

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

Edited by Sheila E. Jelen, Jeffrey Saks,
and Wendy Zierler

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

© 2023 by Indiana University Press

All rights reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1992.

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

A Revolutionary Traditionalist

16 “New Faces”: A Study of Sippur pashut

Haim Be'er

Translated by Deborah Greniman

THE RELATIONSHIP OF Agnon's work to Judaism's ancestral texts — its intertextuality — is neither literary device nor mere turn of phrase, but the very well-spring of his creativity and perhaps also its principal theme — so argues Gershon Shaked; to plumb the depths of the narrative, one must be both broadly and deeply conversant with the “Jewish bookshelf.”¹ Such familiarity is required, in his view, not only in order to discern the traditions embedded in the text, but also, principally, for the sake of creating the encounter between the “tale that's told” and the sacred canon, as it emerges from the relationship between the overt and covert texts. Or, as Shaked subsequently fine-tuned his formulation,² Agnon the writer is characterized by his two faces; he was, in Shaked's oxymoronic definition, a “revolutionary traditionalist,” with his roots planted in tradition and his crown in modern reality.

Agnon did develop this tension throughout his oeuvre, but not quite in the way Shaked put it: Time after time, he highlighted the unbridgeable gap between the glories of the past and the wretchedness of the present, a gap summed up in the Talmud by Rabbi Zeira, quoting Raba bar Zimuna: “If the earlier [scholars] were sons of angels, we are the sons of men; and if the earlier [scholars] were sons of men — we are like asses.”³ For our purposes, suffice it to recall the unforgettable opening words of the novella *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town*, which recur almost verbatim at the story's end:

Three or four generations ago, when the Torah was beloved by Israel and the entire glory of a man was Torah, our town was privileged to be counted among the most notable towns in the land on account of its scholars, who endowed our town with a measure of grace through the Torah that they learned. . . . But,

1. Gershon Shaked, *Other Aspects of Agnon's Oeuvre* (Panim aherot biytsirato shel S.Y. Agnon), Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989, 11.

2. Idem, “Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Revolutionary Traditionalist.” (Shmu'el Yosef Agnon, hama-hapekhan hamesoreti), in Emuna Yaron, Raphael Weiser, Dan Laor and Reuven Mirkin (eds), *Kovets 'Agnon* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), 308–318. See also, Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist* (New York: NYU Press, 1989).

3. BT *Shabbat* 112b, Soncino translation.

now let us leave aside these matters that will not reappear until the coming of the Redeemer, and tell a little something of what our elders used to tell, about two great scholars who were in our town back in the days when everyone made Torah the essence of their being, because they understood that the saying “the joy of the Lord is our Fortress” refers to the Torah.⁴

Did Agnon really believe the past was so glorious? Reading the story, even glancingly, suffices to convince us that this talk of a harmonious, idyllic past rings hollow and dissembling, that it has nothing to do with the harsh and cruel reality described in *Two Scholars*.

One way or another, this basic binary of tradition and revolution, in Shaked's view, is the key not only to understanding Agnon's world, but also to understanding the tension in his work between text and anti-text, between the original meaning of the sources embedded in the story and the new meaning with which Agnon endowed them.

Haim Weiss, a scholar of rabbinic literature, has recently challenged Shaked's rigid conception,⁵ arguing that Agnon's presentation of the past as harmonious is but a romantic pretense, and so his use of “quotes” from the sources does not necessarily create a binary tension between tradition and revolution. Suffice it to say, as Weiss goes on to contend, that Agnon's continuous subversion of the overt meaning of the sacred canon, and his innumerable efforts to elicit new meanings from it, is not so much a modern stratagem as a classic interpretive technique, with its roots in rabbinic literature and its topmost branches in Hassidic teachings. In his genius, Agnon broadened and deepened the range of the text's meanings with his daring usage of these “quotes,” setting them within a multivalent framework.

Whether right is on the side of Shaked or of Weiss, Agnon's finely crafted, subtle, nuanced and sophisticated use of intertextuality is incontestable. His ideal addressee is asked not only to identify the allusions to textual tradition embedded or implicit in his text, but also to attend above all to the question of how the narrator is using that stub of a verse, halakhic term or rabbinic coinage. Is the “quote” invoked merely as a linguistic convention, a reusing of the text as a continuous link in the chain of sacred literature, not to be interpreted as substantive? Or is it significant — to be taken as an anti-text of the literary tradition within which it emerged and from which it was drawn, as Shaked would have it, or as broadening and enriching the range of its reading possibilities, as Weiss would have it? At any rate, the “quote” leverages the work and endows it with a new dimension that would at the outset be concealed from the eyes of the average reader.

4. In: S.Y. Agnon, *Samukh venir'eh*, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1946, 5. English transl. by Paul Pinchas Bashan and Rhonna Weber Rogol, in S.Y. Agnon, *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town and Other Novellas* (New Milford, CT–London: Toby Press, 2014), 3.

5. Lecture delivered in a seminar at Ben-Gurion University, January 2016.

As an example, let us look at the phrase “new faces” (*panim ḥadashot*), which Agnon reiterates over thirty times in his oeuvre, from *The Bridal Canopy* (*Hakhnasat kallah*) and *A Simple Story* (*Sippur pashut*), through *A Guest for the Night* (*Oreaḥ natah lalun*) and *Two Scholars* (*Shenei talmidei ḥakhamim*), and on up to *Only Yesterday* (*Temol shilshom*) and *A City in Its Fullness* (*‘Ir umelo’ah*).

“New faces” is a halakhic term first used in three different contexts in rabbinic literature, beginning with the Tosefta and then in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, from which it was taken up into all the multiple genres and branches of rabbinic literature.

One use of “new faces” relates to the wedding ceremony and its addenda. On each of the seven days of the wedding, the custom is for the chief celebrants to hold a *se’udat mitzvah*, a religious feast, in the presence of the groom and bride and at least ten more invitees. In modern Jewish parlance, this meal, referred to in rabbinic literature as *birkat ḥatanim*, a “wedding benediction,” is called *sheva berakhot*, for the “seven blessings” recited under the *ḥuppah* at the wedding ceremony and at the end of the Grace after each of the festive meals. In order for the meal to take place, its participants must include “new faces” — people who had not met the groom and bride at the wedding or since. “Our Rabbis taught: The blessing of the bridegrooms [*birkat ḥatanim*] is said in the presence of ten [persons] all the seven days. Rab Judah said: And that is only if new guests [*panim ḥadashot*] come.”⁶

