

BUILDING A CITY: WRITINGS  
ON AGNON'S BUCZACZ  
IN MEMORY OF ALAN MINTZ

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Indiana University Press

*This book is a publication of*

Indiana University Press  
Office of Scholarly Publishing  
Herman B Wells Library 350  
1320 East 10th Street  
Bloomington, Indiana 47405 USA

iupress.org

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Manufactured in the United States of America

DOI: 10.2979/BuildingaCityWriting.0.0.00

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Mintz, Alan L. honouree. | Jelen, Sheila E., editor. | Zierler, Wendy, editor.

Title: Building a city : writings on Agnon's Buczacz in memory of Alan Mintz / edited by Sheila Jelen and Wendy Zierler.

Description: Bloomington, Indiana : Indiana University Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "The fiction of Nobel Laureate Shmuel Yosef Agnon is the foundation of the array of scholarly essays as seen through the career of Alan Mintz, visionary scholar and professor of Jewish literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Singer introduced Agnon's posthumously published *Ir Umeloah* (A City in Its Fullness)-a series of linked stories set in the 17th century and focused on Agnon's hometown, Buczacz, a town in what is currently western Ukraine-to an English reading audience, and argued that Agnon's unique treatment of Buczacz in *A City in its Fullness*, navigating the sometimes tenuous boundary of the modernist and the mythical, was a full-throated, self-conscious literary response to the Holocaust. This collection of essay is an extension of a memorial dedicated to Singer's memory (who died suddenly in 2017) which combines selections of Alan's work from the beginning, middle and end of his career, with autobiographical tributes from older and younger scholars alike. The scholarly essays dealing with Agnon and Buczacz is an effort to remember the career of Alan Mintz and his contribution to the world of Jewish studies and within the world of Jewish communal life"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022039444 | ISBN 9780253065407 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Agnon, Shmuel Yosef, 1887-1970--Criticism and interpretation. | Buchach (Ukraine)--In literature. | Mintz, Alan L. | LCGFT: Literary criticism. | Essays. | Festschriften.

Classification: LCC PJ5053.A4 Z5927 2023 | DDC 892.43/5--dc23/eng/20220926

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022039444>

First Printing 2022

# 12 *Last Translations: Gershom Scholem's Renditions of S.Y. Agnon's Polish Tales*

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In Agnon's rendering of its origins ... Buczacz is a way station on the path to the Land of Israel, the result of an arrested journey.

—Alan Mintz, "I am Building a City": On Agnon's Buczacz Tales"

S.Y. AGNON'S TRAVELS AS a young man took him, in 1908, from Buczacz, Galicia to Jaffa, Palestine and from there, in 1912, to Germany. Agnon's stay in Berlin was intended as a "way station" on route back to the Land of Israel, but the outbreak of World War I arrested his journey and he ultimately remained in Germany until 1924. The notion of a "way station" that becomes a home is crucial to understanding Agnon's writing and its dissemination during his extended sojourn in Germany. Agnon continued to write and publish in Hebrew during this period, working on stories and novellas such as "Givat haḥol" ("The Hill of Sand"). He also actively promoted the translation of his stories into German, intended for publication in reputable journals such as the *Jüdische Rundschau* and *Der Jude*. Agnon collaborated, furthermore, with German Jewish editors and translators to produce volumes of tales concerning Polish Jews, thus enhancing his creative output in the German language.<sup>1</sup>

While this formative period in Agnon's career might pale in comparison to his post-World War II voluminous activities, and, specifically, to his "epic" project of *Ir umelo'ah* (*A City in its Fullness*), the two periods of Agnon's writing resonate with one another through a shared preoccupation with the Jewish past in Poland. The stories that ultimately constituted the volume *Polin* (*Poland*), published first in the journal *Hatekufah* in 1919 and, in an expanded volume, in Tel Aviv in 1924, were composed, in part, during Agnon's stay in Germany, and these were also the stories that Gershom Scholem selected to translate. Unlike the spatial focus of the later Buczacz stories, the tales of the *Polin* volume have a broader geographical range across Poland. At the same time, the far slimmer 1924 book

1. See, for example, Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Ahron Eliasberg, eds., *Das Buch von den polnischen Juden* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1916); Hugo Herrmann and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, eds., *Chad gadja: Das Pessachbuch* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1914).

contains, like *‘Ir umelo’ah*, an opening legend, concerning how the Jews came to live in Poland, as well as stories that depict the spiritual life of the poor and violent relations between Jews and non-Jews. *Polin* and *‘Ir umelo’ah* thus provide book ends, of a sort, for Agnon’s writing career: while both combine a mythical and historical Polish Jewish past, the former was written under the sign of Agnon’s years in wartime and interwar Germany, while the latter was heavily shaped by the events of the Holocaust.

