

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

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

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# 9 *Divine Compassion at an Ironic Glimpse: The Experience of the Shoah in Agnon's "The Sign"*

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## The News—Its Place and Timing

“THE SIGN,” WHICH concludes *A City in Its Fullness*, is Agnon’s only direct response to the Holocaust, and thus has provoked great interest among readers and scholars of Agnon. The story opens as follows:

In the year when the news reached us that all the Jews in my town had been killed, I was living in a certain section on Jerusalem, in a house I had built for myself after the disturbances of 1929 ([5]689—ת"רפ"ט—[5]689) in the Jewish calendar, which numerically is equal to “The Eternity of Israel”—(נצח ישראל). On the night when the Arabs destroyed my home, I vowed that if God would save me from the hands of the enemy and I should live, I would build a house in this particular neighborhood, which the Arabs had tried to destroy. By the grace of God, I was saved from the hands of our despoilers and my wife and children and I remained in Jerusalem. Thus I fulfilled my vow and there built a house and made a garden.<sup>2</sup>

Mentioning 1929 as a year that strengthened the eternity of the people, when in reality the riots of 1929 threatened that very eternity, imbues the story with irony from its very first sentence. The strategy of interlacing a story with light irony in reference to God from the very first paragraph is characteristic of Agnon. *Sippur pashut* (A Simple Story), for example, opens with the words, “The widow Mirl lay ill for many years. The doctors consumed her savings with their cures and failed to cure her. God in heaven saw how she suffered and took her from

1. This article has been translated and adapted from the first chapter of Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ḥayyim ketuvim* (Written Lives) (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2011), 30–51.

2. S.Y. Agnon, *Ha'eish v'ha'etsim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962), 293. Also reprinted in S.Y. Agnon, *‘Ir umelo’ah*, Emuna Yaron, ed. (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973), 695. Translation from S.Y. Agnon, *City in Its Fullness*, Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks eds. (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2016), 1. All future citations from these volumes will be noted in parentheses in the body of this essay.

this world.”<sup>3</sup> God in heaven who took Mirl’s life in order to lessen her suffering by the same measure could have healed her. This sentence hints oh so subtly that the doctors and medications didn’t succeed in healing her, but by the same token, neither did the Omnipotent One.

Irony of the same sort can be discerned in the continuation of “The Sign.” The narrator’s articulation of God’s love for His people when He gave them the Torah and on other occasions, is juxtaposed with the statement that human wickedness the sort of which “had not been matched seen man was placed on earth” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 695 / *A City in Its Fullness*, p. 2) had annihilated God’s “beloved” people. Is the omnipotent God who gave the people the Torah with great love responsible for the evil people He created? Already from the outset of the story a multi-faceted, ironic opposition is established: love vs. evil, eternity vs. ephemerality, redemption vs. destruction, death vs. life, Jerusalem vs. Buczacz, the Land of Israel vs. the Diaspora, fulfilled vows vs. broken promises, the ideal vs. the real, the giving of the Torah to a Chosen People vs. a Holocaust coming down upon the heads of that same People.

In his article, “Did Agnon Write about the Holocaust?” Dan Laor notes carefully the polarity that serves as the basis of the story, based chiefly in the opposition between Jerusalem and Buczacz. In his view, “the orderly way of life of the narrator and his family, who observe the holiday Shavuot in all of its details and minutiae,” and similarly, “the permanent home that the narrator built in the neighborhood and the garden he planted around it all symbolize stability and rootedness,” are situated in polar opposition to the description of the city of Buczacz and its slain inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> No doubt this is the central contrast in the story and through it one can understand the many chapters (19–24) in the story that are dedicated to the events surrounding the founding of the neighborhood where Agnon’s house was built. The long, painful settlement, riddled with obstacles and disappointments for the people of deed and vision who established a neighborhood once considered a desert and now a flourishing garden, stands in stark contrast to the sudden destruction wrought upon a bustling city like Buczacz: “Is it possible that a city full of Torah and life is suddenly uprooted from the world, and all its people—old and young; men, women and children—killed, that now the city is silent, with not a soul of Israel left in it?” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 709 / *A City in Its Fullness*, p. 27). However, from the central, structural contrast that Laor observes, many other contrasts emerge, and many of them are characterized by this subtle but incisive irony. The Jewish year 5689 ט’תרכ”ט, 689 תרפ”ט (1929), the year of the riots, which corresponds in gematria with “Netsah Yisra’el,” is only a preface to the array of ironies that Agnon lays out in this story, a clear response to

3. S.Y. Agnon, *‘Al kappot haman’ul* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1958), 55. Translation from S.Y. Agnon, *A Simple Story*, Hillel Halkin trans. (New Milford, The Toby Press, 2014), 3.