The second context in which the concept of “new faces” appears is associated with the laws of mourning. The Rabbis concur that the (male) mourner is not to don *tefillin* (phylacteries) on the first day of the *shiva*, the seven days of mourning. Instead of *tefillin*, which are considered his “glory” (*pe’er*, פ.א.ר), he puts a pinch of ashes (*efer*, א.פ.ר) on his head — reversing the order of the word’s first two letters. However, there is some disagreement among the Rabbis regarding the rest of the *shiva*. In our context, the view of R. Eliezer (Lieber) in the Jerusalem Talmud and the concurring view of R. Joshua in the Babylonian Talmud are of interest. According to R. Liezer in the Jerusalem Talmud, “A mourner on the first day does not put on phylacteries; on the second day he puts on phylacteries, but at the entry of fresh personages [*panim ḥadashot*] he takes them off throughout the seven days.”⁷ Similarly, in the Babylonian Talmud, R. Joshua states: “A mourner is forbidden to put on phylacteries [during] the first two days. From the second day onward, the second day included, he is allowed to put on phylacteries; but at the entry of fresh personages [*panim ḥadashot*] he takes them off.”⁸

Nor should the parallel here between wedding and mourning customs surprise the reader. Shmuel Glick has shown that, notwithstanding the obvious

6. BT *Ketubot* 7b, Soncino translation. Cf. Tosefta *Megilah* 3:14.

7. JT *Mo’ed qatan* 13b, 3:5.

8. BT *Mo’ed qatan* 21b; Soncino translation.

opposition between the two realms, they are discussed alongside each other in the halakhic literature, and rabbinic scholars through the ages have consistently sought either to analogize or to contrast the reasons for these customs.⁹

At any rate, the idea that underpins both of the above rules and fastens them together, notwithstanding their polar opposition, is that the appearance of “new faces” — the entrance of persons who up to now have had no part either in the mourner’s sorrow or in the rejoicing of the bride and groom — results in things returning to their former state. The mourner’s sorrow, which, as it were, had begun to dull, wells up anew as a consequence of meeting someone who had not seen him in his hour of bereavement; and the rejoicing of the new couple, which might seem to have dimmed since the wedding ceremony, is rekindled upon meeting someone who has not yet had a chance to take part in their celebration.

The third context in which the concept of “new faces” appears is borrowed by the Sages from the laws of impurity. It rests upon rules concerning changes or repairs made to an implement that create in it a new halakhic state. For example: an impure sandal that has had both its “ears” or flaps repaired, first the one and then the other; or, as the Talmud puts it: “If one of the ears of a sandal is broken and he repairs it ... if the second is broken and he repairs it.”¹⁰ The two repairs cancel the sandal’s former impurity and create a new halakhic state for it; as the Talmud says, “a new face has arrived here,” and the sandal can now again be considered pure.¹¹

The question, then, is: Which of the “new faces” that peep out at us from Agnon’s page are no more than turns of phrase that occurred to the writer by the by, so that we needn’t dwell too much upon them or seek more in them than what there is; and which are not chance utterances but rather, constitute a form of “epiphany,” that literary miracle characterized by James Joyce as a glowing moment, singular and rare, wherein the writer, and consequently the reader, arrives at a sudden comprehension of some phenomenon of reality, whose essence or inner nature is now laid bare to the public eye, perfect in its magnificence and bathed in brilliant light.¹²

9. Shmuel Glick, *Or nagah 'aleihem: Marriage and Mourning Customs in Jewish Tradition* (Efrat, Israel: Keren Uri, 5757/1997).

10. BT *Shabbat* 112b, Soncino translation.

11. *Ibid.*, Davidson translation. In the same place, the Talmud adduces an additional example of a utensil that had been perforated several times and was repaired each time, as a result of which the Sages view it as a new vessel that no longer bears its former impurity. See also BT *Baba kama* 96b, which deals with the ritual fitness of a brick that someone has made out of earth obtained from a brick he had stolen from someone else and crushed, so that, from here on, it is considered a “new face.”

12. See my essay, “The Hunt for Epiphanies” (*Tseyd ha'epifaniyot*), in: Ruth Kartun-Blum (ed.), *From Where Did I Get My Poem: Writers and Poets Talk about Sources of Inspiration (Me'ayin nahalti et shiri: Sofrim umeshorerim medabberim 'al meqorot hashra'ah)* (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot Aharonot, 2002), 195–220.

It's almost impossible to give a precise answer to that question, because the answer is as elusive as Agnon's intertextuality itself. However, in some places it can clearly be seen that the linguistic fragment drawn from the sacred canon and fitted into the text is not "alone in its times."¹³ Rather than standing on its own, independent of the context, it resurfaces time after time, each time in a different variation, like a musical theme, and its reverberations and their own reverberations are associated each time with different situations, forming mutual ties with the plot. It is in this that the reader may witness the magic touch of the artist, as he transfigures the "quote" — in our case, the "new faces" — and uses it to leverage the story, while simultaneously carrying out a multivalent dialogue with the source, replete with voices and echoes.

The phrase "new faces" appears four times in *A Simple Story*. It confronts the reader already in the opening scene, when Blume Nacht arrives in Szybusz, lost and desperate after her mother's death, and waits in the Hurvitzes' entrance hall for the return of the house's owners:

Blume boarded the wagon and left for Szybusz. When she reached her cousin's house she sat down on a chair in the entrance hall with her belongings beside her.

On coming upstairs from the store that evening, Tsirl Hurvitz saw a new face. She took it by the chin between her fingers and asked:

"Who are you, my dear? And what are you doing here?" (*Sippur pashut*, 55; *Simple Story*, 4)¹⁴

The reader's attention naturally is principally drawn to the lordly way in which Mrs. Hurvitz grasps the chin of the lone girl seeking a roof in her home, inspecting her as one would the quality of a slave girl in the market, and one scarcely notices the words "a new face," behind which, as it were, the intimated image of the writer pops out for a moment, whispering in Tsirl's ear: "See, Mrs. Hurvitz, it's now in your hands to determine whether Blume, who has arrived in your home, is to become a 'new face' for the purpose of rejoicing or rather of pain and sorrow." In other words, this innocent phrase enfolds within it in miniature the whole theme of *A Simple Story*.

But already on the day after Blume's arrival, as the home's denizens dine on the breakfast that the girl has prepared for them, Agnon's ideal addressee will know for certain which of the two possibilities Mrs. Hurvitz will choose. As she sets the table, Blume puts on the serving dish some cakes that she had taken out of her bags. The cakes, to which the Hurvitzes are unaccustomed, immediately

13. See Isaiah 14:31.

14. S.Y. Agnon, *Sippur pashut*, in: idem, *Al kappot haman'ul* (Jerusalem–Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953); English translation: S.Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story* (English transl. by Hillel Halkin; New Milford–London: Toby Press, 2014). All the citations are from these editions. Unless noted otherwise, the translations are Halkin's.

attract the notice of the diners. Boruch Meir, the father, “regarded his cousin and the cakes she had brought with approval” (*Sippur pashut*, 58; *Simple Story*, 6). His son Hirshl, coming in after him, remarks: “Those cakes look awfully good!” He took one of them, ate it, and said, “These deserve a special blessing.” Only Tsirl, who tastes just a little piece, changes her tone of voice and declares: “Thanks be to God ... that we aren’t cake-eaters and pastry nibblers here. Plain ordinary bread is good enough for us.”

