

# Gershom Scholem on Agnon

## Interview by Dan Miron

This interview was prepared in February 1981 for Israel Educational Television. Prof. Scholem died a year later and this was the last interview he granted.

*Prof. Dan Miron* Professor Scholem, I would like you to tell us of your long acquaintance with Shmuel Yosef Agnon – in both senses of the word – your personal acquaintance with Agnon the man, and your acquaintance with his writing and his intellectual world. We know that both are of very long standing, going back to the time when you were a Zionist boy in Berlin of the First World War –

*Prof. Gershom Scholem* Hardly a boy: I was 19 years old.

*D.M.* The personal association between you lasted till Agnon's death in 1970; the literary and intellectual one endures, of course. I would like to start with a few questions that will take us back to those early days of your acquaintance with Agnon. You met him, as you said, when you were a young man of 19. According to your autobiographical book *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, you had left your parents' home –

*G.S.* Not left – been banished.

*D.M.* You took a room in a Berlin boarding-house where, as it happens, a number of east European Jewish intellectuals were staying at that time, and in this intellectual milieu you met Agnon, who was also living in Berlin during those war years. I believe that for you, this meeting was one of two highlights in a seminal encounter that affected your own intellectual development. Agnon was one central figure in that encounter, and the other was Zalman Rubashov, a young historian and Zionist labour leader who eventually, as Zalman Shazar, became President of the State of Israel. Concerning Shazar – you have said on more than one occasion that "the spirit of the nation spoke through him." You felt that his commitment to Jewish history, and the great rhetoric it evoked, gave expression to some metaphysical quintessence of the Jewish nation. As for Agnon – about him you said that you saw him as "a completely

original embodiment of Jewish tradition" and of the Jewish being. At the same time, you have also voiced your opinion that these two men were conflicting personalities – total opposites, in fact. As it turns out, you came face to face with two entities personifying Jewish tradition and Jewish history, respectively, and yet forming two antitheses. How did you reconcile this conflict?

*G.S.* I agree. They were two radically different personalities: they couldn't stand each other.

*D.M.* Does that go for Shazar's attitude to Agnon as well?

*G.S.* No, it goes for Agnon's to Rubashov in those years. Agnon did not care for rhetoricians. Nor for romantics either. Shazar was a very, very different sort of person at that time from the one he was in his last years, when we all knew him as the President of Israel. He was a man of 28 or 29 then, with an extensive knowledge of Jewish lore and tradition and culture, and with a singular mixture of the romantic – a romantic historian – and the *maskil*<sup>1</sup> about him. Rubashov came from a *Habad*<sup>2</sup> Hassidic family, but in those days he had no great sympathy for the *Habad*, to put it mildly. He had a historian's critical-rationalist attitude to Hassidism, regardless of his Hassidic background – his own grandfather was a prominent *Habadnik*. He was taken up with history – with historiography – without being really devoted to it heart and soul because of his political ambition, which he possessed long before I met him. He used to be the *Wunderkind* of Poalei Zion<sup>3</sup> in Russia, you know. He was the sort of man who speaks and thinks in abstract concepts. Still, he never became a historian in the strict sense of the word on account of the romantic streak in him, and also because his way of life prevented it. Agnon was a traditionalist. I mean to say – a traditionalist artist. The Agnon I got to know at that time – in 1917, that is, before I was drafted into the German army – was an artist. An artist working through tradition. *That* Agnon was not orthodox.

*D.M.* Nor a romantic?

*G.S.* There was none of that in him.

*D.M.* You know, it used to be the accepted thing to call him a "neo-romantic." Was that a mistake?

<sup>1</sup> *Maskil* – adherent of the Haskala (enlightenment movement) which began in the 1770s

<sup>2</sup> *Habad* – Hassidic sect

<sup>3</sup> *Poalei Zion* – Early 20th century Zionist-Socialist proletarian movement

G.S. Look, there is nothing you can't say about Agnon. Speaking for myself, I did not perceive the romantic in Agnon. He related to things as an artist, as I said. Perhaps he changed later, and we may come back to that. Towards the end of his life he became an orthodox Jew. I don't find it easy to talk about the way he was before. People say to me: Why do you bring that up, one would rather not hear about it... He was not orthodox, but he adhered to tradition - not for romantic reasons but as a medium, a means available him in his work. And therein consisted his novelty.

D.M. The novelty of applying tradition as an artistic medium?

G.M. As a medium for his art. That, I believe, is Agnon's novelty. Before him, Jewish writers had either been radically critical of Jewish religious tradition - such as J.L. Gordon, or Mendele Mocher Sefarim - or rather more mildly critical like some others, or else apologetic. None of them made comprehensive use of the religious Jewish literary tradition as an artistic medium. They used it, as Mendele did, as a vehicle for criticism.

D.M. How about a writer like M.J. Berdyczewski, whose relations with Agnon were so tense?

G.S. Their relations weren't tense: their relations were non-existent.

D.M. Berdyczewski wrote some very harsh criticism of Agnon's *Vehaya. He'akov Lemishor* ("And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight").

G.S. I am not aware of any relationship between them. Berdyczewski had ideas and opinions of his own - but we are not here to discuss Berdyczewski. The entire affair is too involved to be dealt with in a sentence or two. It is certainly true, though, that when Agnon wanted to see Berdyczewski - who was living in Berlin at that time - Berdyczewski refused to see him. Maybe they had met once and something went sour. Berdyczewski may have written about it in his diary. I don't know. But I do know what Agnon told me in 1917 and 1918, and again in 1920, about his relations with Berdyczewski - that there was no such thing.

D.M. But aside from their personal relationship - if we are talking of the attempt to use the religious literary tradition as an artistic medium - then we do find some kind of parallel between Berdyczewski and Agnon, don't we, in that both of them *made* the attempt, though perhaps in opposite directions.

G.S. Agnon was different from his contemporaries - those I knew in Berlin, people such as Zalman Shazar, say, or Zvi Kitain, or Dr. Jacob Gromer, or the Krupniks - the uncle, and the nephew H. Krupnik, who used to correct Berdyczewski's work because Berdyczewski couldn't write grammatical Hebrew - all these people had an entirely different approach to things. They used to talk of entirely different matters - to talk in abstractions, as I said of Rubashov before. Agnon was never like that, never in his life. He neither would nor could talk on any subject whatever in abstract concepts - only in stories, in parables. You'd start talking to Agnon about anything at all in the language of concepts - and I myself am one of those who speak and think in concepts - Agnon would promptly steer the conversation away from the abstract plane to one of I'll-tell-you-a-story, I'll-tell-you-a-fable. He thought in images, not in concepts.

