UNSETTLING JEWISH KNOWLEDGE

Text, Contingency, Desire

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PENN

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Chapter 2

Agnon's "At the Outset of the Day"
Body, Text, Interpretation

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Historically, literary research on S. Y. Agnon, the renowned Hebrew writer and 1966 Nobel laureate, has been tightly interwoven with the question of the "overt and covert" in his works. The first generation of Agnon critics, which included leading, influential Hebrew literary scholars,[1] perceived Agnon as a "master of disguise"[2] who imposes on his readers the interpretive task of excavating and extracting the buried treasure of meaning. Theirs is a history of reading "layers," almost always privileging the covert or hidden layer. Even scholars critical of overvaluing the covert layer, such as Dov Sadan[3] or his disciple Gershon Shaked who claimed that interpretation must focus on the reciprocal relationship between the two layers,[4] nonetheless subjugated the overt layer to the deciphered, covert one. Indeed, the covert can have multiple meanings. It can be romantic or modernist, national or psychoanalytic, and all that is up for discussion and debate, while the "overt" is left behind as secondary or unimportant. This type of reading seemingly extracts spiritual and metaphysical meanings concealed within the text, yet it is simultaneously occupied with covering and camouflaging the text's tangible and material elements, which are pushed aside in favor of the hidden and abstract. This suppression attests to a preference for the metaphysical and the transcendental and has long been adopted as a core, practically self-evident interpretive approach to Agnon's work.

In this chapter, I outline a different relationship between the overt and the covert in Agnon's work, especially regarding its allegorical manifesta-

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tions. My test case is Agnon's wonderful short story "At the Outset of the Day" (1952). My reading foregrounds the overt layer to observe how the tangible and visible operate in Agnon's allegorical work. However, I do not use a vertical, hierarchal model of the overt and covert, conscious and unconscious, nor do I give precedence to one over the other. Rather, I suggest an understanding of the abstract and the tangible not as layers but as continuous planes of similar value. Giving equal status to physical reality *and* to metaphysical symbols can deepen the allegorical meanings of the text and broaden its interpretive horizons. My reading does not reject an allegorical reading of the story or claim that the covert is irrelevant but shows how recognizing the overt tangible dimension offers new interpretations and brings new meanings to sight, meanings that cannot be explored by reading the covert dimension alone.

The Physical Reality of Allegory

"At the Outset of the Day"[5] takes place on the eve of Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) and is narrated by a father fleeing his home with his young daughter to escape unspecified aggressors, "the enemies who have destroyed my house"; they end their travels, penniless, in the city where he grew up in as a boy. As the holy day begins, they enter the city's Great Synagogue, which has two houses of study built beside it—a new one and an old one. In the synagogue, the father promises his daughter that "good people will soon come and give me a prayer shawl adorned with silver, just like the one the enemy tore apart . . . and for you, child of my soul, they will bring a little prayer book full of letters, full of all of the letters of the alphabet, and the vowel marks, too."[6] This analogy between the cloth and the book, between text and textile, continues throughout the enigmatic story, which seems to follow the sequencing of a nightmare. While the father is still speaking, his young daughter's dress catches fire from a memorial candle burning in the courtyard; the father tears the burning garment off her and then looks for something to cover her with. He finds no clothes in the synagogue, not even in the archival storeroom (*genizah*), because "when books were read, books would tear; but now that books are not read, they do not tear" (in Hebrew, "read" and "tear" are homonyms—*nikra* and *nikr'a*).[7] He seeks help from the adjacent house, that of the deceased rabbi, but discovers that the members of the household are as wretched as he is and that all their clothes are torn.

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When he returns to the synagogue, he finds his daughter naked and shivering, and he embraces her to keep her warm. Men entering the synagogue see the pair and mock the father, provoking his wrath. His daughter wants them to run away, but he manages to appease her by showing her the old study house and the Torah scroll wrapped in the lavishly adorned mantle, protected and held in place by a thick rope. At the end of the short story the father prays devoutly, and the sleepy child repeats his melodies in her sleep, "sweet melodies no ear has ever heard."[8]

Previous readings of the story emphasized the metaphysical meaning of its allegorical dimension. These readings interpreted the father's return to the scene of his past as his longing to return to the primordial and pure state of his soul, personified by his small, naked daughter.[9] According to these interpretations, the father's search for clothing for his daughter fails, because the clothes, symbolizing the holy scriptures, are torn and have been abandoned for some time: the Place (*ha-makom*) has been stripped of sanctity and all that remain are shallowness and spiritual poverty. Thus, the story expresses the desire for a new way of merging with one's origins (including textual, personal, and spiritual origins), of renewing contact with the wholeness and purity of the soul, as innocent and free of sin as a child. For example, in his analysis of the story, Baruch Kurzweil writes about "a generation devoid of clothes and books" and reads the story as an allegory for the experience of "times of crisis" and the "solution" offered by Jewish tradition:

> There is but a single purpose to the escape and return of the prodigal son and his daughter: the world of the forefathers, the world of yesterday, the world of the divine. . . . However, the remnants of the civilized world cannot conceal the nakedness of the terrible present. Because the danger not only threatens from without, through external enemies that strive to physically annihilate us, the destruction is also internal. . . . A relic of the primordial experience of Light is what saves the father and his daughter here, a remnant of that same unity that ever since has been revealed and connected with the present time of this age of adversity, of the Day of Atonement, under the shadow of fear and the desperate escape. And thanks to the power of the Light, from the wellspring of the Day of Atonement back then and throughout the ages, the narrating-self finds its redemption in the most corrupted of times.[10]

Kurzweil therefore reads "At the Outset of the Day" as an allegory for a spiritual crisis during a difficult time in history. The brokenness of the times is derived from the allegory. However, the story itself is not "broken" in such readings; rather, it leads us step by step, symbol by symbol, from the imagery to the underlying concepts. The ideas may be gloomy and pessimistic, especially from Kurzweil's point of view,[11] but the hermeneutic process he proposes is complete and organized and leads us safely toward healing and repair.

Undoubtedly, the story, which was written only a few years after World War II, relates to a state of crisis. The readers, like the author, know that the European synagogues and houses of study were destroyed in the war and could therefore offer neither material refuge nor spiritual salvation. The story's time is a retrospective gaze at the destruction of European Jewry from the perspective of its interim: the destruction has already begun, yet the desire for redemption still lingers. The retrospective gaze imbues this hope with irony while simultaneously charging it with the tangibility of perceptible structures that have not yet been destroyed; this tangibility connects not only the narrator's devastated past with his present moment in the synagogue but also the lost and ruined historical past with the reader's present moment. This temporal constellation implores us to be particularly sensitive to the possibility of rescue, specifically in its theological sense of revelation (implied by the vision of the Torah scroll and the daughter's singing).

Yet the prevailing criticism of the story strangely disregards the subversive physical presence placed at its center: a naked girl and her father in a synagogue on the Day of Atonement. As I show in this chapter, the overt situation presents a blatant provocation that points to sacrilege, heresy, and incestuous aspects, all of which are entwined with the desire for revelation. Earlier interpretations, which ignore the physical reality presented in the story, prefer to suppress the body in favor of a transcendental dimension. Here, I explore what happens to the daughter and father's plot when their bodies are read as tangible and material. Obviously, this too will necessitate interpretation—but will it elicit a different meaning? After all, once the body is treated not merely as a symbol but also as a physical reality, one cannot escape the poignant heretical element of sacrilege embedded in the physical presence of the naked daughter. My reading foregrounds the tangibility of the images and the presence of bodies, objects, and linguistic signifiers. After all, the allegorical figure is always based on a material reality, its "base matter." In his influential book on allegory, Angus Fletcher claims that "the

whole point of allegory is that it does not *need* to be read exegetically; it often has a literal level that makes good enough sense all by itself, even though it inevitably becomes richer with interpretation."[12] According an equal status to physical reality *and* metaphysical symbols can deepen our understanding of the allegory. In other words, my reading shows that attention to the tangible and the material elements of the story expands and complicates its allegorical meanings.