This scene takes on its full significance only if the reader directs his attention to the weighty burden of female eroticism with which bread and other kinds of baked goods are encumbered by the classical Hebrew canon, beginning with the Bible.¹⁵ By way of her cakes, we learn what each member of the household feels about the girl. She is viewed with favor by both the father and the son, the latter not only tasting her cakes with relish but also manifesting his opinion that they are worthy of a blessing — that is, that he sees her as a worthy candidate for marriage. But the wife and mother, by contrast, is repelled by this burst of eroticism that has instantly overcome both men and declares that she will not allow it to penetrate.

The writer sums up the abashed girl’s response to Tsirl’s unexpected attack with the following words: “Blume looked down at the table. The munching of cake did not stop” (קול לעיסת העוגות מפוצץ והולך). In rabbinic literature, the word *mefotsetset*, used by Agnon here to describe this “munching,” is attached to the miraculous apparition of a heavenly voice, as in שמעתי בת קול מפוצצת ואומרת — “And I heard a heavenly voice rumbling” (*Ruth rabbah* 6:4); עתידה בת קול להיות מפוצצת ואומרת — “A heavenly voice shall rumble through the tents of the

15. For example: “Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten furtively is tasty” (Prov. 9:17). Cf. Rashi’s commentary on Gen. 39:6–7: “[Potiphar] left all that he had in Joseph’s hands and, with him there, he paid attention to nothing save the food [lit.: bread] that he ate. Now Joseph was well built and handsome. After a time, his master’s wife cast her eyes upon Joseph and said, ‘Lie with me.’” On the words “nothing save the bread,” Rashi, alluding to *Genesis rabbah* 86:6, remarks: “That is, his wife, but the text used clean language.” Cf. also Rashi’s comment on Ex. 2:20–21: “[Jethro] said to his daughters, ‘Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread.’ Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah as wife.” Citing his comment on Gen. 39:6, Rashi interprets the words “Ask him in to break bread” as meaning “Perhaps he will marry one of you.” In BT *Ketubbot* 62b, sexual satisfaction is defined using the metaphorical expression “one who has bread in his basket” (Soncino translation). On this see the extensive discussion in Jacob Nacht’s *Symbols of Women in Our Ancient Sources, in Our New Literature and in the Literature of Other Peoples* (*Simlei ishah bimekoroteinu ha’atikim, besifruiteinu ha’adashah uvesifrut ha’amim*), Tel Aviv: Studies in Torah, Beliefs, Customs and Folklore, 5719/1959, s.v. *Lehem* (Bread), 140–144. The first to observe the centrality of cakes as a metonymy for female eroticism in Agnon’s writings was Dov Landau, in *From Style to Meaning in the Stories of S.Y. Agnon* (*Mesignon lemashma’ut besippurei Sh.Y. Agnon*), (Tel Aviv: Eqqed, 5748/1988), 91–94.

righteous” (JT *Shabbat* 6:8); ושמעתי בת קול יוצאה מבית קודש הקודשים מפרצת ואומרת— “And I heard a heavenly voice rumbling from the Holy of Holies” (*Yalkut Shim‘oni*, Kohelet, 974). In the breakfast scene, the sound of chewing on the cakes takes the character of a feminine heavenly voice, a kind of mini-prophecy or notice of future events dispatched straight down from heaven, with the intention of clarifying both to Blume and to Agnon’s addressees the ultimate fate of the relations that will emerge between the protagonists.

The story’s plot, as we know, is quite simple. Hirshl, the only son of Boruch Meir and Tsirl Hurvitz, falls in love with Blume as soon as she arrives at their home, but his mother, for reasons of money and class status, nips the relationship in the bud and marries her son off to Mina. His pining for Blume, strengthening by the day, not only undermines his fresh marriage but also conflicts his soul, culminating in the dramatic scene that commences during the morning service for the New Moon in the Little Synagogue and climaxes in his outburst of madness in the forest. Consequently, Hirshl is sent off for a lengthy stay in a sanatorium for the mentally ill in Lemberg. But even after he returns to his home and his wife, the reader doesn’t know for sure whether he has really been cured of his madness, or whether he has merely acquired the ability to behave like a sane person, though his heart is still hollowed out from within.

Those “new faces” that greeted us at the outset of *A Simple Story* were a harbinger of the great conundrum that accompanies the reader throughout the first part of the story: Does Blume’s entrance into the Hurvitz home herald the onset of family celebrations or a series of traumatic events? As the story continues, the phrase also becomes an aperture through which the reader may follow the process of Hirshl’s derangement, over which hovers the threatening shadow of the congenital mental illness that has passed down through the generations in his mother’s family, from his great-grandfather to his uncle, Tsirl’s brother, and on to him.

Before continuing, it is worth setting aside briefly the discussion of “new faces” to direct our gaze to the hidden deep structure upon which the plot of *A Simple Story* was built. At the base of Agnon’s story, which takes place at the beginning of the twentieth century in a Galician shtetl, lies a reversal of the classic structure of the Book of Ruth, anchored in the agricultural scenery of Judea at the time of the biblical Judges. The biblical story, threaded throughout with a חוט של חסד — a thread of compassion — is the hidden deep text of the merciless realistic story woven by Agnon; Bethlehem, and Boaz, the “man of substance of the family of Elimelech,” are the converse reflections of Szybusz and the Hurvitz family of shopkeepers. Or, to use a term coined recently by Daniel Blanton of the Univer-

sity of California at Berkeley, the Book of Ruth serves as a kind of “shadow-text” for *A Simple Story*.¹⁶

The openings of both stories are identical: the unplanned entrance of a girl from a low socioeconomic class, forlorn and destitute, into the bounds of the story as set out by the author. In *A Simple Story*, this is the orphaned Blume, who arrives in Szybusz after the death of her mother to seek the help of her wealthy relative, the shopkeeper Hurvitz, having received several recommendations in this regard. “When I die, go to our cousin Boruch Meir. I’m sure he’ll have pity and take you in,” counsels her dying mother, and the neighbors, too, urge her: “There’s a cousin named Boruch Meir Hurvitz who’s a wealthy storekeeper in Szybusz. He certainly won’t turn her away.” In the biblical book, too, a destitute young widow arrives from the “field of Moab” into the plot scene and decides, on the advice of her mother-in-law Naomi, to try her luck with Boaz, a family acquaintance, in the hope that she might find favor with him and gain his protection.

At this point the stories diverge, each pulling toward the opposite pole of the other.