D.M. And that represents his significance as an artist?

G.S. It represents his own particular art. You won't find his books ever touching on matters of the kind that we would naturally discuss on a conceptual plane. In his most important, most magnificent books you will always find him putting what he has to say in the form of a story. He shuns - he *hates* - abstract talk. He's incapable of it, and he has no use for it. He can read of it in books - and even then abstraction wasn't the sort of thing that would appeal to him.

D.M. Not even in the world of tradition? The world of religious thought?

G.S. Not even in the world of tradition - except as a fiction. If he were to quote you some abstract idea of Maimonides or of Nachmanides - two great and antithetical thinkers who tended to express themselves in abstractions - he would right away back out again and turn the conversation onto an entirely different plane. Take a novel like *T'mol Shilshom* ("Only Yesterday"). You'd say that its subject matter demands abstract treatment and discussion -

D.M. Ideology? Historiosophy?

G.S. Everything. But Agnon managed to convey it all - quite legitimately - in the manner of one thinking in images.

D.M. Yet for all that he was attracted to the kind of people for whom thinking in abstractions was second nature.

G.S. Attracted - yes, he was, but he himself never expressed himself in that way. He would listen, hear what they had to say - insofar as he was interested. He would listen to me, for instance. Young

as I was, he liked to hear me talk. And not just me. But it's a fact that he did not introduce such people as characters into writing – into the vital, creative aspect of his self. He could never speak of a subject – of something we others would all discuss largely in abstract terms – except by going off into his famous I'll-tell-you-a-story. And he would tell one right away, and one story would lead to another and yet another – and Agnon's works are always stories-within-stories-within-stories, as you know.

D.M. You mean, his stories are both medium and substance?

G.S. Primarily medium. Medium *is* substance in this case, because Agnon wishes to tell about the Jewish world as he knew it – first in Galicia, then at certain periods in Palestine and to some extent in Germany, and then again in Galicia. And all of it in stories, even though we tried – I did, and you name me one who didn't – to make Agnon say something in the language of concepts.

D.M. Concerning his *Weltanschauung*?

G.S. Yes. He just never answered questions on that score. I knew him for almost 60 years, and I never managed to draw anything like what you might call a *Weltanschauung* out of Agnon – except in the form of a story. When Agnon wished to challenge the Brith Shalom<sup>4</sup> – he was friendly with most of the Brith Shalom people, yet for all that, he wanted to write a bitter attack on us – what did he do? He wrote a story – the parable of the wolf and the lamb. *Weltanschauung* is a word that had no place in Agnon's vocabulary. If he had one, it was certainly not formulated as you or I would understand the term.

D.M. And that is what distinguishes Agnon from others –

G.S. That is what marks the Agnon phenomenon of the Berlin years. And it made an impression. Here was a man who came from a quite different background, and who wasn't capable of getting up before an audience of more than 25 people and saying something meaningful. He didn't have it in him, and he didn't like doing it. And that is something that creates an aura of tension round a person. The people he was fond of in Palestine and spoke of with the profoundest respect were not public orators.

D.M. Yet some of his greatest affection was reserved for people

who did speak in public – such as Berl Katznelson.

G.S. But not as a speaker. He loved Berl Katznelson because he saw him as a man of integrity. That's how he thought of Berl, unlike some of Berl's companions, whom Agnon only began speaking well of in their old age, by which time he had somehow patched up his quarrel with them. Not for his first 25 years in this country, though. At that time he didn't have much good to say about many people whom I and others regarded very highly. Except Berl. But he also respected Joseph Aharonowitz, who was no orator, and J.H. Brenner. I never heard him speak of Aharonowitz except in admiration. And never of Brenner except with respect. Not as a writer, mind you. He didn't think much of Brenner as a writer, and I doubt whether he even read his books. But he thought very, very highly of him as a man of strong character – of strong moral character. And let's not forget that Brenner, who was a sworn atheist, was the one who invested his last penny in the publication of Agnon's first book, *Vehaya He'akov Lemishor*. Agnon respected such people. But he had little sympathy to spare for orators.

D.M. To go back to the German period – Agnon lived in Germany for 12 years, and he seems to sort of have adopted German Jewry as a second mother, so to speak.

G.S. No, not at all. Who made that up? Certainly not I.

D.M. It's an impression I got from conversations with him. His ties with Zalman Schocken, for example: he described Zalman Schocken to me several times as a medieval German Jewish merchant type. That, he said, was what our ancestors had been like in Germany in the Middle Ages. And I had the impression that beyond the traditional relationship between the great merchant-patron of culture and the writer, there was in this case also a sort of adoption of a father figure, on which Agnon bestowed a historical dimension.

G.S. I grant you all that, but it has nothing to do with German Jewry as a whole. I do not accept your generalization, but neither did I say he had no respect for German Jews, the so-called *Yekkes*.<sup>5</sup> But you touched on another question: was he attached in some special way to Zalman Schocken? Well, the fact is that whoever knew Zalman Schocken – and there *were* a few people beside his

<sup>4</sup> *Brith Shalom* – Jewish association established in 1925 to strive for a peaceable settlement of the Jewish-Arab conflict; Scholem was a leading figure in the group

<sup>5</sup> *Yekkes* – popular term for Jews originating from Germany, referring to their formality (*Jacke* = jacket in German)

family who claimed to know him – regarded him as a very, very stimulating and problematic figure. Problematic to all of us. As to what you mentioned Agnon saying about him – there's something to it; but no attachment to German Jewry – Agnon didn't have that. To the German people, the gentiles – yes, but of German Jewry as such he was critical. Though there were some exceptions. German Jewry served him as a – how to put it – a stimulus. But he only began writing about them much later. In all the years that he actually lived in Germany he never wrote a line about them. He lived there for 12 years, and he married a lady from a very, very distinguished German-Jewish family – the Marx family of Königsberg; he could do all that, but not become part of the German Jewish community. On the contrary, he was critical of them. Because what pleased him about me? He was pleased with people like me for our biting criticism of German Jewry. Not of individuals, but as a collective.

D.M. And what do you think of his later writing about German Jewry? Do you think he penetrated it, grasped its spirit?

