



BRILL

Critical Note



Shadows at Twilight, Sukkot 1905: Agnon's “Avraham Leibush and His Sons”

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In considering any of Shmuel Yosef Agnon's literary works, reading the story exactly as it appears, word after word, ranks foremost to begin any discussion.¹ Examining traditional lore in the author's culture and secondary interpretations

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- 1 See the thorough examination of the style and structure of Agnon's use of Hebrew idiom in Bracha Fischler, “Noy Sukkah – Decoration of the Sukkah: Linguistics of ‘Abraham Leibush and his Sons’ by S.Y. Agnon.” *Mehqarim BeLashon* (vols. 2–3) 1987 (5747) 439–451 (in Hebrew). The article, in summary, examines Agnon's images evoked by use of vocabulary, rhetorical devices, repetitions, symmetry and contrasts. On the story level she notes the purposeful gradualism (one son wanes in proportion to the other waxing – all in symmetrical, measured balance. The narrator also describes emotions of joy and pain as counter weights increasing opposite each other. First there is the climb of Itche as scholar and fall of Hirshke as boor and then the reverse. The characters themselves recognize slight signs of change until they are fully conscious of Itche's fall and Hirshke's rise. Concomitantly emotions keep pace. One son more than succeeds (growing new customers) and the other more than fails (no spiritual attainment, no livelihood.). By the end, Fischler has shown the sophisticated artistry in this one page tale and simply remarks how the image of the sukkah celebrating the physical and metaphysical is significant. It is exactly here I pick up the theme and speculate upon what the rabbis called “*ta'amo shel davar*” the unmasked meaning of multivalenced ambiguity.

of others, looking for parallels elsewhere in the author's works for possible keys, or noting biographical data for relevant clues is always advisable after literal readings of the work in question, usually to widen discussions – and rarely to close them. I offer here what is, to the best of my knowledge, the first translation in English or any other language of Agnon's "Avraham Leibush and his Sons."² In my notes to this story, having considered various stratagems, I present one reading of several possibilities to which I also allude. I hold that Agnon stories, in many cases, lend themselves equally to several interpretations and, as a matter of personal preference, any given reader may comfortably choose one or more above others.

It is as if his narrator is continuing into modern times the ongoing saga of the hapless Jew at the end of Solomon ibn Varga's *Shevet Yehuda*. This book was written in the shadow of the Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and first published in 1564.

I heard from elders who had left Spain that in a certain ship the plague broke out and the captain cast them ashore in an uninhabited place. There most of them died of hunger, while some braced themselves to walk on foot until they should find a settlement. Now one Jew among them tried to walk together with his wife and two sons, but the wife, who was not accustomed to walking, fainted and died. The man began to carry the children, until both he and his two sons also fainted out of hunger. When he awoke from his faint he found his two sons dead, and in his great distress he got up on his feet and cried: "Lord of the universe! Although you are doing much to make me abandon my religion, know for certain that, despite the heavenly hosts, a Jew I am, and a Jew will I remain, and nothing that you have brought or will yet bring upon me will help you!"

Is this story simply a state of the union declaration according to one of the permutations of a worn out folk tune : *Oylem Hazeh iz a gute zakh/Lernen Toyre iz a beser zakh/Varf avek yeder yokh/Lern Toyre nokh un nokh/Oylem Haboo iz die beste zakh*. [This World is a good thing/Learning Torah is a better thing/Throw away every [other] yoke/[And just] learn Torah again and again/The World to Come is the best thing.]?

- 2 This translation is based on the text ("Appendix 1") in S.Y. Agnon: *Mehqarim VeTe'udot (Studies and Documents)*, edited by G. Shaked and R. Weiser, Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1978. Page 30. The frame of the story seems to be Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 5a: telling us that: Torah, Eretz Yisrael, and The World-to-Come are achieved only with suffering. S. Zuker notes (see n. 4 below) in the revised version the term "This World" is used with irony – "good living," rather than a temporal meaning. Perhaps this is true of the original story too. The author expresses gratitude to Professors Yael Reshef and Adina Moshavi, the editors of *מחקרים בלשון* (Language Studies), for permission to use Agnon's original Hebrew text (as copied from *Mehqarim BeLashon* (vols. 2–3) 1987, 5747, p. 448).