In fact, Agnon's story invites us to linger on bodily conditions, physical sensations, and various performative practices, which the text expresses in a sharp and excessive manner, beyond their function as references of abstract meanings. The story begins with an escape and proceeds with the great haste of the effort to find clothing before the outset of the holy day. Agnon repeatedly stresses the exceptional acceleration: "I fled in frenzied haste a night and a day";[13] "We have fled in terror, destruction at our heels";[14] "Night was drawing on";[15] and so on. The cold and chill, contrasted with the heat of the burning fire, are also mentioned repeatedly, emphasized by the little girl's recurring shivering and by moments of physical contact between the father and the daughter: "Grasping her hand in mine"; "I ripped off the flaming garment, leaving the child naked"[16]; "With my body I covered my little girl, trembling from the cold, and I stroked her hair."[17] Caressing the hair, for example, is not an action of covering the body and indicates an affective deviation, which draws attention to the physicality of the event. The same goes for the father's irrational quest for bits and pieces to cover his daughter's body, which relies on the materiality of the scrolls' shreds and his visit to the neighbor's house, which turn out to be pointless. The encounter with the two worshippers who mock the father and the daughter also involves a detailed demonstration of bodies and bodily gestures—a potbelly; beard and hair; height differences; teeth probing; eyes shining; and glasses being removed, wiped, and worn again and then again—while dwelling on the intonation and the performative manners of the dialogue, as well as the physical fight and the horrible rage the father feels. All these attest to the central role of corporeality, continually affected by various touches and injuries—violence, chill, cold, fire, movement, time, and, above all, at the heart of the story, the vulnerable nakedness and the lack of clothing that motivate the plot.

As we linger on the material reality of the text, we can find a reading of Agnon's story in which the overt and covert refuse to synchronize, even though they are inextricably intertwined. The abstract and the tangible di-

mensions of the text tell two different, even contradictory stories. The abstract level, in which the story's protagonist is the soul, presents a "positive" plot of purification and access to the sublime through the stripping away of corporeality, even if this transcendental moment occurs at the height of destruction and loss. By contrast, the tangible dimension relays a negative or "immanent" progression: a story about a father who fails to protect his daughter and rescue them both from an improper and contemptible situation, a story in which the protagonist is acting either in a world that is clearly devoid of metaphysical providence or in one whose metaphysical aim leads him toward grave desecration. However, the gap between these two stories is not necessarily a schism but rather a space in which the body and desire thrive as an undeniable reality. The inability to reason and synchronize the story of the spirit with that of the body not only highlights the material dimension but also refuses a mode of interpretation that selectively chooses certain meanings while suppressing others, thereby encouraging multiplicity. In the reading I propose, the "meaning" cannot be summarized by deciphering the covert layer of the story. Here, meaning is located not in the *outcome* of that deciphering activity but in the very *process* of seeking meaning.

Spirit and Matter, Imagination and Reality

Agnon begins his story thus: "After the enemies destroyed my home, I took my little daughter in my arms and fled with her to the city." After fleeing for a night and a day, the father and his daughter arrive at the courtyard of the synagogue in the city where he was born and raised: "Out of the depths rose the Great Synagogue, to its left was the Old House of Study, and directly opposite, one doorway facing the other, stood the New House of Study. This was a House of Prayer and these were Houses of Torah that I had held in my mind's eye for my entire life. If I chanced to forget them during the day, they would stir themselves and come to me at night in my dreams, just as they did during my waking hours."[18] The "depths" mentioned here are multivalent, referring to the theological "depths" in which redemption is sought, as in "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord."[19] Other connotations include "depths" as the most dejected state of being, a low point that is also an opportunity for redemption, the psychoanalytic aspect of the hidden "depth psychology," and the more straightforward temporal "depths"—the memory of bygone days.

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Out of which "depths" does this memory, which the narrator claims to have kept in his mind's eye every day and night, arise? The elusive quality of the sentence calls on us not only to question the narrator's credibility but also to notice the double dimension of the elements in the story, which exist both as overt and present *and* as covert and hidden in the depths. Moreover, the depths invite us to examine the story as a dreamscape, in which we witness the return of the repressed and the rise of hidden urges to the level of consciousness. As Ya'akov Bahat notes, it is no coincidence that the story's elements are reminiscent of the stories in *The Book of Deeds*,[20] which are all written as an imagined reality; that is, as types of dreams.[21]

Several characteristics invite us to read the story as a dream. First and foremost, there is its episodic structure, characterized by fragmented shifts between events and spaces, each of which features a scene that seems to stand alone, irrespective of the others, and is a blend of memories and events. Another indication is the delayed and inexplicable behaviors and reactions of the characters populating the spaces, such as those congregating at the neighbors' home or the two men with whom the narrator gets into a fight in the synagogue. The narrator's strange justifications seem dreamlike, as does his own absurd behavior; for example, when he rummages through the old torn books in the storeroom, hoping to use them as clothing for his daughter, as if torn pieces of paper are appropriate covering for a naked girl (when he could have simply covered her with his own coat).

At the same time, the boundaries of the dream as such are fuzzy and contain a dream within a dream. The dreamlike unfolding is presented as the physical realization and manifestation of an earlier dream. Near the end of the story the narrator repeats his dream about the synagogue and the Houses of Study: "I stood then with my daughter in the open courtyard of the Great Synagogue and the two Houses of Study, which all my life stirred themselves and came to me in my dreams and now stood before me, fully real."[22] Thus, Agnon blurs the distinction between an imagined state of being and a real one, between the concealed depths and the "full reality" on which the events take place. This very blending urges us not to rank the various levels as more or less important but rather to discuss them simultaneously. It is an entanglement that demands that we not ignore the physical and tangible aspect of things as we rush to uncover their meaning.

Once the father and daughter find refuge in the synagogue, the father tells her about the prayer book: "And now child of my soul, tell me, an Alef and a Bet that come together with a *kamatz* beneath the Alef—how are they

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read?" My daughter replied and said, "*Av*." I said to her, "And what does it mean?" My daughter replied and said, "Father, the way you are my father." I said to her, "You interpret so well, that's right, an Alef with a *kamatz* and a soft Bet are *av*."[23]

Here Agnon highlights the differences between the Hebrew words for "father" and "daughter": the alef (the first letter in *av*, father) has a kamatz vowel, and the bet (the first letter in *bat*, daughter) is soft. This is not merely about the vowel marks: *kamatz* in Hebrew means "clenched," reflecting the attributes of the closed and rigid father in the story, in contrast to his daughter who is soft: she is more gentle, dynamic, and open to the possibilities of interpretation and the shifting of meaning.