Boruch Meir, despite the natural affection he feels toward the girl already from first sight, submits wordlessly to his wife’s merciless dictates. Not only does he dare not stand up for her or for his son, who has fallen in love with her, but no moral scruple arises in him either. No natural feeling instructs him to aid his relative and rectify the wrong he had done her mother a generation ago, when he cancelled their wedding, preferring instead the daughter of his wealthy employer.

The foundational event takes place on the first night of Blume’s stay in the house. All the members of the family are fast asleep; none is attentive to the distress of the guest lying awake, her thoughts of what the morning might bring allowing her no rest.

The events of that biblical night beside the grain pile on the threshing-floor during the barley harvest in Bethlehem, and everything that transpired from them, are as it were a mirror image of the sleepless night in Szybusz — the town whose name, in Hebrew, means defect or mistake — in which the local worthy gives his relative no succor, nor saves her from her distress. Boaz, who, as Naomi says, is “related to us; he is one of our redeeming kinsmen” (Ruth 2:20), “gives a start and pulls back” (3:8) when he discovers the young woman lying at his feet, asking him to “spread your robe over your handmaid, for you are a redeeming kinsman” (3:9). He responds without hesitation, promising:

And now, my daughter, have no fear. I will do in your behalf whatever you ask But while it is true that I am a redeeming kinsman, there is another

16. C.D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* Oxford–New York: (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10, 18.

redeemer closer than I. Stay for the night. Then in the morning, if he will act as a redeemer, good! Let him redeem. But if he does not want to act as redeemer for you, I will do so myself, as the Lord lives! Lie down until morning. (Ruth 3:11–13)

Ruth's entreaty and Boaz's response have a single source: the ancient law that prevailed among the Hebrews in biblical times:

When brothers dwell together and one of them dies and leaves no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married to a stranger, outside the family. Her husband's brother shall unite with her: he shall take her as his wife and perform the levir's duty. The first son that she bears shall be accounted to the dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out in Israel. (Deut. 25:5–6)

If the designated levir refused, for some reason, to do his duty and obey the sacred command, a public ceremony would take place at the city gate, before the elders, in which he was humiliated and scorned for his resistance:

His brother's widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, pull the sandal off his foot, spit in his face, and make this declaration: Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house! And he shall go in Israel by the name of "the family of the unsandaled one." (*ibid.*, 9–10)

It's no coincidence, of course, that none other than the shoe was chosen as the symbolic object used in the ceremony of *ḥalitsah*, by which the widow releases her dead husband's brother and frees him of her obligation to her. In many cultures, including that of the ancient Hebrews, the shoe is a tangible symbol of woman and her sexuality. For example, Bruno Bettelheim has interpreted Cinderella's slipper in the well known folktale as symbolically representing the female vagina.¹⁷ The same is true in the Hebrew sources. Thus, in the *Zohar*, we find: "Rabbi Yehuda said in the name of Rabbi Ḥiyya: It is written: "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from our feet" (Deut. 3:5). ... Rabbi Abba said: This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, commanded [Moses], in a dignified way, to withdraw completely from his wife."¹⁸ According to R. Menahem Recanati's commentary on the Torah, "From the mystery of the levir you may understand the matter of *ḥalitsah*, for the woman is the footwear of her husband, and now he is free of them."¹⁹ Jacob Nacht treats this subject extensively in his book *Symbols of Women*.²⁰

17. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 269–271.

18. *Zohar ḥadash, Ki tetse*, 59a.

19. R. Menahem Recanati. *Commentary on the Torah, Vayeshev*, Venice edition, §283 (n.p.).

20. Nacht, *Symbols of Women* (above, note 15), s.v. *Na'al* (shoe), 166–167.

We may note parenthetically that in the work of Agnon himself, shoes and sandals are manifest symbols of women's sexuality.²¹ For example, Sonia, the female protagonist of *Only Yesterday* (*Temol shilshom*), had shoes made for her by the cobbler from Homel, which accented her erotic appearance and gave her "an upright body and a fine posture," a secret she took care to conceal from her girlfriends.²² Sandals also play a key role in the novel *Shira*: in the dream that recurs to Manfred Herbst several times, where the nurse Shira and the blind Turkish beggar both disappear into a sandal — "until nothing was left of Shira except her left sandal";²³ in the shoes on her dainty feet, made by a skilled craftsman, so that they give her an elegant bearing;²⁴ in the pair of sandals that Manfred buys for his wife Henrietta, putting them on her feet himself, to the astonishment of his little daughter Sarah;²⁵ and, finally, in the lovely, graceful shoes, rather like sandals, that Shira buys for herself in Herbst's presence, which will reappear powerfully in the novel's dramatic final scene, when he is united with his beloved in the leper hospital.²⁶

The "redemption" at the center of the nocturnal interchange between Ruth and Boaz is an extension of the commandment of levirate marriage. The obligation to take responsibility for a childless widow did not stop with her late husband's brother; in the absence of a direct levir, it passed on to wider kinship circles. Thus, Boaz sees himself as obligated to look after his relative, and on the very next day, without delay, he gathers ten elders at the city gate and calls in their presence upon the nearer redeeming kinsman, who ought by right to redeem Ruth, to ascertain whether or not the latter was indeed interested in taking on this task: "If you are willing to redeem it,²⁷ redeem! But if you will not redeem, tell me, that I may know. For there is no one to redeem but you, and I come after you" (Ruth 4:4). This closer redeemer, whose name seems intentionally to be concealed by the scriptural text, rejects the invitation and proposes to Boaz: "You take over my right of redemption, for I am unable to exercise it" (4:6).

As soon as the barrier is lifted, opening the way for Boaz, the ritual of redemption takes place, and, as with the *ḥalitsah* ritual, the shoe is its central symbolic object: "Now this was formerly done in Israel in cases of redemption

21. Adi Zemach, "For the Sake of a Pair of Shoes" (*Ba'avur na'alayim*), in: idem, *Plain Reading in Twentieth-Century Hebrew Literature* (*Keri'ah tamah besifrut 'ivrit bat hame'ah ha'esrim*), (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 5750/1990), 62–70.

22. Agnon, *Only Yesterday* (English transl. by Barbara Harshav), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 117.

23. Agnon, *Shira* (English transl. by Zeva Shapiro), New Milford, (CT: Toby Press, 2013), 5, 510 and 574.

24. *Ibid.*, 63.

25. *Ibid.*, 509.

26. *Ibid.*, 756.

27. The property of Elimelech's family, along with the widowed Ruth.

or exchange,” the narrator informs his readers, “to validate any transaction, one man would take off his sandal and hand it to the other. Such was the practice in Israel” (4:7). The closer redeemer says to his surrogate, Boaz: “Acquire for yourself,” and he draws off his sandal (4:8); and Boaz thereupon declares publicly before the elders: “You are witnesses today that I am acquiring from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I am also acquiring Ruth the Moabite ... as my wife, so as to perpetuate the name of the deceased upon his estate” (4:10).