He gathered some earth and some grass, covered the boys, and went to seek an inhabited place. (Cited from the preface of J. Cohen, *A Historian in Exile: Solomon ibn Verga, "Shevet Yehudah," and the Jewish-Christian Encounter* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017))

As for the translation, I have offered a very literal one, resulting at times in stilted prose. I have tried to translate, as the author has penned it, at the risk of reproducing awkward prosody and syntax. The author's vocabulary mixes biblical, Talmudic, medieval and early modern Hebrew expressions, giving an aura of an ancient legend framed in modern molding. To be sure, the author's words of this short tale are objectively all we know for certain. The rest is in the reader's imagination. The various images, to me, offer episodic social criticisms of contemporary Jewish life, while the story itself leaves open contemporary questions to ponder (whatever we might think they are). Perhaps, we, looking at the last hundred years, are privy to the continuation of them, but at the turn of the 20th century many quandaries remained completely in the realm of innovations to be embraced or resisted.

The way to read Agnon is not only in terms of words following each other but also in images and pictures evoked by the narrative. In many cases, that makes coherence rather difficult, since the images are in flux: reversing, changing, switching, merging, and that for me is the so-called leery universe of Agnon, familiar and strange at once. He has, by design, made it quite impossible to really know what he is talking about for certain, as it seems some hidden puzzlement lies behind his tale. Like Samson in Judges 14:14, he poses riddles seemingly based on some issue or reference that remains hidden, in plain sight, from us and from the characters in the story who offer their feelings and views.³

3 In our case, it may be the object of the *sukkah* that holds the secret. The *sukkah* is roofed with matter that cannot "accept" impurity and thus has to be from unprocessed, natural materials stemming from the ground (*gidulei qarqa*). In the 18th century philosophers and novelists (like Rousseau) who maintained "uncorrupted morals" prevail in the "state of nature" (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, (1754), "Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, part two", *The Basic Political Writings*, Indianapolis: Hackett publishing, p. 78) "Men are wicked, yes, but man is good" and "those important persons who are called artists, rather than artisans, work solely for the idle and rich, and put an arbitrary price on their baubles" (Leo (2005). *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. p. 14; and pp. 488–9.) Agnon's story, *In the city and in the forest*, explicitly explores the issue (also portrayed in *A Guest for the Night*). And now, in the second last line of our story we are told "Hirshke is a 'man'" – an artisan. The artist (like novelists, and like Yitshak Meyer), are frauds; the artisans like Hirshke are good. We cannot know exactly whom Agnon has in mind but the Zionist Rabbi, (Naftali) Tsvi Yehuda (Hirshke Leibush?) comments in his bible commentary *Ha'Amek*

In this story there are three male characters – the father and his two sons – and no women. Although the author's mother taught her son the beauty of German literature, his father tutored him in the intricacies of the language and literature of the ancient rabbis. Avraham really had high hopes for his first born son and neglected the other son. But then the neglected son turns out to be a fine craftsman who is able to support his father, while the brilliant son is just brilliant but does nothing practical or helpful. Indeed, he has abandoned traditional learning and veered into the Enlightenment-scholarship, possibly on a path to which Agnon himself, like many others, was attached.

At the end of the tale the father sees there is more value in the practical son, the *ISH*. The brilliant son is not even a *mentch* (*ISH*) in his eyes. One is tempted (daring to be wrong) to see here an allusion to Exodus Rabbah 1:29's comment on Exodus 2:12:

[So he (Moses) looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was there no *MAN* (*ISH*), he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.]

The Rabbis say: Moses saw that there was no hope of any *righteous people* (referring to "he saw no *ISH*") arising from him or from his descendants until the end of all the generations.

Hirshke actually will have a line of righteous progeny for generations in *this world*. Itche Meyer (sometimes called Yitshak Meir to recall his early promise when he was like *Yitshak*, Isaac, the biblical son of Abraham) has no hope of even doing that, although it was once expected he and his progeny would merit *the Next World*.