In his article honoring Agnon's receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature, Gershom Scholem describes him as the only Hebrew writer who strives to express the holy aspect of Hebrew, even as it is secularized in his writings.[24] Yaniv Hagbi also writes about the sanctification of the Hebrew language in Agnon's work: "If the language includes within it even just shards of sacred being, then the whole matter relating to the materialism of the language becomes linked with transcendence."[25] Indeed, the brief Hebrew lesson the father gives his daughter leads to transcendent conclusions; yet, it also leads to their opposite. The letters are meant to connect to one another, ascend through prayer, and thereby reach God:

> And now, my daughter, tell me, what father is greater than all other fathers? It is our Father in Heaven, who is my father, your father, and the father of the whole world. You see, my daughter, two little letters stand there in the prayer book, as if they were all alone, then they come together and lo and behold, they are Av. And not only these letters, but all letters, all of them join together to make words and words make prayers and prayers rise up before our Father in Heaven who listens very, very carefully, to the voice of our prayers, if only our hearts cling to the Light of On High as a flame clings to a candle.[26]

Seemingly, this segment is an ode to the transcendence reserved for the Holy Tongue, which is concerned with connections and conjunctions, a language in which the letters have a "soul" and they burn like a flame clinging to a candle, echoing the significance of fire in holy rituals of Jewish tradition. Yet immediately in the next sentence, out of nowhere comes a strong wind

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that blows through the courtyard, tipping the memorial candle onto the narrator's daughter. Her dress catches fire, the father tears the burning garment off her, and she is left naked. Ironically, the flames clinging to the candle do not raise the father's prayers to the Father up on high, but do much the opposite: it is as if the fire refuses to act in its symbolic dimension and instead insists on fulfilling its material role—to burn. The burned garment forces the believer to return to his corporeal, physical presence, as though refusing the offering of meaning that seeks to transcend the materialism of the language. Similarly, the father's preoccupation with the letters and the modes in which they are joined emphasizes their separate and distinct existence. The aspiration evoked by the father, to "join together" and "cling" through words of prayer, highlights the manner in which things—the language, the text, the textile—become dismantled and disintegrate. The burning garment seems to foreground the tangible skin—the materiality of the language and the text.

The Interpretation Is the Meaning

As noted, the allegorical approach that dominates interpretations of this story treats its material reality as a symbol of abstract and metaphysical meanings. In fact, Agnon directs his readers toward such a reading through his interpretation of the symbol of the little girl within the story. While the father looks in the genizah for something with which to cover his naked daughter, he remembers something he once found there:

> Again I looked in the storeroom where torn pages from books were kept, the room where in my youth I would find, among the fragments, terrible and wondrous things [*dvarim*]. I remember one of those things, it went something like this: At times she wears the form of an old woman and at times the form of a little girl. And when she takes the form of a little girl, do not say that your soul is as pure as a little girl; this is but an indication that she craves and yearns and longs to return to the purity of her infancy, free of sin. The fool substitutes need with form, the wise man substitutes need with will.[27]

The meaning of this passage is patently evident, and Agnon virtually hand delivers it to us. It is no coincidence that Samuel Leiter writes of the passage

that "once the symbol is grasped it is quite clear, almost over-specified."[28] Similarly, Rachel Ofer argues that this is "a symbolic story that contains the keys to its [own] deciphering. The story itself contains both the riddle and its solution. . . . The naked daughter is the naked soul, and her predicament is that of modern man whose soul is torn."[29] Indeed, Agnon prompts his readers to see the daughter as a symbol rather than an actual girl: not only does the narrator refer to her as "child of my soul" (*bat nafshi*) but also she is overtly positioned as a simile several times throughout the text: "Growing aware of my eyes, she looked at me—*like* a frightened child, finding her father standing behind her,"[30] or "I glanced at my daughter, the child of my soul, *as* a father glancing and looking at his little daughter."[31]

However, I find that the path from the allegory to its meaning is more meandering and subtle than it first appears. The narrator's words about the message hidden in the storeroom imply that part of the allegory deals with the act of interpretation itself. This is a moment in which the mechanisms of representation are revealed, in accordance with Walter Benjamin's insight into the allegorical method.[32] Agnon implies that, on the path from the covert to the overt, "interpretive errors" sometimes occur, namely: the "child" is understood as a personification of a pure soul, rather than as a representation of the actual desire to *become* pure. Later, the narrator returns to this matter and says to his daughter while she is naked and trembling: "I remember that I once found something grand here [in the genizah] about need and form and will. Were it not for our immediate needs I would give you a thorough interpretation of this matter, and you would see that this is no allegory, but a simple and straightforward affair."[33]

Thus, Agnon complicates the interpretation of his story: on the one hand he alludes to interpretive errors and offers the "correct solution," while on the other hand he claims that "this is no allegory, but a simple and straightforward affair." Although we may read this claim as ironic, it does suggest that we should give the text a reading of a *pshat* rather than a *drash,* to use the traditional Jewish hermeneutic terms.[34] But we can only arrive at the *pshat* once the matter has been thoroughly interpreted. The narrator's words direct us to understand the daughter both as a symbol and as an actual child, thus merging an allegorical reading with a literal one, while simultaneously rejecting "incorrect" readings. This moment reveals the challenge Agnon poses to the exegetic and the hermeneutic methods, which seek to "translate" the text's symbols. Along the vein of what Adorno had to say about Kafka, one could say that Agnon's story seeks interpretation while simultaneously rejecting it.[35]

According to the narrator, the appearance of the soul in the form of a little girl does not mean that the soul is as pure as a child, "but [is] an indication that she craves, yearns, and longs to return to the purity of her infancy, free of sin. The fool substitutes need with form, the wise man substitutes need with will."[36] At first it seems that Agnon is offering a Freudian interpretation here, given that his preference for "will" over "form" as the "correct" interpretation of the image of the little girl corresponds to Freud's view of dreams: "a dream is the fulfillment of a wish."[37] According to Freud, the dream makes our desires known to us: the dream images indicate the very existence of the desire. And yet, Agnon's aim is not to "interpret the dream." Rather, he directs us toward the longing itself, the very aspiration, placing the act of interpretation—that is, the *desire for meaning*—at the heart of the story.

To represent the desire, Agnon chooses three words—"craves, yearns, and longs"—which, though intermingled here, are in fact three different modes of will that are hierarchically ranked in classical thought. Instinctual craving, supposedly the lowest form, is indicative of physiological needs; yearning alludes to the sexual and emotional dimension; and longing is a type of religious-spiritual wish for divine revelation. However, if the story's focal point is not its meaning but the *desire* for meaning, it follows that the value of the overt is no less than the covert, because the overt is the tangible presence of yearning. Desire becomes tangible in the body and is connected both to the one who desires and to the object of desire, both in the state of lacking and in the "full," desired state. Therefore, we cannot bypass the physical presence of the body in a direct quest for the story's abstract meaning, which here is related to the soul. In Agnon's words, the craving and longing and yearning are identified as a "need": "The fool substitutes the need with form, the wise man substitutes the need with will." By evoking need, he brings us back to the body, specifically the naked body of a destitute little girl, trembling with cold, in the synagogue on the eve of the Day of Atonement.