In *Ancestral Tales* Alan Mintz discusses Agnon’s approach to memorialization, contending that the Hebrew author conjured “the lost world of Polish Jewry, viewed not in its fallen, belated aspect but in the vigor of its golden age.” Agnon’s indirect response to the events of the Holocaust was to “reanimate ... what was most valuable in the civilization that had been destroyed.”<sup>2</sup> These claims can help to distinguish between the *Polin* tales and the *‘Ir umelo’ah* project: most significantly, many of the earlier stories depict a society in decline, on the verge of its complete disintegration, rather than a world in the “vigor of its golden age.” An examination of Scholem’s translations into German shores up one explanation for this difference: while the earlier stories depict Jews in Poland, they also implicitly reflect upon the current situation of Jews in Germany, as witnessed by Agnon. Working on his translations of Hebrew lamentations around the same time period, Scholem selected precisely those stories that concern cultural decline and end on a note of ironic resolution. Rather than suggest that these translations into German take part in the cult of the Eastern European Jew in Germany during that period, I argue instead that they expressed a specifically German Jewish sense of loss in relationship to the Jewish past and its scriptural traditions.<sup>3</sup> They did not serve the agenda of the German Jewish revival but rather suggested the decline of this culture and offered the long history of Hebrew textual traditions as an antidote to a more nationalistically-driven route toward Hebrew modernization.

### The Task of the Translator, Scholem

Scholem and Agnon met during the World War years at the home of another translator of Agnon’s, Max Strauss, the brother of Ludwig Strauss.<sup>4</sup> At Agnon’s urging, Scholem assisted Strauss with his translation of the novella *Vehayah he’aqov lemishor* (*And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*), advising him about rabbinical Hebrew terms.<sup>5</sup> In letters from this time period, Agnon urges

2. Alan L. Mintz, *Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S.Y. Agnon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 13.

3. See Steven E. Aschheim, *Brothers and Strangers: The East European Jew in German and German Jewish Consciousness, 1800-1923* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).

4. Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1988), 91.

5. *Ibid.*, 92.

Scholem to translate more of his writings and compliments him on the existing translations, asking also that he oversee Max Strauss's subsequent rendition of "Hanidah" ("The Outcast"), ultimately published in 1920 as "Der Verstossene."<sup>6</sup> Agnon also offered to deliver to Scholem unpublished manuscripts, copied by his wife, Esther Marx, but he did not manage to lure Scholem away from his translation project of the kabbalistic work *Sefer habahir* (Book of Brightness).<sup>7</sup> Scholem undertook in total four short translations, the first one appearing in 1920 and three subsequent stories appearing in 1924, after Scholem himself relocated to Palestine in 1923.

A letter from Scholem to his first wife, Else (Escha) Borchhardt, dating July 2, 1923, recounts his visit with Agnon one Shabbat at the author's home in Bad Homburg, during which Scholem read to him Scholem's translation of "Ma'aseh Azriel Moshe shomer hasefarim" ("The Tale of Azriel Moshe, the Book Keeper.") Agnon, he reported, was very enthusiastic and enjoyed the reading, despite his recent bad spirits.<sup>8</sup> The correspondence between the two men also reveals that Scholem had previously sent Agnon drafts of one of his translations, to which Agnon responded: "My friend, I was happy with the translation, which I believe turned out well. I wrote my comments on the margins. Accept the good and ignore the bad. You know that I am not a speaker of Ashkenaz [German] and my knowledge of this language is weak."<sup>9</sup> Despite his protestations to the contrary, Agnon's German did allow him to review the translations of his work and assist Strauss and Scholem in the translation and editing process.

Several decades after the publications of his translations from Agnon's stories, Scholem would assess his friend's contribution to Hebrew literature in a London lecture, claiming that the writer was "heir to the totality of Jewish tradition" while also being able to give artistic form to "the historical forces that made for the disintegration of Jewish tradition." Agnon's early stories, according to Scholem, "succeeded in expressing an infinite wealth of content in infinitesimal space." More importantly, they are, in his words, "suffused by a spirit

6. "כידוע לך תרגם [שטרויס] את הנדה אלא שתרגומו צריך שכלול. בבקשה ממך לכשתבוא לברלין גלגל עמו בתרגום. או כתוב לו שישלח לך את התרגום ואת המקור למינכן והיה לו לעזר מרחוק. ואף אתה אמור לו שיפרסמו במהרה" ("As you know, [Strauss] translated Hanidah but his translation requires improvement. When you come to Berlin please discuss the translation with him or write to him so that he sends you the original and the translation to Munich and be of help to him from afar. And tell him also to publish it quickly.") S.Y. Agnon to Gershom Scholem, undated letter, in Gershom Scholem Archive, ARC.4 1599 01 0016.1, The National Library of Israel.

7. "התרגמת את במצולות? ואת בית הכנסת הישן? היש את לבבך ישר לתרגם איזה דבר משלי? מה?". "Have you translated 'Bametsulot'? And 'Beit haknesset hayashan'? Would you honestly like to translate something that I wrote? Which one?" S.Y. Agnon to Gershom Scholem, August 1920, in *ibid.*

8. Stefan Litt, Hasafranim: blog hasafriyah haleumit, 11.30.2017, [https://blog.nli.org.il/gershom\\_escha/](https://blog.nli.org.il/gershom_escha/).