That simple narrative, to be frank, hardly seems worth the ink and the paper of the author.⁴ Upon deeper analysis, one discovers there are not only binaries paired by contrast in the character development of the two sons; there is a binary in Itche Meyer himself, "the one who is *not the same* as the other one who was." He is *another*. In the later, revised version of this story the action

Davar to Exodus 35:10 and maintains the same sentiment. He remarks that with no knowledge of Torah learning or artisanship, a man by his connection to God is *hacham lev*, an artisan by nature, fashions holy vessels for the *mishkan*. Indeed, the motif is already suggested in Aesop's "Country Mouse and Town Mouse" (*Babrius and Phaedrus Fables*, Harvard University Press (Jan. 1 1965) p. 108 (tr. Ben Edwin Perry)):

Then said the country mouse: "Farewell to you and such feasts as these; enjoy your wealth and revel by yourself in superfine banquets. This abundance of yours is full of danger. As for me, I'll not desert the homely clods, under which I munch my barley free from fear."

4 Shlomo Zuker in his chapter "The stories of *Czaczkas* and the corrections of Agnon," (*Studies and Documents*, 11–33, see n. 2) provides a history of the story's publication, late revisions and a substantive interpretation of the reworked version half a century later.

slows to a still scene at midpoint. Beneath his holy books, this scholar hides works of *maskilim* written in *sacred* Hebrew letters but expounding *minut*, heretical content, and places them even on his knees (which bow before God). In the retelling, the author lifts the veil to reveal a story of hybridity and syncretism as well as hypocrisy and deception, what the Talmud calls “*shtei reshuyot*.” At this point the voice of Isaac (the sacred words of Torah) and the hands of Esau (secular culture) merge. The dualism of paganism has breached the monotheism of Abraham.

This is the classic original story of *Aher* – “the other one.” In B. Hagigah 15a–b, Aher’s story is told. Aher (real name, Elisha ben Avuya) believed in *shtei reshuyot*, joined the holy and secular, hid pagan works in his rabbinic garb. His student Meir recognized where he crossed the limits, venturing beyond the pale and was, tragically, unable to bring him back. In Agnon’s tale, at the end Meir is pulled beyond reach, with Yitshak. He is now called Yitshak Meir but not the same one [he is Aher – a different other] because Meir failed. Nor has it escaped those like Bracha Fischler, discussed in earlier notes, that the very structure of the *Sukkah*, celebrated the day Agnon prints his story, symbolizes the joint bounty of the physical and the spiritual. Still, as a reader I sense Agnon is expressing a profound angst, not just the crisis of his generation but something more personal, more immediate. Is his *oeuvre* simply meant to tell us that the reality that an ignorant boor who can earn a living is preferable to an intellectual and scholar led to modern enlightened ideas bordering on ungodly heresy and foreign notions of progress? Is not the author himself enticed by this very world of using Holy language to express secular ideas in every word he writes!? Should we not seek to find here some resolution to the divides between the holy and the profane, study and livelihood, and most of all between Israel and the nations? To reach beyond the complacent ending of the story, to rebuild a *Sukkah* where Abraham and Isaac are reconciled. A coming world.

The deeper challenge, to my mind, is to try to see if we also have a *roman à clef*. In terms of Agnon, this refers to fictional fabrications representing historical personages at a crossroads in the modern anxiety of abandoning the worn out, disintegrating – slowly but surely – European *shtetel* culture. But this *shtetel* had provided a culture of comfort and spiritual haven to Jews for over a millennium. Either one seeks to venture into an unknown Messianic *Sukkah* in the Promised Land or remain behind to join a Universal Culture of Humankind where ethnic communities privately celebrate their origins in select cultural rites. The third option is to be oblivious to the deteriorating fabric of traditional religious life and trust in the age old power of the words of prophets and rabbis to give deeper insight into the permanence of their past. If one wants to see these options in the present story they are not hard to

find. The one key in this story, which I dwell on, and it is no more than a personal preference, is that one of the two sons represents a type of Peretz (the bard of the contemporary sad state of Jews; see below note 7) and the other, a type of Herzl (the activist for a happier future in one's own land). The attempt to maintain the vision of prophets and rabbis is soon lost as father Abraham himself seeks material advantage from binding his son Yitshak to a life unable to withstand the intellectual challenges of modernity.