The reading suggested by Agnon thus seems to make a contradictory request. It demands that we address intangible meaning even while emphasizing the material reality of the allegory: the naked body, the trembling, the need for clothing, the various materials sought as coverings, and so on. As noted, the dominant interpretation of the daughter is based on a dualism of body and spirit that, in asserting that the child is a metaphor for the soul, seemingly abandons her corporeal reality. However, the story complicates the

distinction between the body and the soul, or between language and material reality. From a metapoetic perspective, returning to the body as "need" challenges the dualistic hermeneutic distinction between content and expression, message and idea. Eschewing the dualism of body and spirit, allegory and meaning, the text directs us toward interpretation as an act that carries its own tangible reality: interpretation is an investigation, a quest, and a passion that take precedence over the act of deciphering and arriving at the solution. This privileging of investigation is a prominent feature of much of Agnon's work.[38]

In this manner, the failed search for clothing, which propels the story's plot, relates to the hermeneutic search for the "appropriate interpretation": one that can cover all of the cracks in the story and "complete" it. The failure to "cover up" the child, along with the torn fragments that used to fill the storeroom and the disintegrating clothing of the forlorn neighbors, portends the rejection of any "complete" interpretation. No longer does "this equal that," with all the pieces fitting nicely into the work of art: something must remain indecipherable, especially in the presence of the "real" tangible body. Even at the end of the story, the child remains naked. Agnon thus leaves the desire exposed: in other words, that which demands interpretation is left bare, without a stitch of clothing/solution.

Seemingly, the unresolved interpretive "chase" attests to an allegorical concept in the vein of De Man, who writes, "All allegories are always allegories . . . of the impossibility of writing."[39] In other words, they never produce knowledge about the physical or empirical world but instead detach from it, creating a spiraling chain of symbols that become increasingly distant from the meaning.[40] However, it seems that Agnon does not actually seek to send us spiraling into a game-like ontological dead end, moving ever further away from the material world; quite the contrary, he aims to bring us back to the body's place within the allegory. The "tearing" of the clothing is the reading of the text[41]: an activity that invades the raw materials of the story and blends in with them.

Like any other form of desire, interpretation has a threatening and negative aspect, represented here by the two Jews who arrive at the synagogue near the start of the prayer service and who see the naked daughter and her father. Both are presented as antithetical to the lost, destitute father and his daughter: the two men are heavy-set, gluttonous, and arrogant. One is a "long man with a red beard, picking from his teeth the last remnants of the final meal, letting his big potbelly out"; the other is a "tall, hefty fellow who boasted

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of being one of my dearest friends." The first, who is referred to as an enemy, and the second, who is referred to as a friend, can be seen as two modes of interpretation: the first mocks the father and his daughter and says "something with a double meaning," whereas the other casually repeats the narrator's words "as one who has heard a charming tale and repeats it. And as he repeated my words he turned his eyes away from me so that they might not see me and might imagine he had made up the story on his own."[42] These two types of interpreters observe the father and daughter's calamity from a detached distance, turning it into "a story" while ignoring the reality of their distress: "I raised my voice and shouted, 'A fire has sprung up and burned my daughter's dress, and here she stands shivering from the cold. . . . It's not enough that no one gives her any clothing, but they must abuse us, too!'"[43]

However, the father himself is also a type of "interpreter" who is concerned more with text than textile: although his failure to find clothing to cover up his daughter indicates a refusal to seal the interpretive process, it is also, quite simply, an abandonment of her in her nakedness. Readers might be horrified at the father's bizarre negligence and his abysmal failure to protect and maintain his daughter's safety, honor, and body temperature as he goes to look for torn pages in the storeroom, leaving her naked in the back of the synagogue as he turns to his neighbors, not for a single moment considering removing his own coat to cover his daughter's body.

Here the father's strength and stability are completely undermined: just as he lost his home to the attackers, he is not able to protect his daughter from the fire or to provide her with a garment to wear while she shivers from the cold. In the past, the father knew to cover the "sacred" book with a glorious red mantle adorned with silver threads, but now his daughter is forced to cover her body with her own hair, as if she knows that the chain of support and learning—from father to daughter—has been broken and she must fill in the gaps on her own. Her need to cover herself with her hair recalls the traditional rabbinic story about the daughter of the wealthy Nakdimon Ben Gurion, who lost everything after the destruction of the Temple. When Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakai encounters her (and this, too, is a father–daughter encounter of sorts), he sees her gathering kernels of barley "from under the feet of animals belonging to Arabs." The daughter covers herself with her hair and begs for his help and mercy, imploring, "Rebbe, provide for me." And the rabbi recalls her family's wealth and how rich fabric used to be spread beneath their feet. But instead of help and patronage, she receives a midrash:

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He said to her: Whose daughter are you?
She said to him: I am the daughter of Nakdimon Ben Gurion, do you not remember signing my *Ketubah*?
Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakai turned to his disciples and said: "I signed this one's *Ketubah* and in it I read [her dowry would consist of] a million gold dinars [indicating her family's wealth—S.S.] from her father's house and her father-in-law's house. They would not enter the Temple Mount to pray until exquisite fabrics had been rolled out beneath their feet, and they would enter and bow down and merrily return to their homes, and all my life I have sought this verse and found it: If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents. Do not read thy kids but thy corpses, for when the People of Israel do the will of the Omnipresent, no nation nor any kingdom has any power over them; but when they do not do the will of the Omnipresent, God delivers them into the hands of a base people, and not only into the hands of a base people, but under the feet of the beasts of a base people."[44]

Paralleling this rabbinic parable, "At the Outset of the Day" deals with the difficulties of losing spiritual and financial assets, as well as the great fall from the light, from the abundance and the love of Torah into abject poverty. In both cases, the fall is depicted through fabric—from delicate and expensive fabric spread out beneath their feet, or the narrator's daughter's "lovely clothes," to scarcity so severe that the daughter has nothing with which to cover herself but the hair on her head. In both stories, the textile alludes to the text, and the event is understood as an opportunity for *drash*, an inquiry into the meaning of a text. After his encounter with the daughter, Rabban Yohanan Ben Zakai arrives at a radical interpretation of a verse from the Song of Songs, which corresponds to the state of the people of Israel after the destruction of the Temple. The child's father also deals with textual interpretation, interpreting her nakedness as a symbol expressing the desire for purification. Much like Ben Zakai, he views material decline as punishment for spiritual decline, a thought he also expresses through allusion to the Song of Songs: "I sought but found nothing. Wherever I directed my

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eyes, I met emptiness."[45] In both cases, the wretched daughter is abandoned—in the midrash, by Ben Zakai, who does not grant her request for food, and in Agnon's story, by the father, who fails to provide her clothing. In both cases, the fathers' failings strongly echo the eroded figure of God himself who is, according to the narrator, "Our Father in Heaven, who is my father, your father and the father of the whole world."[46]

Agnon repeatedly implies that *drash*, the interpretive or midrashic act, cannot fill in the cracks or provide a real solution. The wise man who "substitutes the need with will" neglects the material reality of the need—a reality of nakedness, poverty, and cold—in favor of spiritual and interpretive lessons. This is apparent also given the father's baffling choice to seek clothing for his daughter in the corner of the genizah, of all places:

> I said to myself, I'll go to the corner of the storeroom where the torn books are hidden away, perhaps I'll find something there. Many a time when I was a young man I rummaged about in there and found many things, sometimes the end of a matter and sometimes its beginning or its middle. And now I turned there and found nothing with which to cover my little girl. And don't be surprised that I found nothing. When books were read, they would tear; but now that books are not read, they do not tear.[47]

The search for torn pieces of text to use as clothing accentuates the materiality of the parchment and, by implication, the materiality of the Holy Tongue, which sanctifies the matter on which it is etched. The function of the genizah is to preserve sacred texts that are no longer in ritual use for example, they may be torn), but because they are holy, they cannot be used for everyday purposes nor destroyed. The stored text is sacred despite its flaw and is devoid of practical use. The father's turning to the genizah is akin to an attempt to restore to use—in a sense, grant new life—to that which has been removed from use. Kurzweil, for example, sees the genizah as a symbol for the world of the forefathers, a world gone by; thus, he interprets the father's search in the genizah allegorically, as a search for a solution to the spiritual emptiness characteristic of the present generation. However, this interpretation overlooks the fact that on the literal level, as a *pshat*, using texts from the genizah to cover a naked body is an act of sacrilege, the desecration of a ritual object by using it for everyday purposes. Such an interpretation also fails to address the dual aspect of genizah as a place and an act that signify

both sanctity and desecration: the stored texts are sanctified and therefore cannot be destroyed, but they are no longer fit for ritual and therefore are not to be used. Agnon subtly alludes to this duality by mentioning the "beginning or conclusion of a matter" in relation to the genizah, which calls to mind the Babylonian Talmud's discussion of the book of Ecclesiastes.