The many similarities connecting the Book of Ruth with *A Simple Story*, on the one hand, and the yawning chasm between them, on the other, together endow this division of Agnon’s prose with a new dimension. Boaz’s moral undertaking on Ruth’s behalf served as the point of departure for the story of the eternal flourishing of the Kingdom of David, from then until the end of days. By contrast, Boruch Meir’s indifference to Blume’s distress and to his own moral obligation toward her, and his submission to his wife’s dictate, lead to the family tragedy surrounding Hirshl’s married life, the debility and sickliness of his firstborn son, and above all the hereditary mental illness that rears itself anew, and whose cure, following the lengthy course of treatment in Lemberg, is left in doubt.²⁸

Let us return, then, to the “new faces.” The first appearance of this halakhic term, in association with the wedding benediction, points to the direction in which the life of the Hurvitz family might have developed as a consequence of Blume’s entrance into their lives, had Tsirl not adamantly and firmly thwarted this process. By contrast, its other two appearances, the one connected with the mourner taking off his phylacteries and the other with the “ears” of the sandal, point to the direction in which Hirshl’s life will be tugged from here on. It will suffice us in this regard to track the appearance, throughout the novel, of the key words *tefil-*

28. In the novel *Only Yesterday* (*Temol shilshom*), too, the Book of Ruth serves as a deep anti-theological story to that of Isaac Kumer and his second-aliyah comrades. I shall not discuss this at length here but will suffice with a few details: The story’s title, *Temol shilshom*, is drawn from Ruth 2:11, the only place in the Bible where this pair of words appears with no addition. The title of *Sefer helkat hasadeh* — the Book of the Piece of Land — which, as the author promises at the end of *Only Yesterday*, is to be the novel’s sequel, is also taken from the Book of Ruth. That phrase *helkat hasadeh*, too, appears just five times in the Bible, two of them in the Book of Ruth, in the context of Boaz’s act of redemption. Moreover, the writer refers to the members of the Second Aliyah (the second wave of Zionist immigration to Palestine/Erets Israel, 1904–1914) at the outset of the book as “the people of our redemption,” while by the end they are called “our chosen people” as an expression of his disappointment with them for not fulfilling their obligation to Isaac Kumer, not giving him their protection and not caring for him at a time of crisis, unlike Boaz’s behavior toward Ruth.

lin (phylacteries), shoe or sandal, and the verb *halats*, “to remove a shoe” (*halats*), up until the pivotal scene of Hirshl’s madness, in which the three come together in a chilling episode of casting off and getting free.

In Hirshl’s mind, a secret plan gradually and almost unconsciously takes shape for casting off Mina’s hold. One of the best means at his disposal to do so, a means of breaking out of his marriage, will be to put on a performance of madness, by way of defiling and desecrating his phylacteries. In *A Simple Story*, the *tefillin*, perhaps more than any other object, symbolize the home in which Mina was raised and the values by which her father, Gedalia Ziemlich, had educated her: modesty, caring for others, piety and humility:

Becoming the count’s manager, therefore, had not gone to his head. His house was still open to rich and poor alike and he himself waited on each guest. Whenever he had a free moment he read Psalms to himself, while each Monday and Thursday he journeyed to Szybusz to hear the Torah read in the synagogue. Far from a jealous man by nature, his only envy was of those Jews who could double their merit by putting on two pairs of tefillin each morning, one according to the formula of Rashi and one according to that of Rabbenu Tam—and if he did not emulate them it was not for lack of time but because he feared that, since many pious and learned Jews made do with one pair, it would be vainglorious of him to insist on two. As it was, he took great care of his tefillin, inspected them constantly to see that they were in order, and made sure never to engage in unnecessary conversation while wearing them. It was his custom too to buy a new prayer shawl before each holiday and exchange it for the torn one of some poor but God-fearing scholar—and indeed, his tongueless tefillin and torn prayer shawls were apt symbols for the man himself, who never said a word to anyone about how torn he felt inside. (*A Simple Story*, 92; *Sippur pashut*, 137)

Hirshl has two models for how to go about fulfilling his plan: The one is his mother’s grandfather, and the other the compiler of a dictionary, a copy of which is found in Hirshl and Mina’s home.

His maternal great-grandfather arises in Hirshl’s thoughts three times, always at significant junctures in the story, and always in connection with the grandson, Hirshl’s uncle. As he seeks an escape route from his marriage, the regular appearance of his mother’s brother in Hirshl’s consciousness sharpens his perception that he ought to follow in his uncle’s path, and that this is to be his path of choice, given the deep-rooted, time-honored Jewish folk belief, cited already in rabbinic literature, that “Most sons resemble the mother’s brothers.”²⁹

The first time his mother’s grandfather and brother are mentioned in the story is on Hirshl and Mina’s wedding day:

29. BT *Baba Batra* 110a; JT *Kiddushin* 4, 66.

If anything, he thought of his mother's family, that is, of her brother who went mad and of her grandfather, who was said to have once put a chamber pot on his head and worn it in place of *tefillin*.³⁰ (*A Simple Story*, 106; *Sippur pashut*, 149)

The second time, they burst into Hirshl's thoughts as he lies awake in bed at night:

Whatever he saw or heard that day came up for review at night. Things he had never understood before were suddenly clear to him. Though he had never, for example, seen a photograph of his mother's crazy brother or of her grandfather who drank tea through a hole in a sugar cube and wore a chamberpot where one would don *tefillin*,³¹ he saw them as clearly in bed at night as if they were standing before him. (*A Simple Story*, 162; *Sippur pashut*, 201–202)

And the third time is at the conclusion of the scene of madness in the forest:

As bizarrely as he was acting, Hirshl had his wits about him. He knew that, unlike his mother's grandfather who wore a chamberpot in place of *tefillin*,³² he could not make a hat of a shoe, and that, unlike his maternal uncle who ran off to the forest for good, he would have to go home in the end. Why didn't he, then? Because he had lost his hat, and one did not go hatless in the hot sun.