That is the starting point of my personal reading. This assumption allows me to unravel, however imperfectly, the names and character traits portrayed in the tale. In the end, in my initial reading, the author seems to suggest, in the eyes of the father, that the man of letters is useless, and the "*am ha-aretz*" activist is valuable. But I am open, in further reading, to thinking the father is mistaken and the author is asking the reader which one really contributes more. Or perhaps the initial ideal of a life of study and piety outweighs all. And for me I am inclined to say the answer is all three.⁵

אברהם ליבוש ובניו

את בנו הבכור, את יצחק מאיר, הקדיש אברם ליבוש, סוחר בעצי שרפה, לתורה, כי עוד בילדותו נראו בו סמנים מובהקים של בעל-תורה; חוץ מזה שהיה 'ראש-חד' וקצת עליו, היה נער חלש, צנום ורזה ופאותיו הארוכות היו נגרות על לחייו החזרות בלי טפת דם. ואיטשי-מאיר הלך מחיל אל חיל מ'חדר' אל 'חדר', ממלמד למלמד ויבא אל בית-המדרש. הוא לומד שם ועוסק בתורה. ולאברם ליבוש יש מזה הנאה מרובה, ואינו מבטלו מלמודו; אדרבא, ילמוד איטשע מאיר' שלי, ויקפוץ עליו 'בעלך', כלומר מחותן עשיר עם נדן וארוחת תמיד.

ובכל פעם שהוא נזכר בבנו הצעיר הירשקע, נער 'מגושם', בריא, אך 'עם-הארץ' גם, הוא מתרעם וכועס על עצמו, על מה שהוא מגדל עם-הארץ בתוך ביתו, שאינו יודע רק לטלטל עצים ולעשות כל מלאכה.

וכמו להכעיס נתקלקל יצחק מאיר בימים האחרונים ויחדל לבוא הרבה אל בית-המדרש ואינו מתמיד בלמודו. ובפרט בימים האחרונים כמעט שלא יקח ספר לידו, הוא נשקע כל היום בספרים חיצוניים, ספרים הנדפסים בפורמט קטן ובאותיות קטנות, שאין להקורא בהם לא עולם הזה ולא עולם הבא.... ויצחק מאיר אינו בא אל בית-המדרש, ובמקום בית-המדרש הוא הולך בטל. מחכה בכל בקר ולפנות ערב אצל בית הדואר על 'גאזעטין', שהוא צריך לקבל. סוף דבר: איטשי מאיר זה אינו איטשי

5 It may be of interest to note that he followed this work of 1905 by his unsettling story *Agunut* written in Jaffa in 1909 where the author followed a secular life-style, in concert with other Zionist intellectuals. He would eventually abandon this existence in favor of a devoted, religious one.

מאיר של אז. לא לאלקים ולא לאנשים.
 ואחיו הצעיר, הירשקע, הוא כל-וכל, הכל יכול; רוצים אתם הוא עושה כל מלאכה,
 אף על פי שאין לו כלים, הנצרכים לאותה מלאכה. עוזר הוא על יד אביו במסחרו.
 לולא הוא מי יודע אם היה במה לפרנס את ביתם, הוא כמעט הזן את בית אביו, ויצחק
 מאיר מבזה בכל פעם את אחיו הגס.
 ובחג הסוכות, בבוא אברם ליבוש מלובש בבגדי יו"ט אל הסכה, שבנו הצעיר
 בעצמו עשה אותה, הוא מסתכל בה ומתפלא על יפיה: כמה נאה סכה זו! הוא חושב
 בלבבו. מה לי בכל החכמות של איטשע מאיר, הירשקע הוא 'איש', 'בריה נפלאה',
 אומן יד. 'עולם הבא' לא יהיה לי משניהם, אך לפחות יהיה לי מהירשקע שלי עולם
 ... הזה

Avraham Leibush⁶ and His Sons⁷

*Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes of Buczacz, Sukkot Eve, Ha-Mitspeh 1905 [Lvov 41–42
 Tishrei 14, year 2 5666 (1905) (18 yrs old)]⁸*