The Babylonian sages were troubled by what they perceived as an incoherence in Ecclesiastes: its beginning and ending were appropriately God-fearing, but its central section verged on heresy. The Babylonian Talmud thus narrates, "Rab Judah son of Rab Samuel Bar Shilat said in Rab's name: The Sages wished to store away the Book of Ecclesiastes, because its words are self-contradictory; yet why did they not store it away? Because its beginning is religious teaching and its end is religious teaching."[48] As Gil'ad Sasson writes, in response to these internal contradictions in Ecclesiastes, the Babylonian sages prefer to accuse Solomon (traditionally considered the author of Ecclesiastes) merely of literary "negligence" (carelessness) rather than outright heresy, which was the charge made by the Jerusalem Talmud.[49] Thus, because of the sages' reluctance to charge Solomon with an accusation as grave as heresy, the Babylonian Talmud depicts the Book of Ecclesiastes as an inconsistent text. Still, it deems it worthy of inclusion among the holy books by virtue of its beginning and end, which provide a question and answer, respectively, that affirm the worship of God and the word of the Bible. By alluding to the Babylonian discourse, Agnon characterizes the storing of sacred texts not only as closely intertwined with the question of interpretation but also as a place of contradiction. By association, the arena of the story itself emerges as one divided by conflicting desires, a space in which the possibility of heresy constantly echoes. Thus, the "beginning" or "end" of a matter—the affirmation of faith and meaning—cannot restore their lost validity.

Body, Desire, and Incest

"At times she wears the form of an old woman and at times the form of a little girl," the narrator says about the appearance of symbols. On the contrary, the little girl does not "wear" anything at all. Her dress is burned, she is naked, and she remains naked until the very end of the story while remaining in a sacred place on a sacred day. And indeed, the desire for spirituality that the story aspires to, the desire for the Torah embodied in the

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illuminated vision of the Old House of Study, is manifested through a father who leaves his daughter naked. I find it especially striking that the critics ignored this disturbing matter in favor of what they present as the story's hidden meaning, which is more palatable and easier to contain. Even though the story tempts us to interpret its material elements as "spiritual" ones, the very act of turning to the abstract allows us to skip over what it means at face value. Like an open letter, it tells us another story of desire, a transgressive story that brings incestuous desire into the holiest of holy, during that liminal time on the eve of the Day of Atonement that seems to invite lawlessness and debauchery as a prelude to the suffering intended to purify the soul.

Indeed, incestuous desire is present implicitly or explicitly in other works by Agnon, works, particularly the "family romances" populating his stories, such as "'Ido and 'Enam," "A Simple Story," "Betrothal," and "In the Prime of Her Life."[50] However, "At the Outset of the Day" does not belong to this group of love or family stories. Its incestuous aspect takes on a different meaning: going beyond the psychoanalytic oedipal dimension, it relates both to the interpretive desire and the wish for redemption. Incestuous desire functions as the transgression through which redemption might gleam.

Of course, as long as we downplay the soul's personification in the form of a little girl, there is no disturbing incestuous allusion: if the daughter is not a daughter at all, but simply the suffering and tormented soul of the narrator, there is nothing truly problematic about her naked presence: it is no more than a transparent symbol. In that sense, her nakedness and the cold go along with the torment of the body and soul as the Day of Atonement approaches, seeming to purify the soul as it opens up to receive the light of the Torah. And yet, clearly Agnon does not skip over the incestuous dimension but makes it present in the story, both explicitly and implicitly. He does so explicitly through the mocking of the two worshippers, which causes the narrator to go on the offensive: "With my body I covered my little girl, trembling from the cold, and I stroked her hair. . . . He [the worshipper] regarded us for a moment, ran his eyes over us, then said something with a double meaning. My anger flowed into my hand, and I caught him by the beard and began yanking at his hair."[51]

Freudian psychoanalysis teaches us that our displays of passion are shaped by the early models of our infantile desires. From this perspective, the desire for forbidden sexual relations is the covert and unconscious layer of our

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overt preferences, which act as "symptoms" of this suppression. Agnon's story inverts this symptomatic logic: here, the incestuous tension appears not as a "hidden meaning" but quite explicitly in the father's embrace of his naked daughter and in the ridicule directed at them by the men who enter the synagogue; therefore, this tension need not be gleaned from symptoms. Once we address the tangibility of the naked body and the various interactions with it, the incestuous aspect can no longer be seen as hidden but has a presence of its own. Yet, it is precisely because the heretical nakedness of the body is overt and present that existing interpretations have steered away from it and gravitated toward the abstract and implicit realm.

The incestuous dimension also arises in the story in some elusive, indirect ways. For example, the narrator leaves his naked daughter at the synagogue and goes out in search of clothes for her in the home of Reb Alter, who had been a friend of his father. Returning to this province of the past momentarily confuses him: "Because so many years had passed, I mistook Reb Alter's daughter for her mother."[52] The confusion between mother and daughter as the father's life partner (a central theme in "The Prime of Her Life") echoes with the potential for incestuous transgression.

The same can be said of the intra-textual allusion to one of Agnon's earlier stories, "The Tale of the Scribe," which has multiple links to "At the Outset of the Day."[53] In both stories a candle sets a garment on fire in a synagogue. In "The Tale of the Scribe," this event provides the context for Raphael and his future wife Miriam to become acquainted. On the eve of Simhat Torah, Raphael is singing and dancing, holding the Torah scroll in his arms. An enthusiastic little girl—Miriam—"pushed her way through the legs of the dancers, leaped toward Raphael, sank her red lips into the white mantle of the Torah scroll in Raphael's arm, and kept on kissing the scroll and caressing it with both her hands. Just then the flag fell out of her hand, and the burning candle dropped on Raphael's clothing." This intimacy leads to their betrothal and marriage: "And for Raphael and Miriam's wedding, a new garment was made for him."[54]

Agnon depicts the passion for the Torah, which burns like a fire, as an erotic event. The conversion of the Raphael–Miriam couple into the father–daughter couple in "At the Outset of the Day" tinges the burning of the garment in the synagogue on the Day of Atonement with a hint of desire; that is to say, an incestuous desire. However, if in "The Tale of the Scribe" it is Raphael's clothing that is set on fire with the young girl's passion, in "At

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the Outset of the Day" it is the young girl's garment that is burning and revealing the father's desire.