9. S.Y. Agnon to Gershom Scholem, undated, in Gershom Scholem Archive.

of immense sadness and at the same time hold out a great promise of consolation.” This intertwining of sadness and consolation became, for Scholem, “a profoundly Jewish feature of Agnon’s creativity.”<sup>10</sup> In the German version of the same essay, Scholem used the term “Trauer,” denoting sadness and mourning, to describe Agnon’s writing.<sup>11</sup> Scholem’s appreciation for Agnon thus ties in with his own preoccupation with mourning, which he described, in his 1917 essay, “Über Klage und Klagelied” (“On Lament and Lamentations”) as a paradoxical condition or “mental being,” rather than as a psychological state of loss. Mourning, moreover, entails a linguistic destruction. In Scholem’s words: “Thus mourning partakes in language, but only in the most tragic way, since in its course toward language mourning is directed against itself—and against language.”<sup>12</sup> Scholem wrote this essay as an afterward to his translation of *Eikhah* (*Lamentations*), but it appeared in print only posthumously.<sup>13</sup> Itta Shedletzki has described his process of using translation and commentary to better understand Hebrew lamentations as a “labor of mourning” (“Trauerarbeit”) for the lost Jewish tradition as a result of his secularized upbringing. Using terms reminiscent of Scholem’s own assessment of Agnon, Shedletzki explains that mourning, for Scholem, had a positive outcome: “Only after a break with Jewish tradition and a distancing from it, one might, through a serious attempt at approaching it, freely celebrate a sense of renewal.”<sup>14</sup> Galili Shachar likewise maintains that Scholem found in the form of the lamentation, “the potential for the renewal of language and thought from the points of silence and extinction.”<sup>15</sup>

The process of translating Agnon’s stories can be understood within the framework of the “labor of mourning,” especially in view of the particular stories Scholem selected for translation. “Ma’aseh Azriel Moshe shomer hasefarim,” first published in the Berlin art and literature journal *Rimon* in 1923, tells of a simple man, a porter who, after realizing the extent of his ignorance in Jewish scripture, falls into a deep sorrow. Azriel Moshe finds partial relief through his study of the names of all the Jewish books and their authors in the Beit Midrash. He then

10. Gershom Scholem, “S.Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?,” in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays* ed. Werner J. Dannhauser (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 95, 104.

11. “S. J. Agnon - der letzte hebräische Klassiker?,” in *Judaica 2* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1995), 104.

12. “On Lament and Lamentation,” in *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Ilit Ferber and Paula Schwebel (Berlin: De Gruyter 2014), 315–316.

13. Galili Shachar and Ilit Ferber, eds., *Haqinot: Shirah, hagut, vetugah be’olamo shel Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2016), 88.

14. Itta Shedletzki, “Auf der Suche nach dem verlorenen Judentum. Zur „historischen Gestalt“ Gershom Scholems,” *Münchener Beiträge zur Jüdischen Geschichte und Kultur 2* (2007), 36.

15. Galili Shachar, “Lekonen ulehokhiaḥ: ‘al darko hamukdemet shel Gershom Scholem baya-hadut,” in *Haqinot: Shirah, hagut, vetugah be’olamo shel Gershom Scholem*, ed. Galili Shachar and Ilit Ferber (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2016), 32.

becomes the keeper of the books and is murdered in a pogrom after attempting to guard them from destruction. For Scholem, “Ma’aseh Azriel Moshe” exemplified the “intermingling of consolation and sadness” in Agnon’s work.<sup>16</sup> He translated Azriel’s sadness at his ignorance about the Jewish sources through the term “Kummer,” meaning sorrow or pain: “...sein Kummer so groß war...” (“his sorrow was so vast”).<sup>17</sup> Azriel Moshe experiences this sadness when he recalls how Jews sit on the ground on the Ninth of Av and mourn the destruction of the Temple. He then recognizes that he does not know in which Jewish source this destruction was recorded.<sup>18</sup> The translated term, “Kummer,” provides a lexical juncture between Yiddish and German, and Agnon would later name the protagonist of *Temol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) Yitzhak Kummer. Scholem’s choice of this word allows a Jewish-inflected melancholia to permeate his German. When rendering *Eikhah* into German, Scholem used the word Kummer to translate the Hebrew “*makh’ov*” meaning grief and pain.<sup>19</sup> Scholem’s word choice linked his scriptural and literary translations, since the same German term translated both Azriel Moshe’s sorrow, “*tsa’aro*,” and the grief of Jewish collective lament.