- 6 The protagonist would surely have been called Avruem according to the author's native dialect. The name "Avraham" in the title is never used again in the story. I leave the characters' identifications to the reader to unravel if they so choose. My suggested identifications of the characters' traits and meaning are nothing more than educated speculation (which is a major stumbling block in interpreting many Agnon works, where clues are phrased in ambiguous images and uncertainties abound). It appears where we have the narrator relating events *Yitshak Meir* is used. When emotional views of his father towards his son are portrayed *Itche Meyer* is used. There remains the intended ambiguity whether Leibush here is a surname or is a second Yiddish name appended to Avraham's name, a diminutive of Leib. If a surname, then Avraham (not Yiddish) is consistent. But if we prefer Avruem (Yiddish diminutive for Hebrew Avraham) then "Leibush," like "Leibel," is a diminutive for "Leib" which is Yiddish for "Lion" and reflects the Hebrew "Aryeh." To my mind the author intends both possibilities of Leibush. It seems an uncanny coincidence that the names in this story reflect the names of the Zionist Rabbi Avraham Yitshak Kook and his son Tsvi Yehuda (Yiddish equals, *Hirshke Leib*) born 1891). Rav Kook would befriended Agnon in coming years.
- 7 Perhaps a sly nod to Yitshak Leibush Peretz the erudite *maskil* who authored classics in Yiddish and Hebrew, a worthy precursor of Agnon. Nevertheless it seems, in spite of their learning and storytelling, these artists have not bettered the plight of Jews by portraying them and their culture for posterity.
- 8 This is midmonth at the fall equinox; the moon's light and the agricultural year peak on this day, introducing the story of shifting aspirations, changing values, historical circumstances – what Jewish tradition calls the month of *keseh* (hiddenness); see, e.g., Moses Alshich's commentary to Ps. 81:4. Fifty years later, as S.Y. Agnon of Jerusalem, he will rework this story, expanding it over twofold as G. Shaked and R. Weiser show in their second appendix (*ibid.*, pp. 31–33).

Avram [henceforth *Avruem*, as in Yiddish dialect of Galitsia] Leibush, a fire-wood merchant dedicated his first-born son, Yitshak Meir,⁹ to the Torah;¹⁰ for even in his childhood he showed the distinctive signs of a Torah master. Besides this, his *head was pointed* [Yiddish: *sharfe kop*/sharp mind]¹¹ and a *little elevated* [Yiddish: *shtikel ilui*/something of a genius]; the boy was *weak*, frail and thin with his long side-locks dragging on his pale cheeks that were without a drop of blood.¹² And Itche Meyer went from strength to *strength*: from *room to room* [Galitsianer Yiddish: *foon hayder tzi hayder*/from school to school], from *teacher to teacher* [*melamed*], and entered the study house [*bays hamedrish*];¹³ he would learn there and engage in Torah and Avruem Leibush had a great deal of satisfaction from this. And he did not distract him from his learning; on the contrary, “*Itche Meyer’l, my own, will learn, and there will jump*

9 The name Isaac was traditionally often linked with Meir. The founder of the Hassidic movement known as Gur, was named Itche Meyer Alter.

10 The strange syntax here recalls the biblical sacrificing of Isaac in Gen. 22, and the sacrificial language of “dedicated” (*hiqdish*) and mention of fire-wood mirrors the terminology for offering Isaac on a pyre of fire-wood in the Genesis episode. Literally, the first sentence here reads: *ET* his son, the first first-born, *ET* Yitshak Meir – dedicated [hallowed] Avruem Leibush, a fire-wood merchant, to the Torah. [Cf., Gen. 22:2: *ET binkha et yihidkha asher ahavta ET Yitshaq*]. Does the author consider the intense stress on Torah learning an act of child sacrifice? Is this a veiled criticism of what might be termed today “abuse”? Note that, in the Bible, Avraham is told to offer Isaac as an *Olah* (a whole burnt offering). *Olah* refers to the animal rising in its burning entirely on an altar. Only the animal’s blood is drained first and sprinkled on the altar separately. The author describes the intent to have Yitshak be an *Ilui* (sharing the same root as *Olah*, but meaning a *genius*) and also describes his blood’s having drained from his face. In Midrash Pirkei deR. Eliezer ch. 31, Chanina ben Dosa relates that the ram sacrificed in Isaac’s stead (Gen. 22:13) had two horns; the first sounded at Sinai (giving of Torah), the second to be sounded at the arrival of messiah ushering in the World-to-Come.

11 Here the author pokes Hebrew purists who insisted Yiddish expressions, when not in direct speech, should be rendered in Hebrew. The result of these literalisms is somewhat comical when taking figures of speech literally.