G.S. I would say: in some ways – yes, in others – no. I believe he wrote two books that illustrate this polarity. The one – which it's very strange he didn't publish in his lifetime – is *Bahanuto shel Mar Lublin* ("In Mr. Lublin's Store"), in which there is much that I greatly admire. It also enters into –

D.M. – into the world of German gentiles, rather than Jews –

G.S. Quite, as I pointed out before. But the picture it draws – when I read the book now, I say: that is real. Agnon wrote another large novel ostensibly about the Yekkes – a novel called *Shira* – and here I very much doubt if he really gained an insight into the things he apparently wished to describe.

D.M. Those were the displaced Yekkes, though – the Yekkes of Jerusalem.

G.S. Anyhow, in the story *Bahanuto shel Mar Lublin* there is no trace of caricature, whereas *Shira* is half caricature – and Agnon isn't much good as a caricaturist. It wasn't exactly his forte. I'm afraid that is *Shira's* weakness. He evoked the university atmosphere he knew – or imagined or thought he knew – and the caricatural aspect is prominent, and not to the novel's advantage. Agnon just was no caricaturist. Look for caricatures in his books – you'll find that as a rule they don't come off. You won't find caricature in *T'mol Shilshom*.





*D.M.* That isn't quite true.

*G.S.* Yes, in *Bine'areinu Uvizekeneinu* ("With Our Youth and Our Aged") you have a caricature of Zionism in Galicia, and you have caricatures of apparatchiks – Mr. Askanski (i.e., "Mr. Apparatchik"), Mr. Askanowitz, and all the rest – and you have some of that in *T'mol Shilshom* as well, and it isn't the strong point of this novel, which I consider a first-rate work. What is appealing about *T'mol Shilshom* isn't the caricatures, but the living, authentic characters, not those – in this case Russian Jews – which he meant to portray as caricatures. As for *Shira* – I didn't feel that Agnon managed to convey the atmosphere he was aiming at in an artistic, penetrating way. I didn't feel that his language here was genuine. There are too many distortions, too many caricatures. *And* some great things as well.

*D.M.* In your autobiography, you break off the description of your acquaintance with Agnon at the time of your immigration to Palestine. As far as the book itself is concerned, the reason is obvious: its whole point is to lead up to the time of your settling in Palestine. But in other personal reminiscences you also speak of your acquaintance with Agnon only during the years in Germany. It seems as though you wished to stop at this period in your acquaintance and not take the story on to Palestine, and I've been wondering why. Agnon returned to Palestine a short time after your own immigration –

*G.S.* A year after. He came here exactly a year after I did.

*D.M.* Your close friendship continued, or grew even closer perhaps.

*G.S.* Yes, we would meet nearly every day. Well, he used to work from eight in the morning till one, and he hated anyone disturbing him then, hated it very much. He wouldn't receive visitors. His work discipline was admirable. Wonderful. He didn't work in the afternoons. Then he would go wandering about the streets of Jerusalem. He wanted to visit Meah She'arim, wanted to buy books there, talk Yiddish with the people of Meah She'arim or the Jews of the Old City, call on his Zionist settler friends. There were whole periods when he would look in on us every day. Yes, I knew him. I didn't write about it because I didn't write about this period at all, nor do I intend to.

*D.M.* One has a feeling that Agnon changed greatly after his coming to Palestine. The man who had lived in the heart of Europe



and been open to its influence now began to draw into himself -

G.S. There was a change. Look, the change was natural. Agnon had acquaintances here - people he knew from Galicia and from Germany - nearly all of whom were not orthodox. The number of devout Jews among them was very small. There were Eliezer Meir Lifshitz and Rabbi Binyamin, who were both old acquaintances, actually; not to mention Rabbi Kook - but that is something else again - a different sort of man, a different sort of time: Rabbi Kook was an authoritative figure for Agnon, a figure on a pedestal, not someone like Meir Lifshitz who was a staunch friend. But by and large, most of the people he knew to talk to or was friends with were not orthodox. Everyone was aware of it, both he and they: they knew him for what he was, and he them. The strange thing is that after all - actually it isn't strange, there is an explanation for it, no doubt - that after coming to Palestine he became an observant Jew. Why? That is a question you are free to speculate about - and it does offer plenty of scope for speculation. Some people didn't mind this change in him, because they realized he couldn't work here except through this medium of Torah observance, living in the way prescribed by the Torah. His wife wasn't religious at all.

D.M. I've heard it said that she was religious before their marriage, and that first he made her leave religion and then made her revert to it.

G.S. That isn't true. His wife was a sworn atheist before she met him - that's what Esther Agnon was. But when she married him she gladly undertook to do what was required for his sake. And it didn't take so much doing when they lived in Hamburg, but in Jerusalem it did, and it was no simple matter. What good would it have been for me to write about things that we didn't understand? Towards the end of his life we saw Agnon becoming pious. I mean, not as theatrics but in all truth - his own truth.

D.M. But that was very late in life.

G.S. Very, very late. I was one of those who witnessed this process, yes, and wondered about it too. My wife says I shouldn't tell this story, but I'll tell you anyway. We were both living in Munich at the time - before Agnon's marriage, that is. Agnon's landlord was a religious Jew, but Agnon himself always used to go about bareheaded. Always. And once, here in Jerusalem, when he reproached me for going about hatless, I said to him: "But Agnon, you yourself

used to walk through Munich with me nearly every day - and always bareheaded." So he said: "Yes, but I had a *yarmulke* in my pocket." Once, in Munich, we were taking a walk, and I was telling Agnon what I was doing - I was studying a daily portion of the Gemara then, under a great Talmudist rabbi, Dr. Heinrich Ehrentreu - so Agnon stops in his tracks and faces me and says: "Schulem" - he always used to call me "Schulem," and not "Shalom" or "Scholem," he used the Galician dialect - "Schulem," he said, "I believe you want to be *frum*." In those words. There is no adequate translation for *frum*. So he told me: "Schulem, I'm afraid you want to be *frum*. Don't turn *frum*." That's what he said to me then. He never repeated it in this country, but I won't forget that conversation, that warning he gave me: "Don't turn *frum*." Yes, I suppose there really is no Hebrew word for it. All the words in the dictionary, at any rate, are only approximations -

D.M. Devout? Pious?

G.S. Well, not "God-fearing" anyhow. He never used the term "God-fearing." I only heard him use it very rarely, very, very rarely. Maybe once, in speaking of a certain rabbi. Agnon had no high opinion of many of the famous rabbis and did not consider them God-fearing. Not everyone who observes the religious precepts is God-fearing, and Agnon was perfectly capable of making the distinction.