After writing all the names he has learned in the Beit Midrash on the walls of his home, Azriel Moshe feels joy intermingled with sadness for while he has learned the names of wise Jews and their writings, he cannot read the contents of these books. He cries and his tears erase the very names that he wrote in chalk in order to memorize them: “umerov hadema’ot hayah haketav holekh venimḥah” (“And the abundance of tears was erasing the writing”).<sup>20</sup> In Scholem’s German, this same phrase reads: “Und der Menge der Tränen halber verlöschte die Schrift immer mehr” (“And because of the quantity of tears the writing was wiped out more and more”).<sup>21</sup> The German verb *verlöschen* refers, ordinarily, to the extinguishing of a source of light, but here the tears perform the destruction, erasing that which has been obtained through study. Azriel Moshe’s tears in the story function in a manner akin to the language of lamentations, in Scholem’s iteration: they destructively erase, in a performative gesture, the very names that they mourn, resulting in a potentially endless cycle of mourning. However, Azriel Moshe subsequently decides to rewrite: he purchases paper and records the names with pencil on it, providing a somewhat definite framework for retaining and transmitting his knowledge.<sup>22</sup> This shift in medium, from chalk on the walls

16. Gershom Scholem, “S.Y. Agnon,” 104.

17. S.Y. Agnon, “Zwei Erzählungen: Die Geschichte von Asriel Moshe, dem Bücherwart; Die große Synagoge,” *Der Jude*, 1924, 232.

18. “Ma’aseh Azriel Moshe shomer hasefarim,” *Rimon*, 1923, 35.

19. Galili Shachar and Ilit Ferber, eds., *Haqinot: Shirah, hagut, vetugah be’olamo shel Gershom Scholem*, 53.

20. S.Y. Agnon, “Ma’aseh Azriel Moshe,” 36.

21. “Zwei Erzählungen,” 233.

22. “Ma’aseh Azriel Moshe,” 36.

to paper and pencil, might be compared to the mournful work of translation that has the potential of resulting in a sense of restoration.

Scholem's choice of the term "Schrift" in his translation of the above-quoted passage is overdetermined since it denotes not only writing but also the holy text, *Die Schrift*. The translation thereby foregrounds an implicit aspect of the original story: Azriel Moshe's tears do not merely erase chalk names on walls, but extinguish the holy books themselves, thereby alluding to the holy names of God. Elhanan Shilo has discussed the Kabbalistic origins of this passage in tales from the *Zohar* about the angel Azriel who reinscribes the names of God that were erased by false oaths and thereby protects the world from the waters of the deep, of *tehom*.<sup>23</sup> If Scholem undertook a "labor of mourning" through his work on Hebrew lamentations, his translations of Agnon's stories addressed German Jews who had experienced a distancing from tradition and a desire to take up the study of Jewish texts, enabling a sense of restoration. Specifically, he had his brother-in-law, Moshe Marx, in mind since, as Scholem recounted, Marx collected Hebrew books and took excellent care of them, even though he could barely understand their contents.<sup>24</sup> Scholem's German version thus spells out for readers the resonances of Agnon's Hebrew, rendering writing as scripture and turning the erasure of the names into their utter extinguishment.

From yet another perspective, Scholem himself, as a translator between Hebrew and German, might be compared to Moshe Azriel who, after erasing his own writing on the walls, decides to transcribe the (holy) names again. In his diaries, Scholem described the translation of the Bible as an act of redemption since through this process the "structure of God's language" can be rediscovered. He viewed the translation of *Eikhah* and the Bible more generally as a "parting gift" (*Geschenk beim Abscheid*) of the Zionist Jew to the German language, or else "the gift that enables parting." In other words, German Jews cannot be delivered into Hebrew until they pay off their "debt of gratitude" (*Dankesschuld*) to German society and culture through the task of scriptural translation.<sup>25</sup> When approaching works of literature, such as Agnon's stories, rather than "God's language," the hefty notion of a debt of gratitude is only partially applicable. However, in view of Scholem's departure from Germany in 1923, his translations of Agnon became literal gifts, which he left behind for a German readership.

23. Elchanan Shilo, *Haqabbalah biytsirat S.Y. Agnon* (Ramat-Gan: Universitat Bar-Ilan, 2011), 187-188.

24. "This memorable man [Moses Marx] was a partner in a textile firm on Spittelmarkt, but his heart belonged to Hebrew typography and bibliography, though he was hardly capable of understanding the contents of the books which he so lovingly tended and had so wonderfully bound by Berlin's most outstanding craftsmen." Gershom Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem: Memories of My Youth*, 143.

25. *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 346.