His mother's progenitor, from whom generation after generation of hereditary mental illness goes down through the Klinger family, delineates the path for his great-grandson — casting off and desecrating his *tefillin* — and in the former's case, also by casting the *tefillin* off his head and wearing a chamberpot instead. Although the word rendered here as “chamberpot,” *kiton*, commonly appears in rabbinic literature in the phrase *kiton shel mayim*, “a pot of water,” the Hebrew reader will surely hear between the lines the expressions used more often in modern Hebrew literature: *kiton shel shofkhin*, “a pot of sewage,” *kiton shel roth'in*, “a pot of boiling water,” or *shafakh 'al peloni kiton shel buz/ħarafot/‘el-bon*, “poured a potful of scorn/curses/insults on X” — that is, cursed, mocked, insulted or defamed him. These expressions would appear to derive from a passage in Mishnah *Sotah*:

During the whole seven days [of the festival], one makes his sukkah [his] permanent [dwelling], and his house [a] temporary [dwelling]. If rains fell, starting when is one permitted to clear out [of the sukkah]? When a stiff dish [of food] would be spoiled. They [the elders] illustrate this with a parable: To what

30. Halkin's translation: “instead of a skullcap.”

31. Halkin's translation: “instead of a skullcap.”

32. Halkin's translation: “on his head.”

can this matter be compared? To a slave who came to pour a goblet for his master, and he [the master] poured a bowl-full [*kiton*, i.e., of water] in his face.³³

Incidentally, just as the symbolic meaning with which the *tefillin* are invested in Hirshl's childhood home is entirely different from their meaning in Mina's childhood home, so, too, with the meaning of the *kiton*. While for Hirshl the *kiton* is a symbolic expression of the primal madness of the family's progenitor, for Mina it expresses the healthy normalcy of her family, a health with which she flatters herself in one of the tensest conversations between herself and her husband, to which we shall immediately turn. "I come from an honest family that's earned its keep by hard work, not by flattery," she upbraids him. "Why, when I think of how my father started out as a milkman with a route, I feel proud of him!" (*A Simple Story*, 132; *Sippur pashut*, 172–173)

In this conversation, which takes place between the couple as they await the arrival of Mina's friend Sophia Gildenhorn, Hirshl not only reveals to his wife for the first time the existence of his mad uncle, a deep secret that the family had up to then endeavored to conceal from her, but he also takes the trouble to share with her his own interpretation of how the madness of his mother's brother is really to be understood, giving her a glimpse of the mechanism that he will use to free himself of their failed marriage and clear the path for Blume's return to his life:

He soon got onto the subject of his mother's brother, whom his surprised wife had never heard of, so that he said to her:

"If you ask me, my uncle was perfectly sane and just pretending to be crazy, because otherwise his father, that is, my grandfather Shimon Hirsh, whom I'm named after, would have married him off to some woman he didn't love and made him waste the rest of his life on her, raising a house full of her little darlings, and making lots of money, and getting filthy rich, and being disgustingly respectable. There may be nothing wrong with all that, but I tell you, it would have left him an empty shell of a man. If my uncle had managed to make something of himself on his own, everyone would have said how clever he was. Since he didn't, everyone thought he was crazy. ... I will say this, though, and that's that if I feel empty inside, what does anything else matter? You look so sad, Mina. I swear I didn't mean to make you feel that way. It makes me sad to think of my uncle too, even though it happened years ago. Well, let me tell you something funny, then. ..."

(*A Simple Story*, 131–132; *Sippur pashut*, 173–174)

At this point, when the image of his uncle turns up in Hirshl's mind, one would think that the image of his mother's grandfather, who always appears together with him, would turn up as well. But Hirshl, apparently not wanting Mina to draw the self-evident conclusion that there were serial cases of madness in his

33. Mishnah *Sotah* 2:9.

family, presents a double of his grandfather, a kind of replica of a man who desecrated his *tefillin* — a distinguished composer of a dictionary, who was not a family member:

“Well, let me tell you something funny, then. Do you see that fat volume in the bookcase? It’s a Hebrew dictionary. The man who compiled it was married off when he was young to some woman he didn’t even know, as was the custom in those days. Do you know what he did? When he grew a little older and decided to get rid of her, he took the cat one morning and put his *tefillin* on it. Just imagine it, Mina: his wife and her parents were so frightened that they agreed to a divorce at once. After that he married a woman of his choice and lived with her happily ever after. I don’t know if he still puts on *tefillin* every day, but I’m sure he leaves the cat alone.” (*A Simple Story*, 132; *Sippur pashut*, 174)

Consciously or not, Hirshl has just revealed his future actions to Mina, but she, on her part, prefers to suppress and deny them, as expressed metaphorically in the way she treats the dictionary when she comes across it again:

Mina ... had no interest in Hebrew dictionaries. One day, in fact, when the dictionary fell by mistake while she was taking down a book from the shelf, she nudged it along the floor with her foot until it vanished beneath the bookcase. (*Ibid.*)

Let’s hang up the *tefillin* for a bit and turn our gaze to Hirshl’s shoes. The shoes come into the frame of the story for the first time on that oppressive, rainy night when Hirshl, broken-hearted, stands as is his wont, before the home of Akavia Mazal, watching Blume’s room. He finally sees her when she goes down to close the garden gate, which had been blown open by the wind, but she recoils at hearing his voice and runs back in:

The rain fell noiselessly. Through a curtain of mist so thick that he could not see his own self the image of Blume appeared as brightly before him as it had on the day she had stroked his head in her room after walking out and returning. Hirshl rested his head on the latch of the gate and began to cry.

The tears kept coming. Rain collected in his shoes. He let the umbrella slip from his hands and soon was wet all over. (*A Simple Story*, 153; *Sippur pashut*, 193)

At midnight, after going home and holding an imaginary, revealing and uninhibited conversation with Mina, who has been fast asleep for hours,

Hirshl took off (*hilets*) his shoes and wet socks and tiptoed to his bed. The windows were shut tight, and a warm, somnolent smell came from Mina. (*A Simple Story*, 155; *Sippur pashut*, 195)

But if, in real life, Mina's bed gives off a warm and somnolent smell — a perfect expression of domestic calm and marital harmony — in Hirshl's consciousness, exactly as in the ancient Hebrew traditions that we saw above, the shoes are a symbolic expression of Mina's femininity and sexuality. For Hirshl, however, the trouble is that Mina is like the wet, cold, rain-soaked shoes: a hindrance that he wants only to cast off his feet, to rid himself of its punishment.

Actually, the verb *h.l.ts* has already served the author of *A Simple Story*, and not unintentionally, in a passage where he intimates to his readers what goes on in Hirshl's heart after his engagement to Mina:

Whereas until now Hirshl had tried thinking of everyone but Mina, now he could think of no one else. As detached as he felt from her, there was no escaping her existence. And yet—though he did not, God forbid, wish her any harm—to escape it was what he most wanted. He prayed for something to save him (*veyehaltsenu*), such as his family losing its fortune overnight, which would force Ziemlich to call off the wedding and himself to go to work as a shopboy in another town. One night, without knowing how Mirl's dead parents, Blume's grandparents, had sat reading Boruch Meir's letters to them before Boruch Meir became engaged to Tsirl, Hirshl dreamed that he had written them. If worse comes to worse, he thought, I can always run away to America. Though he knew that an only child like himself could do nothing of the sort, imagining it kept him from despair. (*A Simple Story*, 72; *Sippur pashut*, 117–118)

The key words *tefillin*, shoe/sandal and the verb *h.l.ts*, which have slowly but surely commandeered their place in the first twenty-five chapters of the story, following their debut on the opening page, where they were implicitly encoded in the phrase “new faces,” play their peak dramatic roles in the pivotal scene that begins at the end of Chapter Twenty-Six and concludes in the first part of Chapter Twenty-Seven. In this scene the narrator relieves Hirshl of his *tefillin* and his shoe and provocatively ties them together, even as the protagonist fantasizes that he has finally shed his bonds and momentarily achieved a chimerical freedom — the liberation bestowed by madness upon its sufferers.