D.M. Yet there seems to be something more general - a definite personality change - after he came to Palestine. I mean not just his adopting a religious way of life, but a sort of withdrawal, a cutting himself off. He became less and less responsive to other people, to the world -

G.S. Well, yes, I think that to some extent what you said *did* happen, and it's difficult to find adequate words to describe it. I say - and I have said it often before, and no doubt to you as well - I assume that Agnon paid a heavy price for preserving a sphere of his life where everything could be authentic. Authentic Agnon. To preserve such a sphere of Agnonic authenticity in the full sense of the word, in the way he wished it, he paid by being not-so-authentic in all the other spheres. In order to preserve a quarter of his time, of his life, for that vital creative authenticity he wished for, he paid in 'theatrics' for the other three-quarters.

D.M. In Germany too?

G.S. In Germany too, but less than here, and the reason is obvious.

In Germany he wasn't required – I may presume – I didn't ask him because, well, it's not something you can discuss with a person, ask him: Where's your authentic part and where do you begin to diverge from it. That's impossible. You can't talk about a thing like that to anyone. But the truth of it is – and I think that all of us who knew Agnon realized it – that there was a lot of posing, of theatre, in his actions. In Germany there was no need for it because he didn't move in the kind of circles that demanded it. There was no Meah She'arim there, no Old City, no one for whom to put on a performance. Agnon, if I may say so, was an actor. In the noble sense of the word, but all the same it's true that in his relations with the world at large he was playing a part. And he paid for it, and knew he was paying for it too. One time I was going for a walk with him – he always loved walking. He'd come and say: "Let's go for a walk" – we were going down King George Street, and all at once I find Agnon is leaving my side, he rushes across the street, stops by a man whom I know he detests, and gets into a long conversation with him. I stand there watching, and I know exactly what he thinks of the man – Agnon used often to discuss people in private conversation – so afterwards I say to him: "Agnon, why did you go out of your way to speak to that man, seeing..." – and he finishes the sentence for me: "...seeing that I detest him. And so he won't realize how much I detest him, I engage him in conversation." That's what I call his theatrical side. He paid heavily for it, because it took up a large part of his time, but in that way he as it were secured the remaining part for himself, marked out a pale of absolute authenticity; and there was no other way in which he could have preserved this authenticity, for in those years he was an observant Jew, but he was not orthodox. Though mind you, he was not the only one to observe the precepts without being orthodox – there were others, and some of them people he held in high esteem. He profoundly admired someone at the university – Ya'akov Nachum Epstein, the Talmud professor. And the reason Agnon admired him was precisely his being a strictly observant Jew yet a complete free-thinker in outlook.

*Translated by Miriam Arad*

*Part two of this interview will appear in Ariel No. 53*

## CONTEMPORARY HEBREW POETRY ON JERUSALEM

# A Tunnel Calls to Its Hollow

Gabriel Levin

There is an amusing poem by a young Israeli, Zali Gurevitch, which seems to parody the long tradition of poems to Zion. Instead of braving the seas and elements to arrive at the Promised Land, it opens with a man driving his car up the winding foothills of Jerusalem. By a clever pun the poet suggests that the visitor is not the pilgrim of traditional poetry but a Japanese tourist (*ish im auto*, Hebrew for 'man with a car', is a pun on a Japanese-sounding name 'Ishimoto').

On the way to Jerusalem a man in a car  
a windshield burgeons before him  
brushes butterflies  
and the infiltrating sun  
crunches in his eyes  
ignites  
and he accelerates,  
he overtakes

if it weren't for his safety-belt  
he would levitate

*"A Man In A Car"*

Our hypothetical Japanese driver is eager to get to Jerusalem yet is held back by the very vehicle which is transporting him there. The car with its windshield keeps him from experiencing the rarefied surroundings, just as the safety-belt prevents him from rising heavenwards, intoxicated by the sun.

It is possible to read Zali Gurevitch's poem as a modern-day voyage to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is both longed for and, to a degree,

estern Wall; for other composers it has been Yemenite/ig, the Chagall windows in Hadassah Hospital, etc. Obviously try with so many diverse elements will provide plenty of for composers.

obvious question is whether the musical adjustment to be made l, rather than in New York, Paris or London, for a musician, is asier by virtue of being Jewish. In my case, for example, an ing feeling of Jewishness has been expressed in my music-; by the seriousness and commitment that I feel towards ng musical life in Israel. If I were asked to identify elements 'rebirth' in the emotional content of my playing, I would be at although that which we ourselves cannot perceive, others nes can. On a tour last year, recording the Elgar Cello to in Iceland (a country in which I lived and performed for l a half years), I found friends commenting on the change, the hat has developed in my playing. Perhaps over a period of years this change would have come about in any case; s not. Then again, it is possible that such a change could be an encounter with the intensity of life in Israel and exposure Israeli national character.

talent, potential and capacity for musical development here markable. There are few places in the world where the an feels such an impact with such immediate results: this han compensates for the extreme demands called for in illing or redirecting the frequently raw musical energies. One's ution to musical life in Israel is certainly neither unnoticed appreciated.

## Gershom Scholem on Agnon

### Interview by Dan Miron - Part Two

*The first part of this interview appeared in Ariel No. 52* ↖

*Prof. Dan Miron* Professor Scholem, may we move to another subject? I'm speaking of the scientific investigation of the religious phenomenon in general, and of Jewish religion in particular. I would of course like to talk first of all about your research into Jewish Kab- bala and mysticism. What was Agnon's attitude to the very principle of rational, disciplined scientific research of religion?

*Prof. Gershom Scholem* That's hard to say. Agnon had no interest at all in scientific research, but that doesn't apply to men of research. Look, you understand what I'm saying: if you want to be honest, you must say that he might care for the *people*, the *scholars* - some of them he accepted, and some he didn't - but for scholarship as such - no. And even scholars - there was a great deal of disdain in his attitude to them. No end of it. Though not to me: seeing a young man like me studying the Gemara, studying the Jewish sources - not reading *belles-lettres*, but going to the texts proper - that is what drew him to me, what roused his sympathy. That certainly was what led to the good relations developing between us: here was someone going in search of the sources. He said as much to me: "You sit and read the sources."

*D.M.* But didn't those relations change when you turned to the research of those sources, when you tried to establish them within -

*G.S.* No, no.

*D.M.* - within some historical framework?