The reverence with which Scholem upheld Agnon might also explain his decision to translate his stories into German, even when most of his other translations were not of a literary nature. When reading out loud another tale by Agnon, “Aggadat hasofer” (“The Tale of the Torah Scribe”) to Walter Benjamin in the summer of 1918, Scholem describes how Benjamin thought that this story is comparable to the Bible, so that if the ending were better executed then “the purpose of the Bible” would no longer be evident.<sup>26</sup> Scholem too considered Agnon’s Hebrew writing a continuation of Hebrew scriptural and literary tradition, claiming that Agnon “worked for [the renaissance of Hebrew] in the quarries of tradition.” Agnon did not treat the Bible as a mere “national saga,” devoid of religious or mystical significance, but rather recognized the “continuity of tradition and its language in their true context.” In this respect, Agnon, for Scholem, was the last of a near-extinct species of Hebrew writers, the master of an obsolete medium, or, from a different perspective, “the occupant of the most advanced outpost of the Hebrew language in its old sense.”<sup>27</sup> The question arises, how could a translation into any language, including German, capture Agnon’s sensibility as a Hebrew writer who was able to bridge the Jewish past of this language with the present and future of its users? When seeking to mediate Agnon for a German readership, Scholem could not preserve the full extent of the Hebrew writer’s allusions and the range of his Hebrew that drew from past textual traditions. Rather, his German texts evoked, more than anything, a sense of loss and mourning, perhaps as a first steps towards recovery of the past. They provided a glimpse of the Hebrew original without suggesting that the German translation could supplant knowledge of Hebrew and its legacy.

### The Voices of Past Hebrew

In the same issue of the 1924 *Der Jude*, Scholem also published his translation of Agnon’s “Beit hakeneset haggadol” (“The Great Synagogue”). This story shares with “Ma’aseh Azriel Moshe shomer hasefarim” the sense that a body of knowledge and tradition has been lost and cannot be fully restored, despite the protagonists’ attempts. “The Great Synagogue” first appeared in the Hebrew journal *Hatekufah* in 1919 and Agnon then collected it, with some modifications, in the *Polin* volume of 1924. It describes a group of Jewish children who, when digging in the ground in order to construct their own new Temple, uncover the shingles of a roof. At first, when only the roof is in sight, the Polish town folk believe it is an old palace in which a local lord suffocated to death his wife’s lover. After the entire structure has been uncovered, they believe it is a church, and only

26. Gershom Scholem, *Lamentations of Youth: The Diaries of Gershom Scholem, 1913–1919*, trans. Anthony David (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 250.

27. “S.Y. Agnon,” 95–96.

when they hear voices coming from within and fear that these are unburied souls, do they call the Jews to try and open the locked building. When the doors swing open, the local Jews find a splendid synagogue within, filled with trappings of the original Temple as depicted in the Bible. However, the last line reads: “Everything was in its place. Only the eternal light was about to go out.”<sup>28</sup>

Scholem’s choice to translate this tale of unearthing a synagogue from a past era of greatness was overdetermined, when we consider his view of Agnon as a writer who worked for the modernization of Hebrew in “the quarries of tradition.” The epigraph, a verse from Psalm 31, alludes to this point: מָה רַב-טוֹבָהּ, אֲשֶׁר-צִפְנָתָ לִירְאֵיךָ: “How great Your goodness that You hid for those who fear you.”<sup>29</sup> Those who seek God might find a hidden goodness, the Psalmist promises, but Agnon’s story is far bleaker. Ironically, the synagogue appears to be the very Temple that the children were planning to build so that their utopic project transforms into a site of decline and death, hinted at through the discussion of the local lord who turns into a vengeful murderer. Rather than uncover a preserved space and tradition that possesses an “eternal life”—in Scholem’s description of the Hebrew language—Agnon’s ending reveals, in Robert Alter’s words, that “the wondrous renewal of the past ... comes too late in the history of faith and culture—the return can no longer take place.”<sup>30</sup> In the historical Jerusalem Temple, the Western candle was the one that always remained ablaze and was used to light the other candles. Considering that Agnon used the term “*ner hattamid*,” his story points to the decline of Western Jewish culture. Scholem translated the final verb, “*shqi’ato*” (its setting or extinguishing) with the nominalized verb, *Erlöschen*, which denotes both extinguishment and death, thereby intensifying the original Hebrew. The German translation can be viewed as a lamenting one, mourning the loss of Jewish traditions and the Hebrew language itself, suggesting that the past can perhaps be dug up but not fully resurrected.

Scholem’s German includes, in a gesture of preservation, specific Hebrew terms—such as “*Tischa b’ab*,” the day of mourning for the destroyed Temple, “*Gemara*,” and “*Shamir*” (legendary worm used to cut the Temple’s alter stones). This incorporation of Hebrew terms notwithstanding, the German version provides, as a whole, an accessible narrative that forgoes the intricate web of allusions evoked in Agnon’s Hebrew, precluding the very process of probing into

28. S.Y. Agnon, “The Great Synagogue,” *The Reform Jewish Quarterly* (2016), 129. “הכל על מקומו בשלום, רק נר-התמיד היה סמוך לשקיעתו” *Beit hakeneset haggadol*, *Hatequfah*, 1919, 30.