The scene begins during the morning prayers:

Hirshl stepped into the Little Synagogue, donned his prayer shawl and tefillin, and joined the prayer. (*A Simple Story*, 176; *Sippur pashut*, 214)

The day wasn't an ordinary weekday, but one with a special character:

It was the day of the New Moon, and the Torah scroll was taken out to be read. (*Ibid.*)

Incidentally, when Hirshl first saw Blume and was swept away by her magical charm and cakes, it was also the New Moon:

It was a day in May, the first of the Hebrew month of Iyyar, when servants and household help renewed their annual contracts. Not long before Blume's arrival the Hurvitzes' maid had given notice and a new maid had yet to be found. When the employment agent came to Tsirl with a replacement, Tsirl said to her:

"Just where, please tell me, am I supposed to put her? A cousin of ours is staying with us and sleeping in the maid's bed." (*A Simple Story*, 7; *Sippur pashut*, 59)

Since then, the New Moon has borne an emotional charge for Hirshl, which comes to crashing expression in the events of this morning.

The indications of his breakdown, already evident in his conversation with Mina before his departure for the morning service and intensifying throughout the prayers in the Little Synagogue, revolve again and again around his head, finally concentrating on the spot upon which the worshipper sets his phylactery.

The sensations in Hirshl's head appear as soon as he arises:

Nor was [his good mood] affected by the headache he had, which merely proved to him that, while he might not feel well physically, there was nothing the matter with his mind. Indeed, a sound mind was needed to realize that there was something wrong with his body. (*A Simple Story*, 172; *Sippur pashut*, 210)

Mina, waking up, immediately notices this:

"Does your head hurt, Heinrich?" asked Mina.

"Come, Mina," he answered. "Where would I be if my head didn't hurt? It's my way of knowing I'm alive." (*Ibid.*)

After he enters the small Beit Midrash, wraps himself in his prayer shawl and dons his *tefillin*, his problems still center on the spot on his head where his phylactery lies:

Midway through the service he felt a jolt in his head as if it had been banged against a wall. A moment later he felt another jolt as if it were being blown right off. He bent to look at the floor, then felt his forehead to see if his *tefillin* had been knocked to the ground. (*A Simple Story*, 176; *Sippur pashut*, 214)

With a thousand thoughts racing through it, his mind wanders from his prayer book, whose pages are riffled by a breeze, to the sneeze of a snuff-taker and from there to a couple of couple of men discussing a talmudic text. Listening to their conversation brings his thoughts back again to the same spot where the phylactery rests on the head, the spot upon which all his yearnings were concentrated:

Two men who had prayed already were discussing a Talmudic text that dealt with birds with upright feathers on their heads, and whether there is a need, after their slaughter, to check for a piercing of the skull. (*Ibid.*)³⁴

But only with the conclusion of the service, after he has departed “as light as a feather” from the heart of Jewish civilization — the study house — and gone out to the unencumbered space of the forest, by way of the intermediate stages of the cattle and spirit markets, will his lunatic episode reach its apex. Everything that has been fermenting within him since the day that Mina straddled his path, and he was compelled by his mother’s command to relinquish Blume, bursts out in momentary illusion of relief and liberation.

Taking off his *tefillin*, which in Hirshl’s eyes symbolize accepting the yoke and authority of community tradition and his subjection and submission to his father’s discipline and his mother’s instruction, opens the way to taking off something else — his shoes. At the height of this outburst, Hirshl will hold an alternative ritual of *ḥalitsah* for himself, in which he will symbolically free himself of his wife and his obligation toward her.

To conceal his madness, which is about to break out, and so as not to draw the attention of anyone who might block his way, Hirshl sticks to the conventional comportment of east European Jewish householders, with their old-fashioned ways:

[H]e made himself walk slowly, for a man in full possession of himself, he thought, should do nothing that might appear unseemly.

He made his way with a modest air of deliberation, clutching the velvet bag that contained his prayer shawl and tefillin. Anyone happening to see him just then would have thought he had much on his mind . . .

Holding his bag in his left hand, Hirshl tipped his hat with his right as if passing before a reviewing stand, though there was no one there but him and the trees. (*A Simple Story*, 178; *Sippur pashut*, 215)

And here, in the depth of that isolated spot, the decision to hold a *ḥalitsah* ceremony for himself rises to the threshold of his consciousness:

What a fool you were, Hirshl, not to have thought of that in front of Blume’s house. There’s nothing like tipping your hat for staying out of trouble—unless it’s taking off your shoes so that Mina won’t hear you when you come home late at night. I had better take them off right now. (*A Simple Story*, 178–179; *Sippur pashut*, 215)

The original *ḥalitsah* ritual as it was carried out in east European Jewish communities looked something like this: The ceremony took place in the morning, right

34. Halkin’s translation: “Two men who had prayed already were discussing a Talmudic text that dealt with the head feathers of slaughtered birds.”

after the morning service, usually in or near the synagogue. The brother-in-law donned a special type of footwear on his right foot, something between a shoe and a sandal, made of black leather, with two flaps sewn onto its edges. Through these loops the wearer threaded two strips of black leather, bearing no trifling resemblance to *tefillin* straps, which he bound around his calf just as a male Jewish worshipper binds *tefillin* straps around his arm. The sister-in-law untied the straps and pulled the shoe off the foot of her dead husband's brother, after which she spat in his face and repeated word for word the verse read to her by the rabbinic judges: "Thus shall be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house! And he shall go in Israel by the name of 'the family of the unsandaled one' (Deut. 25:9–10), 'the family of the unsandaled one,' 'the family of the unsandaled one.'"³⁵

Hirshl reenacts this ritual almost precisely in the forest, and he, too, takes off just one shoe:

As he was about to remove his second shoe, though, he stood up anxiously and thought, Why, I said I couldn't feel my own body, but now I see that I can. Or is it just something I imagined Suddenly Hirshl struck his head and cried aloud, "I am not crazy, I am not!" (*A Simple Story*, 179; *Sippur pashut*, 216)

Note the words that are put into his mouth: "I said I couldn't feel my own body, but now I see that I can." When Hirshl says *besari*, my body or my flesh, it is clear to anyone versed in the sacred canon that the reference is not to himself but to his wife. Suffice it to cite just two sources: "Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh (*basar ehad*)" (Gen. 2:24); "and do not ignore your own kin (*besarekha*)" (Is. 57:7). The Sages interpret the latter verse: "Your kin — this is his ex-wife,"³⁶ speaking admiringly in this connection of Rabbi Yossi Hagelili's concern for his ex-wife after their divorce, though she had made his life miserable during their marriage.³⁷ Agnon himself would again invoke this meaning of *besarekha* in his unfinished novel *Shira*. In what was to have been its concluding chapter, as Manfred Herbst tries to persuade Shira, who is confined to the leper hospital, that he must stay with her forever, he declares: "...How can I tell you? I once read a poem, and I found a line in it that sticks to my tongue." "What is it?" "Flesh such as yours will not soon be forgotten."³⁸

35. See Shlomo Yosef Zevin (ed.), *Entsiklopediyah talmudit*, (Jerusalem, 1976), XV, cols. 615–816, s.v. *Halitsah*.

36. *Yalkut Shim'oni*, Behar, §665.