*G.S.* No, no, not at all. He was interested, he was definitely interested when I told him about it. It was not a forbidden subject, was it? He was no apologist. We talked. Look, Agnon was no great admirer of the Zohar.

*D.M.* Please tell us a bit more about that.

*G.S.* He said "The author of the Zohar couldn't write."



D.M. You mean, he had a low opinion of the Zohar as literature?

G.S. Precisely. Look, when Agnon wrote *Vehaya He'akov Lemishor*, his idea was: I'll write the way the authors of the *sifrei yere'im*<sup>1</sup> would have written, had they been writing Hebrew. And when I told him – Look, you know it took me years to arrive at a definite conclusion about the author of the Zohar, because I initially set out to prove the exact opposite of what I did prove in the end (that is, that the Zohar was written by a single medieval author, Moses de Leon, rather than being an early collective composition) – so I told Agnon about it, and he was very interested. I said to him: Look, any page of the Zohar you analyze – even a single page is enough – every page bespeaks medieval language. That interested him. Agnon once said that you can't forge a page of Midrash. And being Agnon, he promptly made up a story: the story of a man who tries to write a page of pseudo-Gemara, and finds it impossible unless the whole page is sheer quotation. Agnon said: Show me a page of forged Midrash – I would see through it at a glance.

D.M. That was apropos the Zohar? Agnon spotted the pseudographic element in it?

G.S. Perhaps he did. He was interested, he wanted to hear details, understand my grounds for saying what I did. The *details* were what interested him, the *research*. He stood up for me when rabbis came and said to him: He's such an aberration, that Scholem – a perfect ignoramus where the Torah is concerned, Talmud he knows nothing of – and he says the most outrageous things about Sabbetaians, and so on and so forth. Because so long as I wrote about the Zohar, nobody cared a bit, you see, but when I happened to mention in one line – after being convinced of the truth of it – that Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz had been a Sabbetaian – Heaven help me! Agnon's friends from Poalei Agudat Yisrael – that was a large part of Agnon's theatrics, his friendship with the Poalei Agudat Yisrael people – well, their rabbis called on him and they said whatever it was, and Agnon told them: "You don't understand what it's all about, you don't understand what Scholem is doing." So when I came to see him, he told me: "Rabbi So-and-So just left here ten minutes ago, and he called you a..." And he told me what his answer to the rabbi had been too. In a word, Agnon could have regard for a scholar when he

considered there was a matter of individual research as such – whether the Zohar, so many centuries later, stand a thing like that, I think, did not.

D.M. I would like and Eynam") a difficult as though it were (

G.S. That interpretation that interpretation was an attack on me so on. I read that count. It doesn't hurt wrong, *everything* is that the story was staying in our apartment I, were in America

D.M. Well, how do characters – Gemara

G.S. I don't like to that this story was Ugaritic discoveries convincing analysis quotations from Ginzberg binical or scientific admire it, and I told to make fun of his in the way he once said too well." That's what really meant as a historical talk about it because which of Agnon's stories among them. It's to every single one of interesting books, a

<sup>1</sup>*sifrei yere'im* – homiletic traditional tales

<sup>2</sup>*Tannaim* – Jewish sages

Zohar as literature?

*Vehaya He'akov* authors of the *sifrei* writing Hebrew. And ears to arrive at a , because I initially ove in the end (that al author, Moses de position) – so I told d to him: Look, any e is enough – every d him. Agnon once d being Agnon, he who tries to write a e unless the whole a page of forged

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ted to hear details, e details were what when rabbis came Scholem – a perfect d he knows nothing t Sabbetaians, and e about the Zohar, d to mention in one at Rabbi Jonathan help me! Agnon's rge part of Agnon's srael people – well, it was, and Agnon l about, you don't ame to see him, he nutes ago, and he r to the rabbi had a scholar when he

considered there was some point to his work. And in all, it was a matter of individuals – respecting some, and some not – because research as such didn't frighten him, because what did he care whether the Zohar was written at the time of the Tannaim<sup>2</sup> so and so many centuries later. Agnon would have been the first to understand a thing like that. But the world of research in general – that, I think, did not exist for Agnon.

*D.M.* I would like to bring up the question of *Iddo Ve'einam* ("Iddo and Eynam") a difficult symbolic story, which some people interpret as though it were dealing with the issue of Kabbala research.

*G.S.* That interpretation is wrong from start to finish! I have read that interpretation by Meshulam Tochner, who claimed the story was an attack on me, on the scientific research of the Kabbala, and so on. I read that article, and I think the man is wrong on every count. It doesn't hold up: the symbolism is wrong, the facts are wrong, *everything* is wrong. Everything. The only fact he got right is that the story was written at my place. Agnon wrote it when he was staying in our apartment for about half a year while we, my wife and I, were in America. That is correct, and all the rest is not.

*D.M.* Well, how do you interpret the story's symbols then? And its characters – Gemula, Gamzu, and Dr. Ginnat?

*G.S.* I don't like to say it, but I think I agree with those who argued that this story was written under the influence of H.N. Ginzberg's Ugaritic discoveries. A year or two ago, someone published a totally convincing analysis showing that Agnon had used verbatim quotations from Ginzberg's book in this story, and from other rabbinical or scientific sources as well. As for the story itself – I don't admire it, and I told Agnon so. I told him I thought he wrote the story to make fun of his interpreters, that it is a satire on the interpreters, the way he once said about Baruch Kurzweil: "He understands me too well." That's what he said. I don't know whether the story is really meant as a hoax. What I said to him was in jest. But I shouldn't talk about it because I don't think it is a good story. If you asked me which of Agnon's stories will survive – I believe this one wouldn't be among them. It's too much of a temptation for the critics, and so every single one of them proceeded to write a book about it. All very interesting books, and none of them convincing. And that's what

<sup>2</sup> *Tannaim* – Jewish sages and scholars of the Law in the 1st-2nd centuries CE

persuaded me that it was actually meant to be the ending of *Shira*. I don't know if this is true, but it may well be. Whatever the case, the story has no bearing whatsoever on Gershom Scholem or on the Kabbala. That much is certain. It does bear on the problem of myth in Agnon's work. Agnon invoked a myth here and added something to it, spun a web – perhaps consciously, perhaps not. Me, I do not recognize myself in it. Dr. Ginnat isn't me. And that interpretation you mentioned does not seem valid to me at all.

D.M. Would you go so far as saying then that Kabbala symbolism has no place in Agnon's work at all?