The Desire for Redemption

It is impossible to separate the pronounced desire of the narrator, whose soul "yearns to return to the purity of its infancy, free of sin," from his current state of being: this is no routine passion or fixed theological longing. It is a yearning that emerges in an hour of destruction while the narrator and his daughter are stranded, homeless, and stripped of their property—lost, impoverished, and isolated. The daughter's nakedness expresses, above all, a return to an unparalleled state of vulnerability, which is also the state of death ("Naked came I from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither")[55] and the state of birth, a new beginning when everything is still possible and the potential is infinite. In this sense it is also the desire to be reborn, made possible precisely by the state of destruction. It is a desire that intensifies in the presence of the place and the permission granted at this specific time: the Day of Atonement, a day on which redemption is sought, when the possibility of repentance—the opportunity to turn over a new leaf and claim a clean slate—becomes available. In this sense the naked child embodies both the desire to go back in time—to the familiar and the known, to the past as embodied in childhood, family, and tradition—and the desire for the future, for redemption, and starting over in a different way. Paradoxically, redemption becomes possible through transgression and from within it—an idea related to Gershom Scholem, as discussed later.

The story's incestuous dimension signals the desire to eliminate distinctions or erase boundaries between subject and object, between the individual and the other, between generations; it expresses the urge for the father and daughter to merge and be swallowed up in each other, to undo any separation between purity and sexuality, desire and faith. As such, the girl found naked—not only in the courtyard of the synagogue but also at the end of the story, even at the height of prayer and in the presence of the Torah scroll—can almost be seen as the transplant of a Frankist fantasy into the heart of a sacred space.[56] It echoes the notorious event that took place in the Frankist cult, which met with great resistance and ultimately led to its excommunication. I am referring to the antinomistic erotic ritual that occurred in Lanckorona in Podolia (Poland), in 1756, when the wife of the local rabbi

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danced naked with a Torah crown on her head, while Frank's followers danced around her, kissing her naked body as if it were a mezuzah.[57] Indeed, the ascended spiritual state that the child unknowingly reaches in the final scene of the story, as she dozes off in the corner of the synagogue repeating in her sleep, "each and every prayer in sweet melodies no ear has ever heard," can be seen as a *mitzvah haba'ah be-'aveyrah* (a mitzvah that comes about through sin), as Gershom Scholem refers to the dominant principle of Frankism.[58]

Here it should be noted that in *A City in Its Fullness* (*Ir u-melo'ah*), Agnon depicted Jacob Frank as a native of his own city, Buchach, even though he was well aware that this was a dubious claim (every scholar of Frankism, including Scholem, Agnon's friend, agrees that Frank came from Podolia).[59] Agnon does indeed call Frank a "despicable specimen," and there is no reason to assume that he himself supported the nihilistic notion that the abrogation of Torah is its fulfillment. At the same time, it is clear that, along with his understandable aversion toward Frank, he is also enchanted by the very possibility of such a figure. In addition to the special intention directed toward the feminine aspect of the divine, reflected in "At the Outset of the Day" through the femininity of the soul, Frank's doctrine also offers a literalization of religious allegoresis. Rachel Elior writes that Jacob Frank established "a world in which the abstract and the sensory, the symbolic and the metaphoric, the heavenly and the corporeal have become indistinguishably merged with one another . . . [He] turned the written mystical text of the Kabbalistic myth and the visionary revelation referring to the upper worlds into a mystical theater playing out in this world, dramatizing the abstract through the tangible and the symbolic through the ritualistic."[60] As Israel Yuval notes, this approach abandons traditional medieval symbolism, which is detached from the tangible, and ascribes a realistic ontological status to religious symbolism.[61]

This is the lens through which we need to consider the Frankist-like allusions in Agnon's story: they are an invitation to adopt a new attitude about the relationship between the abstract and the tangible, the overt and covert—one that confers central importance on the physical and material presence. The realization of abstract meanings might also distort or alter those very meanings. The passion expressed in the story demonstrates that the desire for redemption and for the sublime in general cannot help but pass through the body and be manifested within it. But once the body is truly involved, it is no longer merely a symbol: in fact, its physical reality disrupts the metaphysical meaning of the story as a "positive" plot of purification and

access to the sublime through disembodiment. Even though previous interpretations have been quick to turn to the story's metaphysical meaning, to the soul and the spirit, the entire story is steeped in "physis" and desire, as if opposing this very desertion.

Even though the story as a whole expresses the nakedness of the girl as reflecting both physical and spiritual suffering and as a shameful situation that calls for a solution that the father fails to find, at the end of the story the search for clothing suddenly stops, and nakedness no longer seems to appear as a problem to be solved; nor does it prevent the father and the daughter from witnessing the Torah scroll and taking part in prayer. This ending is ambivalent and can be interpreted in two opposing ways: both as a heretic transgression *and* as a moment of religious sublimity, a fragment of a redemptive bright light that flashes beyond time. This tension between sacrilege and holiness is far from being solved.

At the end of the story, in front of the new scroll that is clothed in a mantle, the narrator says, "And of its own accord, my spirit wrapped itself and I stood and prayed as those wrapped in prayer shawls and ritual gowns. And even my little girl, who had dozed off, repeated in her sleep each and every prayer in sweet melodies no ear has ever heard." The wrapping of the spirit indicates that at long last clothing was found for the soul and that it is protected and contained, just as the sacred book is. At the same time, in Hebrew, the phrase *nit'atfah 'alay nafshi*, "my spirit wrapped itself," divulges a gloominess and depression (see Jonah 2:8) and implies that the solution is no solution at all. The daughter's singing is also multivalent: it is both creative and religious, but it also contains an element of blasphemy and desecration, as "the voice of a woman is indecent" (*kol be-isha 'ervah*); let us not forget that she is still naked. Here we should also mention Gemulah's singing in Agnon's "'Ido and 'Enam," and Miriam–Devorah in his story "The Cantors," *Ha-ḥazanim*. This singing contains a strange duality: on the one hand, it "repeats" the words that have been sung throughout the ages from the prayer book, and on the other it seems to be something completely new and original, something "no ear has ever heard." Much like the incestuous dimension, this dualistic performance of old and new, past and future, alludes to a desire to eliminate partitions. The prayer of the naked female body becomes a song that slips out inadvertently; it is unintentional singing that is all pure sound, "sweet melodies"—meaning language in its most corporeal and materialistic form, untranslatable, in its very becoming, even before it enters the chain of signification and is regulated within it.

In this way, Agnon complicates the distinction between body and soul, language and material reality, allegory and meaning, the transcendent and the immanent. The return to the body in its appearance as a "need" not only reflects a criticism of the dualistic hermeneutic act itself, which distinguishes between content and expression, message and idea: it also constitutes a crucial and vulnerable tombstone for the moment of destruction, even as it captures, with a special physical and tangible force, the longing for spiritual and actual redemption, its bitter failure, and the myriad tensions and paradoxes they reveal.[62]

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independent story. The 1974 edition of *Shirah* also includes a 'Final Chapter' in which the male protagonist of the novel, the historian and would-be dramaturg Dr. Manfred Herbst, decides to follow his beloved, the now sick Shirah, to the lepers' residence. In 'Forevermore' the scholar Adi'el Amzeh makes a similar decision not for the love of a woman but rather for the love of knowledge [!]: he enters a lepers' residence only to gain access to an old manuscript that held an indispensable clue for the historical study to which he has dedicated his whole life."

63. For example, *Shirah*, 243: "Should I admire the fact that some good for nothing ignored his wife and young children while they were dying of hunger so he could enjoy being idle—what some call 'worshipping god'?"

64. Agnon dedicated himself to "rebuilding" his hometown Buchach in his late stories, yet never had them published . His stories were posthumously published in the book *'Ir u-melo'ah* (1973) and only recently translated to English as Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks, eds., *A City in Its Fullness* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2016).