29. Alter Psalm 31.

30. Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin, and Scholem* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 17.

the past that the story describes.<sup>31</sup> The opening of the story posed a particular challenge for Scholem (and later translators) since it draws on Talmudic idiom, also alluding thereby to the relevant rabbinic commentary. Here are the story's opening sentences:

תינוקות של בית רבן משתעשעים היו יום של קיץ אחד אחר הצהריים בחצר בית רבן על  
ההר הגדול: במחבואים ובזקנה ודוב; בארבעים שודדים ובגימ"ל אחין; במלחמת דוד  
וגלית ובכהן משוח-מלחמה, —עד שנתיגעו משעשועים אלו ונתנו לבם לבנות את בית-  
המקדש. אמרו: הרי אתמול תשעה באב היה, יום שהחריבו את הבית, הבה נתחיל בבנינו.<sup>32</sup>

Die Kinder aus der Schule spielten nachmittags an einem Sommertage im Hof der Schule auf dem großen Berg: Versteck, die Alte under der Bär, Vierzig Räuber, Drei Brüder, Davids Kampf mit Goliath, und den Priester, der die Krieger auswählt, bis sie dieser Spiele müde wurden und darauf sannnen, das Heiligtum zu bauen. Sie sagten: gestern war ja Tischa ba'ab, der Tag, an dem die Feinde das Haus zerstörten, nun wollen wir anfangen es wieder zu bauen.<sup>33</sup>

School children [*tinot shel beit rabban*] were playing on the hill: Games such as Forty Thieves and Three Brothers, the Battle of David and Goliath, and the Priest Anointed for Battle. When they had tired of these pastimes they said, "Yesterday was Tishah B'Av, the day that the enemies destroyed the Temple. Let's begin to rebuild it."<sup>34</sup>

The Hebrew idiom "*tinot shel beit rabban*" is a Talmudic term originating in BT 119b that refers to children studying in a traditional Jewish school or *heder*. In the context of this story concerning the children's shift from typical games to the more serious project of rebuilding the Temple, the idiom activates a passage in the Babylonian Talmudic warning against the neglect of Jewish children's studies, even for the sake of rebuilding the Temple.

R. Hamnuna said: Jerusalem was destroyed only because they neglected [the education of] school children; for it is sad, pour it out [sc. God's wrath] because of the children in the street: why pour it out? Because the child is in the street.

31. In 1917, Scholem published in the Zionist *Jüdische Rundschau* a scathing critique of Alexander Eliasberg's translation, from the Yiddish, of three story collections by writers such as Y. L. Peretz, Sholem Aleichem, and Sholem Asch. He accused Eliasberg of succumbing to modern norms and bourgeois expectations, producing texts that ignore or replace Jewish terms and create a sentimental atmosphere unbecoming the originals. Gershom Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, vol. 1, ed. Kalfried Gründer, Herbert Kopp-Oberstebrink, and Friedrich Niewöhner (Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, 2000), 495–497.

32. S.Y. Agnon, "Beit hakeneset haggadol," 28.

33. "Zwei Erzählungen," 235.

34. "The Great Synagogue," 126.

Resh Lakish also said in the name of R. Judah the Prince: School children may not be made to neglect [their studies] even for the building of the Temple.<sup>35</sup>

Playing secular games like “Forty Thieves and Three Brothers,” the children in Agnon’s story participate in the neglect of studies denounced by R. Hamnuna and Resh Lakish. Their games progress, furthermore, from the more innocuous “hide and seek” to enactments of biblical battle scenes such as “David and Goliath.” Not only do these children neglect their sacred studies but they then turn to the “game” of rebuilding the Temple. They work sacrilegiously in direct opposition to the rabbinic notion that the neglect of study caused the destruction of Jerusalem and that children should not be permitted to stop studying even for the sake of rebuilding the Temple. When their teacher, the Rabbi, comes out to the sound of their calls as they happen upon the roof tiles, he does not scold them, moreover, but appears interested in using the tiles to repair the roof of his own home.

This passage concerning the children’s work outside of the *heder* environment can also be interpreted from within a Zionist framework: as they leave behind the religious world, the children embark upon warring games that bring them to take matters into their own hands and attempt to rebuild the Temple. By setting his tale on the day after the Ninth of Av, a day that Agnon adopted as his birthday, Agnon implicitly shows how the destruction of the Temple might be subsumed within a Zionist agenda, alluding to the rebuilding of a Jewish nation through imagery of children as construction works: “One brought a pocket full of clay, and another a mouth full of water. This one a stone and that one a broken brick... they decided to cut the stone with their teeth.”<sup>36</sup> Using their clothes, mouths, and teeth rather than any construction tools, these young students embody Zionist labor, using and sacrificing their own bodies as they toil and become subsumed in the earth that they dig up.

The loss of the Talmudic allusion to the *tinogot shel bet rabban* in German translation—“Kinder aus der Schule spielten nachmittags...im Hoff der Schule”—thus enacts the logic of the story itself. It abolishes the world of Jewish *heder* and religious studies and secularizes the story, downplaying the sacrilegious dimension of the children’s play. Additionally, just as the townspeople misidentify the structure and believe it to be a church, so readers of this translation might first misinterpret who these children are, mistaking them for Christians, only to encounter terms like “*Tischa b’ab*” that force a renewed perception of the truth. The dissonance between the German-language opening and the game of rebuilding the Temple, “das Heiligtum,” performs the distance that a secularized German Jew would need to overcome in order to return to Zion as a religious,

35. The Babylonian Talmud, (I. Epstein), 818–819, <https://archive.org/details/TheBabylonianTalmudcompleteSoncinoEnglishTranslation>.