G.S. Oh, it has, it has. He uses whatever will serve his purpose. You'll find many kabbalistic elements in the stories, you'll find quotations from the Kabbala woven into the stories' fabric. You read, and suddenly come across things that – if you are familiar with Kabbala texts – you recognize as Agnon's source, as something he used because it appealed to him.

D.M. You published a study of a short story by Agnon, *Ma'aseh Rabbi Gadiel Hatinok* ("Gadiel, the Wonder Child"). You traced its kabbalistic sources, and concluded that Agnon was not merely familiar with them, but had some primal insight into kabbalistic myth.

G.S. No, that isn't what I wrote. What I wrote was that Agnon was indeed familiar with certain texts, which I tried to uncover, and I quite certainly traced down the source which Agnon used for his first motif, namely the *Shulhan Arukh* of Rabbi Isaac Luria, which he doubtless had in his library. I translated the story into German from the manuscript before it was published, and I happened to be reading the *Shulhan Arukh* at the time. I said to Agnon: "But that's from the *Shulhan Arukh*." So he says: "All right. You know it." Further on in my study I pointed out certain elements in the story that have a counterpart in the Zohar. It's true that no Rabbi Gadiel is mentioned in the Zohar, but it's easy enough to take this one step further and connect certain things that aren't connected in the text itself. What I actually did show in the second part of the study was that no such story about Rabbi Gadiel exists in Kabbala literature, but that Agnon takes divergent elements and combines them – intuitively.

D.M. And do things like that occur elsewhere in his writing?

G.S. Yes, fairly often. You can see the extent of kabbalistic influence on him in two of his books, the anthologies *Yamim Nora'im* ("Days of Awe") and *Sefer Sofer Vesippur* ("The Book of Writers and

Tales"). The *Yamim* respect. It shows how Kabbala are inherent with it. For all that, applied rigorous criticism went against the grain.

D.M. For instance?

G.S. You once asked a pertinent question. I excluded everything in literature referring to the covenant stands not only on the covenant. I knew there is something in the covenant. I mean, to say, things come out of the covenant, such as an incident in the vast literature in the Zohar. I was in vain for any reflection. I noticed its absence in the Zohar – and I consider it an anthology, a really serious work. I praised the book to all the sexual material in the present generation. I could you, knowing Bratslav, what a position from the Zohar to...

D.M. In this context, the story, *Agadat Hasoj*, often referred to as "The Story of the Zohar": Agnon read this story tells of a woman who were yearning to inscribe a Torah on their death. The woman's task, and now he is in the clothes it in her wedding dress. It seems to me that Agnon never practised sex.

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Kabbala symbolism

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Tales"). The *Yamim Nora'im* book is particularly interesting in this respect. It shows how many themes, figures, characters from the Kabbala are inherent in Agnon's world, and how much he is taken up with it. For all that, since you asked, I ought to tell you that Agnon applied rigorous censorship to whole areas in the Kabbala which went against the grain for him.

D.M. For instance?

G.S. You once asked me about Agnon's attitude to erotica. A very pertinent question. In *Yamim Nora'im*, Agnon suppressed and excluded everything touching on it from his anthology, though a vast literature referring to the Days of Awe exists on the subject, and it stands not only on my bookshelves but on Agnon's as well. Agnon knew there is something called *tikkun habrit* (literally: "mending of the covenant") in the Kabbala - in the kabbalists' regulations - that is to say, things concerned with the rectification of sexual lapses, such as an incidence of nocturnal emission and the like. There is a vast literature in the Kabbala on the subject, but you would look in vain for any reflection of it in Agnon's books. I dare say you never noticed its absence at all, but I did. When *Yamim Nora'im* came out - and I consider it an outstanding book, an absolutely first-rate anthology, a really splendid piece of work - I went to see Agnon, and I praised the book to him, but I added: "Agnon, why did you suppress all the sexual material?" So Agnon said to me: "That isn't for the present generation." That was his answer to me. I said: "But how could you, knowing as you do what it meant for Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, what a positive mania for matters erotic he had; and how from the Zohar to..." Well, you see, that's censorship.

D.M. In this context, I would like to hear your opinion of an early story, *Agadat Hasofer* ("The Tale of the Scribe"), which you have often referred to as a perfect piece of art. You heard it from Agnon himself: Agnon read the manuscript out loud one evening in Berlin. This story tells of a scribe and his saintly wife who were barren, and who were yearning for a child but to no avail, till at last they decide to inscribe a Torah scroll in order to leave something behind after their death. The woman dies, and the scribe, Rafael, completes the task, and now he identifies the Torah scroll with his dead wife - he clothes it in her wedding dress. Two questions come up here. Firstly, it seems to me that Agnon implies throughout the story that these two never practised sexual intercourse at all.

G.S. I disagree with you.

D.M. I believe it can be proved.

G.S. I would like to see that. It's news to me. I think it goes entirely against the story's drift.

D.M. The story has a detailed description of several instances of the couple's marital life. The woman returns from the ritual bath and waits for her husband, who is studying Talmud at the synagogue. She has donned her best clothes. Her husband comes home and seeks to approach his wife, but as he draws near her he catches sight of the *mizrah*<sup>3</sup> reflected in the mirror, and his eyes meet the ineffable name of God written there, and at once the two separate. If I'm not mistaken, Agnon concludes this scene with the words: He is seated in this corner, and she in that, and they are far apart.

G.S. But that doesn't imply what you said. That is a particular instance, and on that I agree. Right.

D.M. To me it seems the event repeats itself. The same thing happens every time the woman returns from the ritual bath. These two are waiting for a miracle conception - for a child to be born without sexual intercourse.

G.S. I beg to differ on that.

D.M. Well, in that case we disagree about the interpretation of this story, and that disposes of my first question. I had meant to ask how you read this waiting for a miracle. Perhaps as a comic suggestion on Agnon's part? My second question is: How do you read the story's ending?