12 In discussing the sin of humiliation, the B. Baba Metsia 58b notes the sign of spilling blood to be a loss of redness (blood) and subsequent onset of paleness, which here might suggest that Yitshak, as all whose parents push them to spend their lives in study, is a metaphoric walking sacrificial victim. The description fits yeshiva students spending 18 hours a day in study halls. The long side-locks may well indicate that he belongs to a Hassidic family (as had Agnon’s own father). So Avruem here suffers from dedicating his eldest to Torah. This precious gift could only be opened by suffering. But Yitshak is spoiled and does not suffer. It is his brother Hirshke, who is neglected in favor of his brother’s Torah, who suffers. Yet the father also suffers in watching his “boorish” son’s ignorance of Torah, an ignorance Avruem himself had caused.

13 See B. Berakhot 64a.

upon him *baln*"¹⁴ which is to say a rich father-in-law with dowry and constant sustenance.

And every time that he would think of his younger son, *Hirshke*,¹⁵ a physical lad, healthy – but a *gross ignoramus*,¹⁶ he would grumble and get angry at himself in that he was raising an ignoramus within his house, who only knew to carry wood and do every kind of practical work.

And as if to be spiteful, Yitshak Meir lost control of himself in later days, and he stopped coming frequently to the study-house and was not relentless in his studies. And in particular in the later days¹⁷ he just about never held a holy-book in his hand. He was absorbed all day long in "books outside the boundaries"¹⁸ that were printed in a small format (as short stories) and in small letters. *For all who read in them have neither this world nor the next. ...*¹⁹ And Yitshak Meir would no longer come to the study-house. And instead of the study-house he went about idle, waiting every morning and dusk at the post-office for newspapers that he had to get.²⁰ The final word: This *Itche Meyer* was not the *Itche Meyer* of then – "not for God and not for people."²¹

14 The Yiddish term seems to refer to an interested or eager party to conclude a deal. The narrator explains Avruem's understatement here to indicate a man of wealth and importance who would be honored to support a brilliant Talmudic scholar such as his son.

15 Perhaps a sly nod to the indefatigable Zionist leader, Theodor *Herzl* (the name is a variant of Hirsch, deer), the architect of modern Zionism. Endearment forms vary locally from *Hershel* to *Hirshl*, *Herzl*, *Hershke*, and *Hirshke*. Theodor Herzl lacked a basic Jewish education. He died in 1904, the year before Agnon's piece appeared.

16 The image is of the biblical Abraham's grandson, Esau. The irony is that the term used for ignoramus is *am ha'aretz*, literally, "a people of the land." This term is not to be minimized as, in my interpretation, this son is a child of natural faith, not bookish faith, and provides for everyone as they journey to be the PEOPLE of THE (holy) LAND. One might take note of Naftali Tzvi Yehudah (*Hirshke Leib*?) Berlin's comments to Exod. 35:10 (*All who are naturally wise among you are to come and make everything the Lord has commanded*): Also this He said to all the congregation of Israel, that even those who had not studied any Torah but were naturally wise, meaning the wisdom deriving from awe of God – ... let him come and make [holy vessels] and *the Lord his God is with him* through Heaven's help, in spite of his never learning his craft in Egypt (*Ha'amek Davar*).

17 "The later days" may function as "recently" in the narrative, but in the meta-narrative properly suggests, "In modern times."

18 *Sefarim hitsonim* for the ancient rabbis meant books outside of the sanctioned canon of the Bible. For some ancient rabbis, "whoever read these forfeited his afterlife" (M. Sanhedrin 11:1). But here the reference "outside the boundaries" is to secular books.

19 They lack edification for physical existence and for spiritual realms.

20 B. Eruvin 22a. One should go every morning and dusk to the study-house.

21 Reverse of common Yiddish slogan (*tsi Got un' tsi layt*), "For [benefit of] God and for [benefit of] people." Note the binaries: sickly/Torah master vs. healthy/ignoramus; holy-book vs. newspapers; study house vs. post office; God vs. man; This World vs. Next; Itche Meyer 1

And his younger brother, Hirshke, he was all and all, all-able.²² You want something – He does every kind of practical work even though he has not the requisite tools for a particular job. He is a helper at his father's side. If not for him, who knows if he would have the wherewith all to support his household. He was just about the nourisher of his father's household. And Yitshak Meir disparaged at every opportunity his *gross* brother.²³

And on the festival of *sukkot* (Galitsian dialect: *sikkis*), when Avruem Leibush came, dressed up in his festival garb, into the *sukkah* that his younger son had himself made, he contemplated it and marveled at its beauty.²⁴ How beautiful is this *sukkah*!²⁵ He thought in his heart, "What use are all the wisdoms of Itche Meyer to me – Hirshke is a *man* (Yiddish: *mentsch*/decent person), a spectacular being, a craftsman, I will not have a Next World [on the merit] of

(Torah scholar) vs. Itche Meyer 2 (modern intellectual); academic cleverness vs. decent human being – tensions in Jewish values.