37. JT *Ketubot* 11:3; *Genesis rabbah* 17:3; *Leviticus rabbah* 34:14.

38. Agnon, *Shira* (English transl. by Zeva Shapiro; above, note 22), 757. The quote is from the poem "Woman" by S. Shalom, *Sefer hashirim vehasonetot*, (Tel Aviv, 1943), 191.

Nevertheless, despite the surprising awakening of his feelings for Mina, Hirshl does not desist from the *ḥalitsah* ritual that he is conducting for himself:

He took out his stopped watch and studied it, then lay down in the grass with it hanging out of his pocket, one shoe off and one shoe on, happily laughing and ga-ga-ing to himself. He could not remember ever having felt so at peace. (*A Simple Story*, 179; *Sippur pashut*, 216)

Like the original *ḥalitsah* ritual, this solipsistic, self-devised ritual finishes with expeoration. And since the widow is supposed to spit in the face of her brother-in-law, Hirshl must lie on his back and spit upwards in order for the spittle to hit him. By means of this bodily pose, the narrator achieves two bold effects that are missing from the original ritual: defamation of God and defiance of heaven, on the one hand,³⁹ and self-abasement, on the other:⁴⁰

Oh nice oh nice, he thought, staring joyfully up at the sky with a hallucinatory smile on his lips. All at once he leaped up in dismay and exclaimed, “Half past seven!”

In an instant his smile vanished and a turbid froth appeared in its place. He spat it into the air and it fell back into his eyes. Again he spat it upward and again it rained down on him. (*Ibid.*)

At the end of the ritual, the *tefillin*, which were briefly set aside, return to the center of the story, again taking their place in Hirshl’s consciousness, this time in the form of a shoe, which he puts on his head in the spot where one would set a phylactery, in a kind of reincarnation of the pot bound by his great-grandfather in place of a phylactery:

Then he turned and ran, the hat toppling from his head. The sun beat down on him. The veins stood out hotly in his brow. He drummed on them with his fists, then removed his other shoe, placed it on top of his head, and began to hop on one foot until a stone sent him sprawling.

As bizarrely as he was acting, Hirshl had his wits about him. He knew that, unlike his mother’s grandfather who wore a chamberpot on his head, he could not make a hat of a shoe, and that, unlike his maternal uncle who ran off to the forest for good, he would have to go home in the end. (*ibid.*)

Hirshl remains lying in the place where he performed his *ḥalitsah* for hours, until a member of the search party finds him there at the end of the day:

39. It is said of Titus that upon his entrance into the Temple, he set his face defiantly, “drew his sword and cut into the curtain ... And not only that, but he seized a whore and brought her into the Holy of Holies, and began to curse and revile and blaspheme and spit upwards” (*Avot deRabbi Natan*, B, 7).

40. See, e.g., Num. 12:14, where, after Miriam is smitten with leprosy for her untoward words, “The Lord said to Moses: If her father spat in her face, would she not bear her shame for seven days? Let her be shut out of camp for seven days, and then let her be readmitted.”

At sundown Hirshl was found in a field with one shoe on one foot and the other on his forehead, an expression of great anguish in his eyes. It was hard to look at him, though he himself stared straight back at his finders without saying a word. At last he cried out to them, "Don't cut my throat! I'm not a rooster! I'm not!" (*A Simple Story*, 180; *Sippur pashut*, 219)

From here on, from when Hirshl is brought back home until the end of the story, the key words *tefillin*, shoe (*na'al*) and *halitsah* vanish from the textual scene. Now that they have finished their roles, the narrator takes them off the stage and places them behind the scenes for safekeeping.

At the outset of this essay, I argued that Agnon's intertextuality is finely and artfully crafted, subtle, refined and sophisticated, demanding of the reader not only identification of the allusions to traditional passages embedded in the text, but also a response to the question of what type of use the narrator is making of them.

I believe I have demonstrated here that the "new faces" peeping out at us from the opening scene of *A Simple Story* become, by virtue of the author's creative genius, not only a foreshadowing of the story's central theme, but also a kind of inverted reflection of the narrative tradition from which this phrase sprang and is taken. The meeting of the two texts, ancient and new, leverages the work and gives it a profound dimension that otherwise would be concealed from the eyes of the ordinary reader.

Apart from that first occurrence at the beginning of *A Simple Story*, the phrase "new faces" recurs thrice more in the course of the story, once on p. 137⁴¹ (*Sippur pashut*, 178) and twice on 236 (*Sippur pashut*, 269). But even a cursory inspection of its role in these passages will show that the phrase is used in these cases in its simplest sense, no more than a turn of phrase by a Hebrew author writing in the holy tongue, and if readers, for reasons best known to themselves, should seek in these usages something more substantial, they may run a risk of seeing something that isn't there.

* My thanks to Batya Be'er, Dr. Roni Be'er-Marx, Raphael Weiser, Dr. Haim Weiss, Dr. Gideon Tikotsky, Rivka Pilser and Edna Zahor, who read the manuscript of this essay, and whose deep and broad-ranging knowledge helped me to improve it greatly. I, of course, bear exclusive responsibility for any mistakes or shortcomings that may be found in it.

41. Where it is rendered "its only visitor" in Halkin's translation.

HAIM BE'ER is a celebrated Israeli novelist, literary critic, and professor of Hebrew literature at Ben-Gurion University. He has authored works of literary criticism, among them *Gam ahavatam, gam sin'atam* (*Their Love and Their Hate*) on the relationship of Bialik, Brenner, and Agnon, and most recently *Ḥadarim melayim sefarim* (*Rooms Full of Books*), which explores Agnon's *To This Day*. He is the recipient of the Bialik, Brenner, and Agnon literary prizes, which recognized his many novels, among which *Feathers* and *The Pure Element of Time* have been translated to English. His most recent Hebrew novel, *Tsel yado* (*The Shadow of His Hand*), appeared in 2021.