G.S. Agnon changed his own interpretation of the ending. It's one of the strangest of all my memories of him - and strange that it should happen with this particular story, which I consider a gem of a story, one of the most perfect he ever wrote. Agnon read the story from the manuscript in 1917, as I told you. Then - in 1919, I think - it was published by Lachover in Warsaw, and I only read it on my return from Switzerland - I had spent a long time in Switzerland, and I only returned shortly before the end of the war. I was staying in Munich at the time, and seeing a lot of Agnon. We talked about the story, which I had read in Lachover's publication, and I asked Agnon what the ending meant. Agnon said to me: "Didn't you understand? Didn't you understand the ending?" What I

hadn't been able to ecstasy at the end of is it only a vision?" die. You didn't understand surprised at a fellow there." I asked: "What Rafael has a semi-identification of the it's hinted in the story made a great impression referred to it again. the truth. I didn't in fact: I never imagined Agnon, said: "I phrase Agnon turned Orthodox were talking, and Hasofer, and Agnon do you mean by the Munich, something memory." - "What Agnon got very angry him so upset - and knew he was lying. he could have forged said nothing more interpretation - something like that used to be incident of the story ness"), about the Jewish safekeeping in a church was attacked by someone get those too - who Agnon got upset and the way. Agnon's achievement. Agnon story against the British shouldn't put their fabrication. There's said - remember? -

<sup>3</sup>*mizrah* - Decorative tablet hung on wall to indicate the direction of Jerusalem



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Agnon said to me:  
"What about the ending?" What I

the direction of Jerusalem

hadn't been able to decide for myself was whether the hero dies in  
ecstasy at the end or has a mystical vision. I asked: "Does he die, or  
is it only a vision?" And then Agnon told me: "Of course he doesn't  
die. You didn't understand. You didn't understand the hint. I'm  
surprised at a fellow like you failing to understand what it says  
there." I asked: "What does it say there?" And he answered: "That  
Rafael has a seminal emission. His mystical marriage and the  
identification of the Torah with his wife bring on an emission, and  
it's hinted in the story's final sentence - a hint to the chaste." That  
made a great impression on me. I reread the ending, and never  
referred to it again. I'm ready to swear that what I'm telling you is  
the truth. I didn't invent it. It came as a complete surprise to me, in  
fact: I never imagined that that was what the words implied. He,  
Agnon, said: "I phrased it in delicate language." Many years later  
Agnon turned Orthodox, and some time in 1960 or thereabout we  
were talking, and somehow the conversation turned to *Agadat  
Hasofer*, and Agnon said something about it. I said to Agnon: "What  
do you mean by that? You told me something quite different in  
Munich, something that has remained indelibly impressed on my  
memory." - "What did I say?" - I told him: You said thus and thus.  
Agnon got very angry, very upset - I hardly remember ever seeing  
him so upset - and he said: "I never said a thing like that." And I  
knew he was lying. Or had forgotten. Though I find it hard to believe  
he could have forgotten. And I had heard him with my own ears. I  
said nothing more. He had given it a completely different  
interpretation - some Orthodox interpretation. You see, many things  
like that used to happen with Agnon. Such as the well-known  
incident of the story *Ma'agalei Tsedek* ("The Paths of Righteous-  
ness"), about the Jew who in all naïveté used to put his money for  
safekeeping in a church collection-box under a crucifix. The story  
was attacked by some Orthodox idiot, or Orthodox scoundrel - you  
get those too - who claimed that Agnon worshipped Christianity, and  
Agnon got upset and very furious about it. It's a beautiful story, by  
the way. Agnon's short stories are altogether his greatest artistic  
achievement. Agnon declared at the time that he had written the  
story against the British Mandate, to point the moral that the Jews  
shouldn't put their faith in the British, and that's an outright  
fabrication. There's not a word of truth in it. But that's what he  
said - remember? - and we all know quite well that it isn't true, that

(opposite) Allegorical illustration from *The Tree of Life*  
by R. Haim Vital. Central Europe, 18th century;  
(overleaf) Scholem, 1978 and Agnon, 1966

he made it up. Because the last thing he was thinking of when he wrote that story was the British or their Mandate.

D.M. You mentioned the artistic perfection of Agnon's short stories, and you named at least one of his novels, *T'mol Shilshom*, as another work you consider perfect -

G.S. I find perfection in *Ore'ah Natah Laloan* ("Guest for the Night") and in *T'mol Shilshom*. I think those two novels are first rate.

D.M. Don't you find there is some disunity or structural dichotomy in *T'mol Shilshom*? How do you explain the appearance of the dog?

G.S. I'll tell you a story. *Sh'nei Talmidei Hachamim Shehayu Be'ireinu* ("Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town") is one of Agnon's greatest stories, which I admire very, very much. I think that his art is at its highest here, and that it is one of the best things he wrote. When *T'mol Shilshom* was published - or even before that, when the episode of Balak the dog appeared as a separate story, or perhaps it was only after the complete novel was published - Agnon came to see us, and we were discussing the book, and my wife told him: Your dog episode is really a repetition of *Sh'nei Talmidei Hachamim*, isn't it? In both stories we see a trifle - half a sentence, a word said unthinkingly, with a hint of malice perhaps, or half in jest - having devastating consequences. Both stories actually have the same structure. So Agnon told my wife: "How can you compare scholars to a dog?" That was his answer. You see the point? My wife was right.

D.M. She was a structuralist. She was concerned with the correspondence of structures and not of content, that's why she could compare scholars to a dog.

G.S. "How can you compare scholars to a dog" - that was his answer to her. Yes. I consider *T'mol Shilshom* a great book. It is very critical of the Old Yishuv.<sup>4</sup> It paints a very depressing picture. The hero is drawn into this mire, into this quagmire. And it is also severely critical of the Zionist community. As for his promise at the end - to write a book about the agricultural settlers - Agnon never intended to write it, he was just pretending. He only says: "To be continued." Because Agnon revered the Kibbutz Degania people. He revered people of integrity altogether - the doers, not the talkers. Though that didn't apply to *all* the Second Aliya<sup>5</sup> people but to many

<sup>4</sup>Old Yishuv - pre-State Jewish population of Palestine

<sup>5</sup>Second Aliyah - wave of Zionist immigration to Palestine, c. 1904-14



Paul Klee: *Angelus Novus*. This work held special significance for Gershom Scholem

of them – and to the Hapo'el Hatza'ir founders rather than the Ahdut Ha'avodah<sup>6</sup> people. Agnon felt close to the Hapo'el Hatza'ir people. Remember, he used to publish all his stories in the Hapo'el Hatza'ir organ then, and not by chance, you know. Though someone like Brenner – whom he profoundly admired and was influenced by – Brenner as it happens did *not* belong to Hapo'el Hatza'ir. Well, the ending of *T'mol Shilshom* is positive, because in the book proper Zionism doesn't come off too well. In *T'mol Shilshom*, no one comes off well except the dog, who pays with his life. The dog pays.

D.M. The dog does, and so does the hero, Yitzhak Kumer.