65. For example, Rabbi Simha Eilberg, *Akeidath Treblinka* (Shanghai: n.p., 1946); Eliezer Berkovits, *With God in Hell: Judaism in the Ghettos and Death Camps* (New York: Sanhedrin Press, 1979); and Elie Wiesel, *Night, Dawn, the Accident: Three Tales* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972). According to Eilberg, the 'Akeydah "moved with Israel from land to land until it ended up in the death camp"; see "The Akedah of Treblinka," in *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses During and After the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 192–98. See also Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, "Holy Fire," in *Wrestling with God*, 30–40; Gershon Greenberg, "Ultra-Orthodox Jewish Thought About the Holocaust Since World War II: The Radicalized Aspect," in *Wrestling with God*, 11–25; Gershon Greenberg, "Sacred Death for Orthodox Jewish Thought During the Holocaust," in *Interaction Between Judaism and Christianity in History, Religion, Art, and Literature*, ed. Marcel Poorthuis, Joshua Schwartz, and Joseph Turner (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 289–315. See also Feldman, "'Not as Sheep Led to Slaughter?'"

66. For details, see Feldman, *Glory and Agony*. Portions of this chapter were presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies in Washington, D.C. (December 2011), at a Bar-Ilan University International Conference on "Nazism, Holocaust, and Ethics" (May 2018), and at a colloquium on "Mechanisms for Change and Development in the History of the Jews and Judaism" sponsored by both NYU and Tel Aviv University (May 2019). My thanks to the organizers and participants of these meetings for their fruitful critiques and suggestions, as well as to the editors and readers of the present version.

Chapter 2

1. This group includes Dov Sadan, Baruch Kurzweil, Meshulam Tukhner, David Kena'ani and others.

2. See Avino'am Barshay, "Kavim ba-bikoret le-dyukan Agnon ha-sofer," in *S. Y. Agnon ba-bikoret ha-'ivrit: sikumim ve-ha'arakhot 'al yetzirato,* Vol. 1, ed. Avino'am Barshay (Tel Aviv: Schocken, Open University, 1991).

3. Dov Sadan, "Be-mevoey sefer ve-sofro: mavo," in *Pesher Agnon*, ed. Meshulam Tukhner (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1968), 7–26.

4. Gershon Shaked, *Omanut ha-sipur shel Agnon* (Merhavia: Sifriat Po'alim, 1973).

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5. From the collection of stories *Thus Far* (*'Ad henah*), 1952. S. Y. Agnon, "'Im knisat ha-yom," in *'Ad henah* (*Thus Far*) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1952), 171–77. See the English translation in S. Y. Agnon, "At the Outset of the Day," in *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. Nahum Glatzer and trans. Isaac Franck (New York: Schocken, 1970), 7–25. Excerpts from the story are based on the English translation but have undergone certain revisions; page numbers refer to the Hebrew publication. The first version of this story was published under the title "Between the House and the Yard" (Beyn ha-bayit ve-lakhatzer) in Y. L. Barukh, *Sefer ha-mo'adim: parashat mo'adey Israel, 'erkam, giluyehem ve-hashpa'atam be-ḥayey 'am Israel u-ve-sifruto mi-ymey kedem ve-'ad ha-yom ha-zeh* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1950).

6. "At the Outset," 172.

7. "At the Outset," 173.

8. "At the Outset," 177.

9. See Shmuel Yeshaya Pnueli, "Yetzirato shel S. Y. Agnon," in *Tarbut ve-ḥinukh* (Tel Aviv, 1960); Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot 'al sipurey S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1963); Ya'akov Bahat, "'Im knisat ha-yom le-S. Y. Agnon: mekorot ve-'iyun," *Ha-ḥinukh* 39, no. 6–1 (1967): 121–27; Samuel Leiter, *Selected Stories of S. Y. Agnon* (New York: Tarbut Foundation, 1970); Hillel Barzel, "Ha-poetikah shel S. Y. Agnon," *Sde ḥemed* (February–March 1971): 261–79; Edna Aphek, *Ma'arakhot milim: i'yunim be-signono shel S. Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Dekel Academic Publishing, 1979); Malka Shaked, "Be'ayat yom ha-kipurim u-fitronah be-yetsirat Agnon," in *Ḥikrey Agnon: 'Iyunim u-meḥkarim be-yetsirat S. Y. Agnon*, ed. Hillel Weiss and Hillel Barzel (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1994), 321–35; Rachel 'Ofer, "'Im knisat ha-yom': Yamim nora'im ve-teshuvah be-yetzirato shel S. Y. Agnon," in *Teshuvah u-psykhologiyah* (Alon Shvut: 2001): 67–76; Yaniv Hagbi, *Lashon, he'ader, mis'ḥak: Yahadut ve-superstrukturalism ba-poetikah shel S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Carmel Publishing House, 2007); Galili Shahar, *Gufim ve-shemot: kri'ot be-sifrut yehudit ḥadashah* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 2016).

10. Kurzweil, *Masot*, 176, 277.

11. On this matter Moshe Goultschin, analyzing Kurzweil's critical work, notes,"Kurzweil takes advantage of the way in which he fills the comprehension gaps in Agnon's work to sway the cultural consensus towards a defiant, pessimistic reading of Agnon's work." Goultschin, *Barukh Kurzweil ke-parshan shel tarbut* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Publishing, 2009), 168.

12. Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 7. James Paxson, writing on new trends in cultural studies, notes a renewed attunement to allegory, a trope that deconstruction has almost anaesthetized and taken out of use due to its over-application. Paxson, "(Re)facing Prosopopeia and Allegory in Contemporary Theory and Iconography," *Studies in Iconography* 22 (2001): 1–20. In the twenty-first century, new emphasis has been placed on the materialism of allegory and its physical, bodily, and corporeal elements—sexuality, desire, violence, abjection, and pain; this is in contrast to the traditional manner in which it was generally handled, as a mechanism for expressing abstract ideas and meanings, and unlike Paul De Man's deconstructive treatment, which emphasizes the allegory's self-reference and its detachment from the empirical world.

13. "At the Outset," 171.

14. "At the Outset," 172.

15. "At the Outset," 173.

16. "At the Outset," 172.

17. "At the Outset," 175.

18. "At the Outset," 171.

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19. Psalm 130, KJV.

20. *The Book of Deeds* (*Sefer ha-ma'asim*) by Agnon is a collection of thirteen short stories (first published as a collection in 1941), all characterized by a nightmarish and surreal style that blurs the boundaries of time and place, as well as the borders between life and death, reality and imagination. See Agnon, *Samukh ve-nire'e* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1950).

21. Bahat, "'Im knisat ha-yom," 122.

22. "At the Outset," 177.

23. "At the Outset" 172.

24. Gershom Scholem, "Reflections on S. Y. Agnon," *Commentary* (December 1967): 59–66.

25. Hagbi, *Lashon, he'ader, misḥak,* 282.

26. "At the Outset," 172.

27. "At the Outset," 175.

28. Leiter, *Selected Stories,* 92.

29. Ofer, "'Im knisat ha-yom,'" 74.

30. "At the Outset," 172.

31. "At the Outset," 177; emphasis added.

32. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998), 175.

33. "At the Outset," 177.

34. *Pshat* and *drash* are two classical methods of Jewish exegesis. *Pshat* is defined as referring to the surface or direct meaning of a text, whereas *drash* is the attempt to interpret and fill gaps in the text, mostly to draw a lesson out of this interpretation.

35. "Each sentence says: 'interpret me,' and none will permit it." See also Theodor W. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 246.

