz's cast-aside first son Meshulam. Yehoshua's notes toward a rewriting and reinterpretation of Agnon's stories of frustrated love, both *Sippur pashut* and the prequel novella, *Bidmi yameha*, further emphasize the connection between thwarted love and rewriting that runs like a unifying thread though all of the contributions to this volume. What better way to pay tribute to a writer who obsessively wrote and rewrote than to offer this collection of essays that examines yearning and rewriting in Agnon's writings themselves, as well in the work of some of his most admiring fellow writers and readers.

NOTES

1 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, *A Simple Story*, trans. Hillel Halkin (Toby, 2014), 152–53, with minor adjustments to the translation.

2 Translation by Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, 3 vols. (Norton, 2019), 3:602–3.

3 On the centrality of Song of Songs in Agnon's writing and within his intertextual symbology, see Ilana Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers* (University of Washington Press, 2013).

4 Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo meʾusharot* (ʿAm ʿOved, 2009).

5 Amos Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (Harcourt, 2004), 75.

6 In 1950, Agnon published a short story titled "Vaterev ḥokhmat Shelomo," available in *ʿAd henah* (Schocken, 1952), and in English as "And Solomon's Wisdom Excelled," in *Forevermore and Other Stories*, ed. Jeffrey Saks (Toby, 2016), 60–65. The story presents King Solomon as a vexed author, discomfited by his readers' inability to properly fathom the multiple layers of meaning within his Song and Proverbs. This leads him to conceal his writing or to offer it up as allegory. Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (University of California Press, 1968) interprets this story as Agnon's own retort to his critics, "camouflaged as a modern midrash" in which Solomon grows frustrated by his inability to control his audience's misreading of his work (410).

7 Although published in 1922, *ʿAl kappot hamanʿul* was already in the works almost a decade earlier. In 1913, while residing in Berlin, Agnon had proposed the idea for a collection of these stories to Warsaw-based publisher and editor Fishel Lachower, then provisionally titled *ʿAd sheyafuaḥ hayom*; this, too, was taken from Song of Songs 4:6: "'Til morning's breeze blows." The long delay was likely tied to Agnon's inveterate revising of his stories, an obsessive perfectionism that occasionally got in the way of prompt delivery of manuscripts, and then to the outbreak of World War I, which all but suspended Hebrew publishing in Europe. On the "genealogy" of the collection in its multiple incarnations, see the pair of articles by Dan Laor in *Haaretz—Tarbut vesifrut* (August 3 and 10, 2022).

8 Shmuʾel Yosef Agnon, *The Bridal Canopy* (Toby, 2015), 223. On the evolution of this story, see Nurit Govrin, "Leshanah habaʾah biYrushalayim," in *Qeriʾat hadorot*, 8 vols. (Gevanim, 2002), 1:250–58.

9 For theories on the etymology of *ʿagunah*, see David Curwin, "ʿAgunah and Ogen," *Balashon* (May 27, 2009), https://www.balashon.com/2009/05/aguna-and-ogen.html.