G.S. Yes, the hero and the dog pay. The dog is brilliant. From the literary point of view, *T'mol Shilshom* and *Ore'ah Natah Laloan* are on a far higher level than *Shira*.

D.M. Those two, and not *Sippur Pashut* ("A Simple Story"), which is generally regarded as a perfect literary whole?

G.S. I don't know. Look, personally I was very impressed by *Ore'ah Natah Laloan*. I think that in many ways it is a masterpiece. He foresaw the degeneration, the death throes of Galician Jewry long before it was massacred. It's as though he'd had some terrifying vision of them dying from within before they died at the hands of the German murderers. I consider it a great book.

D.M. How do you feel about Agnon's so-called "Kafkaesque" stories, meaning primarily those of *Sefer Hama'asim* ("The Book of Deeds"). To begin with, do you think there is some affinity between Agnon and Kafka, the Kafka world?

G.S. Look, let's keep the two apart. Let's take *Sefer Hama'asim* first. In my opinion, most of *Sefer Hama'asim* is simply dreams – dreams that he wrote down, and then crossed out the word "dream." That's basically what I think – that these are dreams Agnon dreamt. Not all the stories – a large number of them. Now to Kafka. Again, matters are complicated. I'm sure Agnon read Kafka. I haven't the slightest doubt of it. Yet he used to deny it hotly, with a kind of offended insistence – yes, it used to offend him. People would say: that is a real Kafkaesque story – and he: No, I never read Kafka in my life. And repeating it to whoever would listen. But he did, without the shadow of a doubt. He had him on his bookshelves, and

<sup>6</sup>Hapo'el Hatzair, Ahdut Ha'avodah – Zionist-Socialist labour movements in Palestine, established at the time of the Second Aliyah

he would always say: "Esther reads Kafka. It's she, Estherlein who reads Kafka." I'm sure I don't know why he denied it. He read Knut Hamsun and he would speak of him in the highest terms. But not Kafka. Why did he deny the obvious? For myself I have no doubt of it, nor am I the only one: we were all certain of it, and we only wondered why he took the trouble to deny it. It was a little absurd, really. But as for *Sefer Hama'asim* - that, I think, came from his innermost being.

D.M. In what way?

G.S. He wanted to show how flimsy the protection afforded by the traditional Torah way of life is. That is the moral of his *Sefer Hama'asim*. The same idea turns up in many of his other works, to be sure, but in *Sefer Hama'asim* it is the core. The Kafkaesque element is fairly apparent here. Both Kafka and Agnon show that you can't take a single step in life without bringing on catastrophe. You'll agree with me that that is the essential point of *Sefer Hama'asim*, and that, of course, is the point one learns from Kafka - yes, that one knock at the gate - and the process of destruction is set off. That is the gist of all Kafka's novels and short stories. To that Agnon added this issue of the Torah, which he knew more about than Kafka. But even with the protection of the Torah - you set out for a brief visit to a friend - you will never get there; you go to the post office to send off a parcel - but it won't get sent. All the stories turn on this point, don't they? It's a restatement of the Kafka theme in a negative form: even a Jew living by the Torah can't take a single step... And I believe that is the reason for all of Agnon's hesitation about publishing the stories. Because there is no other way of interpreting them except this, is there? And of course it's something he would never have wanted to be explicit about. The Orthodox, at all events, got into a great fury even so about the book. They put a ban on it, and it's forbidden to so much as mention its name to this day.

D.M. Do you believe that Agnon learnt something from psychoanalysis? In *Sippur Pashut*, for instance?

G.S. Don't ask me, I wouldn't know. Though I rather doubt it. I'm not qualified to seek out the psychoanalysis in Agnon. I expect Agnon had need - or rather had no need of Freud much as Proust had no need of him. He could write what he did without ever reading a word of Freud. His mentality is that of a man immersed in the language of story and parable, and it is through them he gauges the depths, and

he did not have to g

D.M. And finally, o Agnon, requires an e

G.S. That's true. R you must be well-read literary ambitions to heart, and only then

D.M. But doesn't t sibility and understa

G.S. My dear fr Shakespeare. What d all the literary and they? So what remain by George Steiner: question, which yo pertinence to Agno read - what will be I will know his way Shakespeare can't knowledge for gran your question. Becau full enjoyment of anyone today rever sources rather than can say what will h dare say they are m. These metamorphos Dostoyevsky today, thousand things the only one - he's only man drawing upon s is no end to the thi

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I rather doubt it. I'm Agnon. I expect Agnon uch as Proust had no t ever reading a word sed in the language of auges the depths, and

he did not have to go to Freud for that.

*D.M.* And finally, one last question: reading Agnon, understanding Agnon, requires an extensive acquaintance with Jewish lore -

*G.S.* That's true. Really to enjoy his work, appreciate it to the full, you must be well-read. And yet, mind you, every young Israeli with literary ambitions today starts out first of all learning Agnon by heart, and only then he begins to write.

*D.M.* But doesn't that have some grave implications for the accessibility and understandability of Agnon, now and in the future?

*G.S.* My dear friend, you can apply the same question to Shakespeare. What do people today make of Shakespeare? They miss all the literary and mythological allusions of which he's full, don't they? So what remains? Once, in Canada, I heard an excellent lecture by George Steiner: "Shakespeare Tomorrow." He asked this very question, which you may apply with the same justification and pertinence to Agnon. Steiner asked: How will Shakespeare be read - what will be left of him - in the next generation, when no one will know his way any more in all this mythology, without which Shakespeare can't really live; because Shakespeare took that knowledge for granted in the audience of his day. That is exactly your question. Because all this store of Jewish learning on which a full enjoyment of Agnon depends is falling into oblivion. Would anyone today revert to the study of our primary and secondary sources rather than read *belles-lettres*? It's a good question, but who can say what will happen to Shakespeare tomorrow? Or to Agnon? I dare say they are made of the stuff that can endure through change. These metamorphoses happen to the greatest of writers. A reader of Dostoyevsky today, of Balzac, or Flaubert - he'll come up against a thousand things that are obscure to him. Besides, Agnon isn't the only one - he's only the most prominent case in our literature of a man drawing upon sources. Yes, but take someone like Goethe: there is no end to the things in Goethe that no one today understands.

*D.M.* And yet the power of their art sustains them.

*G.S.* It may, yes. I think it is the only answer you can give. Agnon's artistic greatness is authentic, and that authenticity comes through even after you subtract everything that is of value to the initiated. Something comes through after all.

Translated by Miriam Arad