- 22 The progressing phrasing here suggests biblical blessings to the ancestral patriarchs but ends sacrilegiously with the praise in the Yom-Kippur *piyyut* meant for God alone – *All-Able*. Perhaps this term reflects the claim of the religiously pious that Herzl was usurping a divine messianic role and that the ambiguous title "Herr Herzl" meant not "Mr. Herzl" but *Lord Herzl*.
- 23 Compare *and Esau disparaged his birthright* (Gen 25:34). Also Hebrew "*gas*" (usually "*grossly haughty*") is used here for Yiddish *grubber*. Yitshak, born with a birthright, will undergo a transformation and end up disparaging it. It was the biblical Esau, the boorish one, who disparaged his birthright. Here it is the scholar who does so. There is a touch of irony here recalling the first sentence mentioning Yitshak Meir, the narrator's name for this first born son who has no story yet, rather than Itche Meyer, the actual son, who has a sad story.
- 24 Since BabTalmud Sukkah 27b suggests that all Jews could potentially make their home in a *sukkah*. Czaczkes may have found the image of the *sukkah* as model for a national home. Herzl had read Benjamin Disraeli's *Tancred* where the Jewess Eva says about Sukkot, "The vineyards of Israel have ceased to exist, but the eternal law enjoins the children of Israel still to celebrate the vintage. A race that persists in celebrating their vintage, although they have no fruits to gather, will regain their vineyards."
- 25 Compare Bab Shabbat 133b: Exodus 15: 2 aNveiHu / from root *Na-eH*- *Beautify* / I.e. *Beautify yourself before Him in doing commandments. "Make before Him a beautiful sukkah"*. The festival of *sukkot* is both materialistic (celebrating harvests, see Exodus 34:22) and spiritual (celebrating protective Clouds of Divine Glory see Bab Talmud Sukkah 11b). Perhaps the point is that if Israel is abandoning Torah at least they can have the security of their own homeland (*sukkah*). The *sukkah* itself is ambiguous: spiritual edifice\material construction. Rabbis disputed its primary intent (Talmud *ibid*).

either of the two, but at least [on the merit] of Hirshke, *my own*,²⁶ I will have This World. ... ”²⁷

26 The very expression of endearment (“my own”) used now in the final paragraph of the story to describe Hirshke was used for Itche Meyer in the final line of the first paragraph. The story is built around reversals and transformations, (the wise son becomes wicked while the unaware son becomes straightforward). The last line reverses the first line. The above categories of children are part of the Passover *seder* scenarios [“about four sons the Torah speaks”] and the Talmud finds cause to parallel Passover and Sukkot (see Bab Sukkah 27a). The father’s efforts to raise his eldest to be a Torah scholar, have not come to fruition but he has raised another son who is helpful to all in their journey until they settle in the promised Land – and that will suffice to bring him honor and sustenance in this Life. In my reading the author considers one of the many Talmudic insights concerning threes, primarily (see Bab Talm Berakhot 5a): “Rabbi Shimon ben Yoḥai says: The Holy One, Blessed be He, gave Israel three precious gifts, all of which were given only by means of suffering and these are they: Torah, The Land of Israel and the World-to-Come”. The father endured suffering from his sons: one who prepared himself to acquire Torah and another to acquire the Land – And in the end he became Adam – a creature of the earth (Perhaps the author saw himself as a suffering child in the struggle to master Torah literature and then later as an artist trying to get to the Holy Land like every Jew in ibn Varga’s above story.) “The Messianic World- to- Come” represented by the festival of the eighth day after sukkot [*shmini atseret*] where all is pure joy which is beyond Avruem’s reach. None of his sons has embarked on that path of holiness. Ideally all Jews are Adam: But being ISH is also a fine achievement.

27 As already mentioned in an initial note, the tale has the spirit of Berachot 5a hovering over it: Torah, Eretz Yisrael, and the World-to-Come are achieved only with suffering. Finally, I thank Rabbi Jeffrey Saks and Prof. Paul Socken for their suffering through initial drafts of the above piece.