36. "At the Outset," 175.

37. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1955), 147.

38. This tendency also relates to Agnon's prominent interest in scholarly characters, as is evident in works such as "Betrothed" (*Shevu'at emunim*), "'Ido and 'Enam" (*'Ido ve-'Enam*), *Shira*, and others—as opposed to his lack of interest in "author-writer" characters (see also Scholem, "Reflections," 59–66). This interest also places the interpretive desire at its center, as the preferred activity rather than the solution. A typical story in this context is "Forevermore" (*'Ad 'olam*), in which 'Adiel 'Amzeh spends his days consumed with his research on the lost city of Gumlidata in an attempt to understand from which gate the city was conquered—meaning from which direction one should approach the text: not only the "history of Gumlidata" text but also the story "Forevermore" itself. Even after he solves the riddle of the gate, 'Amzeh continues to research the book "Forevermore" at the lepers' home. Yaniv Hagbi notes that Agnon's insistence on being cryptic while rejecting a solution is his way of enriching the interpretive spectrum and directing his readers' attention to the creative act itself; see Hagbi, *Lashon, he'ader, mis'hak,* 236–238.

39. Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 205.

40. Paul De Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1983), 222.

41. Edna Aphek writes about Agnon's fusion between the Hebrew homonyms "tear" and "read" (*kra*) in this story: "Tearing and reading have merged in the story to weave a dead world; a world in which no activity takes place." See Aphek, *Ma'arakhot milim,* 31. By contrast, I view the tearing as an invitation to partake in creative interpretive activity.

42. "At the Outset," 176. Agnon repeatedly uses the motif of copying. Thus, in "In the Prime of Her Life" (*Bi-dmi yamehah*), where 'Akavia Mazal's diary is repeatedly copied; in "The Tale of the Scribe" (*Agadat ha-sofer*), which tells the story of a Torah scribe; in "Forevermore" (*'Ad 'olam*), where 'Amzeh copies the chronicles of Gumlidata. The special emphasis on the act of copying, repetition, and reconstruction shows that, for Agnon, these are the avenues of creation. But here, "creation" takes on a negative meaning because the repetition of the father's words seeks to erase his real despair and even his own self, whereas in the other works I mentioned the act of copying is steeped in matter and does not deny it.

43. At the Outset," 176.

44. *Sifre Devarim* 31:14.

45. "At the Outset," 173. See also the Song of Songs 3:1. On Agnon and the Song of Songs, see Ilana Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

46. "At the Outset," 172.

47. "At the Outset," 173.

48. B. Shabbat 30b.

49. Gil'ad Sasson, "'Mishley ve-Shir ha-shirim ve-Kohelet gnuzim hayu': levateyhem shel ha-tana'im ve-ha-emora'im be-yahas le-sfarav shel Shlomo ha-melekh," in *Hokhmat hayim ve-shirat hayim*, eds. Leah Bornstein-Makovetsky, Nitza Davidovitch, and Orzion Bartana (Ariel: Ariel University Press, 2009), 205–16.

50. On expressions of incest in "'Ido and 'Enam" see Tsahi Weiss, "Lada'at mi-bli lada'at," *Reshit* 1 (2009): 261–277; on expressions of incest in "Betrothal," see Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers*. Nitza Ben-Dov's book *Their Praise* (*Ve-hi tehilatekha*) presents incestuous desire as a motivating force of the plot in modern Hebrew literature and shows that Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua draw the incestuous schemes in their novels from the works of S. Y. Agnon. Ben-Dov, *Ve-hi tehilatekha: 'Iyunim be-yetzirot S. Y. Agnon, A. B. Yehoshu'a ve-'Amos 'Oz* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2006).

51. "At the Outset," 175–76.

52. "At the Outset," 174.

53. There are many links and echoes between these two stories, including their prominent preoccupation with clothing and parchments of sacred texts, the tone and melody of prayer, and the space of the synagogue. For an interesting reading of the tensions between Eros and creation in "The Tale of the Scribe," see Michal Arbel, *Katuv 'al 'oro shel ha-kelev: 'Al tfisat ha-yetzirah etzel S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006).

54. Agnon, "The Tale of the Scribe," trans. David S. Segal, in *Twenty-One Stories*, 23–24.

55. Job 1:21 KJV.

56. "Forevermore," too, expresses a Shabtaian or Frankist debauchery, because "heresy is at the very core of Gumlidata"; see Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers,* 124.

57. On the Frankist ceremony in Podolia see Pawel Maciejko, *The Mixed Multitude: Jacob Frank and the Frankist Movement 1755–1816* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

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58. Gershom Scholem, *Meḥkarim u-mekorot le-toldot ha-shabta'ut ve-gilguleyhah* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1982), 9–67.

59. This appears in a chapter whose title is also related to the matter at hand, called "Things that Are Better Concealed than Revealed," where the text reads: "But among all of Buczacz failings we could not find even one of its sons who followed Jacob Frank, even though this despicable specimen was from Buczacz and in Buczacz he was born on Kolorevka Street, and because there is one small town called Koroluvka some chroniclers mistakenly chronicled Frank's birth as having happened in the city of Koroluvka, and indeed Frank was born on Kolorevka in Buczacz, and Kolorevka Street in Buczacz is two and a half kilometers long, about the size of a small town in our country." See Agnon, *'Ir 'u-melo'ah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973), 214. Scholem mentions the dubious belief that Frank hailed from a suburb of Buchach bearing a name identical to a town east of Galicia where he was actually born: Koroluvka (and not Kolorebka!). See also Scholem, *Mehkarim u-mekorot, 199*.

60. Rachel Elior, "Sefer divrey ha-'adon" le-Ya'akov Frank: Otomitographiyah mistit, nihilizm dati ve-hazon ha-herut ha-meshihi ke-reyalizatziyah shel mytos u-metaforah," in *Ha-ḥalom ve-shivro: ha-tnu'ah ha-shabta'it ve-shluḥoteyhah,* Vol. 2: *Meḥkarey yerushalayim be-maḥshevet Israel,* 17 (2001): 540–41.

61. Israel Yuval, "Leḥem ve-yayin? lo be-veyt knesiyatenu," *Ha'aretz*, August 13, 2011.

62. I am grateful to my colleague Haim Weiss. The discussion of "At the Outset" was born of a mutual thought process, and our dialogue is embedded in my words in ways that can no longer be reconstructed. I would also like to thank Lital Levy, Anne Dailey, and Oreet Meital for their constructive remarks, which have proven very helpful to me.

Chapter 3

Note to epigraph: Moshe Cordovero, *Or Yakar*, 2.104.

1. Gregory Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions in the Study of Indian Buddhism," *History of Religions* 31 (1991): 1–23.

2. Schopen, "Archaeology and Protestant Presuppositions," 20, citing Carlos N. M. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 76.

3. This way of conceptualizing the role of Jews in Christian theology is the legacy of Augustine and has persisted since; see, e.g., Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

4. Brennan Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 50–51.

5. Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Uncommon Sense: On Philological Method and Teaching Ancient Language" (paper presented at the Harvard Semitic Philology Workshop, Harvard University, 2015): "the philologist is the hero who liberates the ancient text from every previous incorrect reading" (13).

6. I thank Martin Kavka for the initial suggestion that the latex glove used to handle a manuscript fragment might be understood as a paratext. It became clear to me only later how this idea helps us understand the function of the contaminating and sterile objects we see and imagine to be adjacent to textual artifacts. On the role of paratext for framing and presenting a work, see Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), translated as

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