36. S.Y. Agnon, “The Great Synagogue,” 126.

not merely political, site. Scholem's translation constitutes, in this manner, a portal in its own right: it is a door that will not easily unlock and that hides its inner Hebrew contents; it also can, potentially, lead the reader into the house, *habayit* in Hebrew, which means both home and Temple. Just as the children uncover the old synagogue when trying to rebuild the Temple, so the readers too, once entering the story, come across terms and ideas that, like the shingles of the rediscovered roof, must be deciphered, ultimately revealing their innermost Jewish significance.

If Scholem uses the more neutral words "Kinder" (children) and "Schule" (school) in the opening of the story, as the tale progresses he includes explanations within the translation for terms that do not require such elaboration in the Hebrew. For instance, where Agnon writes "*harei matsinu bateshuvot*" ("we have found in the responsa"), Scholem translates "Wir finden ja in den Bescheiden der Rabbinen" ("we find in the legal decisions of the rabbis"). When a voice is finally heard from within the locked abode, Agnon writes and translates that the Jews hear the voice, "and behold: the voice is the voice of Jacob." Scholem diverges here from Agnon and writes: "und sieh, wie die Stimme von Juden war ihr Klang" ("and behold, its sound was like the voice of Jews").<sup>37</sup> As in the example of "*tinoqot shel beit raban*," here too the German version avoids an allusion to another Jewish text, in this case the theft of the birthright in Genesis 25, when Isaac identifies Jacob's voice while incorrectly mistaking the hands for Esau's. In Agnon's tale, the allusion concludes a debate concerning the identity of the building itself. Initially perceived as a palace, further digging reveals the structure to be a house of worship, but it remains unclear whether it is a church or a synagogue. Only when the door does not open and the Polish townfolks supposedly hear the voices of an unburied soul from within do they call upon the Jews to approach, fearing spirit possession. In other words, the synagogue itself appears masked, as though it were a church with "stained glass windows," reminiscent of the manner in which Jacob covered himself with lamb skin in order to appear akin to Esau while his voice betrayed his true identity. Considering that Agnon witnessed the flourishing of Reform German Jewry in Germany, including the construction of a massive and richly-decorated synagogue in 1912 in West Berlin, the allusion to the "voice of Jacob" could be understood as a stab at the Christian façade of the modern German synagogue. Agnon further underscores the importance of this allusion with the description: "And when they put their hands on the gate, the gate opened before them." It is not enough to hear the voice of Jacob, that is the voice of the Israelite brother, the Jews must also, like Jacob, use their hands to recover the space of this structure as their own.

37. "Beit hakeneset haggadol," 29; "Zwei Erzählungen," 237.

The verse that the voice from within the synagogue sings includes the name Jacob: “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel.”<sup>38</sup> Since Jews traditionally utter this phrase from Numbers 24:5 prior to prayer, upon entering the space of a synagogue, Agnon uses it at this point in the narrative just prior to the magical opening of the old synagogue’s doors. However, in conjunction with the previous mention of Jacob and his mistaken blessing, this allusion to Numbers also might remind readers that Bal’am sought to curse the people of Israel, rather than bless them. Israel’s fate depends on such reversals, from curse to blessing, and the dug-up synagogue represents this potential transformation from poverty to wealth, from destitution to redemption. Still, the decline of the eternal flame at the end of the story indicates an unclear resolution and brings this fairytale like narrative to an ominous conclusion. While Scholem transposed the verse from Numbers into German—“Wie schön sind deine Zelte, Jakob”—he translated the first mention of Jacob as “Juden” (Jews), revealing that he did not rely on his audience to understand the biblical allusion or to consider Jacob as representative of the people of Israel. He also rendered the singular Jacob as a plural “Juden,” linguistically cementing the connection between the Polish Jews whom the Christian villagers call to “do their work” and enter the structure and the voice emanating from within.

In an unpublished 1926 essay entitled “Bemerkungen über Hebräisch und Hebräischlernen” (“Notes on Hebrew and the Study of Hebrew”), Scholem distinguished between Hebrew as the literary language of the book and the Hebrew spoken in Palestine. He argued for the life force of the former in contrast to the ghostly, almost demonic power of the latter. Despite the ongoing processes of secularization, Hebrew had retained, for Scholem, the glint or reflection (“*Abglanz*”) and “the constant resonance of that revelation” to which it owes its eternal life. Even more so, this language possesses, through its tradition, “a weighty treasure chamber of nuances” (“*Ballast Schatzkammern von Nuancen*”) and, most importantly, “it promises us the silent realms, without which we cannot conduct a spiritual, that is a linguistic life.”<sup>39</sup> Scholem perceived Agnon, alongside the poet Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, as one of the few modern Hebrew writers capable of drawing from these “treasure chambers of nuances” and writing in the spiritual mode of the language. For Scholem, “Agnon’s writing is distinguished by a singular stillness, by an absence of pathos and exaltation.” It is also, as he recognized, informed by “the extraordinary sobriety of rabbinic prose,” in addition to Agnon’s saturation in kabbalistic literature and the early writings of Hasidism.<sup>40</sup>

In view of Scholem’s own positioning of Agnon at the “crossroads” of Hebrew language tradition and modernity, translation into any language,

38. “The Great Synagogue,” 128.

39. Gershom Scholem Archive, ARC. 4\* 1599 07 277.1.25, The National Library of Israel.

40. Gershom Scholem, “S.Y. Agnon,” 106-107.

German included, could not possibly convey this bridging function. As we have seen, while contending with the dying out of the Jewish past and the inability to fully resurrect it, “Beit hakeneset haggadol,” nonetheless performs the ongoing presence of the past in the Hebrew language through its intricate web of biblical and Talmudic allusions. Incapable of replicating these resonances in German, Scholem could still imitate the “sobriety” of Agnon’s prose, or else its stillness and “absence of pathos.” Furthermore, his German story points to the duality of (secularized) Hebrew as a potentially demonic voice emanating from within an unidentified locked chamber versus (literary) Hebrew as a decipherable voice emerging from within an identified synagogue. His decision to take up this particular story, alongside “Ma’aseh Azriel Moshe shomer hasefarim,” suggests, moreover, that both tales addressed Scholem’s concern with the demise of German Jewish culture. The German translations were intended to lead readers to the Hebrew source, rather than leaving them satisfied with its German replication. Like the Christian townspeople, who are denied entrance to the unearthed house of worship, so readers of the German text are led to understand that they remain themselves outside the structure of Hebrew spiritual life that contains treasures for those who seek. Thus, for instance, the final sentence of the Hebrew story includes terms that allude to the Temple’s brass ritual objects (“*kiyyor nehoshet*” and “*nehoshet kelal*”) and to the symbolism of the dove. While the interior opulence can be expressed in German, the provenance of the Hebrew terms in scriptural descriptions of the Temple remains buried in translation.

For Scholem, the figure of Azriel Moshe and the image of the Great Synagogue encapsulated some of these tensions concerning the study of Hebrew in modern times and the preservation of written Hebrew as a quarry of tradition. Both stories represent, through imagery of erasure, misidentification, and extinguishment the arduous process of coming to terms with and striving to obtain a hidden and buried past. Agnon’s stories do not suggest that these losses can be recuperated but posit, instead, a structure of mourning that ends on a tragic-ironic note. The act of translating these stories from Hebrew into German constituted, I maintain, a loss of a second order, distancing the reader further from the original and from “the heavy ballast of historical tones and overtones accumulated through 3,000 years of sacred literature,” as Scholem put it.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, the translations performed, even more decisively than the original texts, the rupture between past and present, tradition and modernity. They offered German Jewish readers a form of literary lamentation, a path for mourning the erasure of holy Hebrew names, also through the very process of translation away from Hebrew. And, at the same time, they extend into the German language something of the Hebrew “Abglanz,” the reflection of revelation: they depict a glint of that light in

41. *Ibid.*, 95.

the process of its extinguishment. Scholem's German translations radicalize, in this manner, the Hebrew lament, marking a site of linguistic annihilation and suggesting that the rich silence of this language might only be accessed through the dialectic of study and mourning.

In writing this essay, I too mourn the tremendous loss of Alan Mintz<sup>42</sup>, a wise and caring mentor. Not unlike Scholem, Mintz too engaged in the translation and interpretation of Agnon's writing, focusing on works about the Jewish Polish past. In the "introduction" to *Ancestral Tales*, Mintz openly tells us that he was "wrong" in his past assessment of Agnon's engagement with the Holocaust. While previously underestimating the significance of World War II in this author's oeuvre, he came to realize that he could not see the Holocaust because it did not appear in the forms he was used to—"ghettos, camps, victims, perpetrators, survivors, traumatic memory, and so on." "The Great Synagogue" can provide a useful analogy for Mintz's claim: how does one go about identifying what one encounters? The entire population in the story ("kol ha'ir kulah"), and not merely the Christian Poles, see in the unearthed building what their eyes are trained to perceive: a palace or a church. The idea of a Temple-like "great synagogue" has been lost, to some extent, and cannot be imagined until very late in the story. Mintz understood Agnon's project as an attempt to "restore, if only through the medium of the storyteller's art, the world of Jews and Judaism that had been brought to its final extermination."<sup>42</sup> In order to appreciate this project of restoration one must, as Mintz instructed us, retrain one's scholarly vision, allowing the previously unimaginable to appear and become recognized for what it truly is. And for this late-life lesson, an intellectual parable if you like, I am eternally grateful to Alan Mintz.

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42. Alan L. Mintz, *Ancestral Tales*, 14.