4. Dan Laor, *Hebetim Hādashim (New Aspects)* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po’alim, 1995), 83.

the Holocaust. (Incidentally, Agnon didn't have to mention this gematria; a mention of the year would have sufficed, had he not wished to hint at the contradiction between the promise of eternity and the stark reality of the lack thereof.) I will endeavor to prove that part and parcel of this story, as a lament for a city full of Jewish life that was annihilated in the Holocaust, is the protest it lodges against a God who did nothing to prevent this carnage. Agnon, in his way, unveils this criticism by way of ambiguous statements that feign innocence on the outside, but offer harsh criticism on the inside, that have an outer aspect and internal accusatory one all at the same time. Agnon's mask in this story is not his identity and place, rather a seemingly ingenuous tone. Therefore, this is an autobiographical story not just because it affords a glimpse into Agnon's inner world, but also because it enables a poetic inquiry into Agnon's special way of revealing the hidden precincts of the soul.

It is possible that the rumor of the obliteration of the entire Jewish population of Agnon's native city indeed reached Agnon's ears on Shavuot eve, but it is also possible for ideological, symbolic and literary reasons that it was comfortable for this shrewd writer to anchor the arrival of these terrible news in Shavuot in particular.<sup>5</sup> After all, according to one of the names and explanations of the holiday, the giving of the Torah at Sinai is the one time that the entire people, not just its chosen representatives "see the voices." In other words, the collective experience of covenant with God stands in stark opposition to the collective conspiracy to abrogate the covenant, with an entire people on the verge of being wiped out from under the skies of a God who chose them to receive the Torah. In addition, this holiday presents its own unique oppositions, such as those between heavens and earth and between day and night: after all, this is the holiday of the giving of the Torah from the **heavens** and the offering of first fruits from the **earth**; this is the holiday that turns night into day in the form of the Tikkun Leil Shavuot, during which one stays awake to study Torah and recite specific prayers. In the story "The Sign," where the terrible news about the annihilation of Jewish Buczacz arrives on the eve of the holiday, an additional opposition is furnished between celebration and mourning.

The second chapter of the story, which makes clear the arrival of this bad news on Shavuot eve, begins as follows:

I made no lament for my city and did not call for tears or for mourning over the congregation of God when the enemy had wiped it out. The day when we

5. Rachel Elior uncovers a parallelism between Agnon hearing about the news of the destruction of Buczacz on Shavuot eve in World War II, while he himself resides in Jerusalem and Shavuot Eve 1533, when the news arrived about the Kabbalist messiah, Shelomo Molkho, who was burnt alive at the stake by the Catholic Inquisition, all the while his kabbalist peers celebrated a festive Tikkun Leil Shavuot, a renewal of the covenant, according to the tradition of the Zohar. See Rachel Elior, "Shai 'Agnon vehamasoret hamistit,'" *Kivvunim hadashim* 22 (2010), 232.

heard the news of the city and its dead was the day before Shavuot, so I put aside my mourning for the dead because of the joy of the season when **our Torah was given**. (*Ir umelo'ah* p. 695 / *A City and Its Fullness*, p. 2, emphasis added)

On its declarative face, in the struggle between the dead of the city and the giving of the Torah, the Torah seems to have the upper hand. Nevertheless, the sonic similarity between “*mitah*” (death) and “*matan Torah*” (the giving of the Torah) undermines the seeming victory of giving over death. In the same way that the promise of eternity implied in the numerology of ט"ה failed to deliver on its promise in the wake of the 1929 riots in Jerusalem, so too the covenantal promise inherent in the giving of the Torah is broken in the face of the extermination of the people in the Shoah. The narrator’s pious statements in the continuation of the passage, where he claims that God’s love for His people is what endows him with the strength to divert his attention from mourning to the sacredness of the holiday, are steeped in bitter irony in the face of the mass death of tens of thousands of Jews, whose love of God offered them no protection, hence they were “killed and strangled and drowned and buried alive” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 695 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 1) and all this with great, unthinkable suffering.

Moshe Granot, in his critical appraisal of Agnon—critical in the sense that it takes a stand against the aesthetic and moral values of Agnon’s work—fails to recognize the ironic aspects of “The Sign” and takes it at face value, reading literally the declaration of the narrator that the holiday of Shavuot has forced him to suppress his mourning for his city. As such, Granot angrily denounces Agnon and his values: “And so, the ostensible message from this is that the Jew continues to act according to former custom, and this total calamity has no capacity to change the ways of the world. The joy over the giving of the Torah to six hundred thousand remains undimmed even in the face of the extermination of six million!”<sup>6</sup> Agnon so thoroughly veiled his criticism of the Giver of the Torah that the author of *Agnon Unmasked* could not discern the mask. The difference between Granot’s reading and my own (as well as that of other critics) attests to the complexity of the situation that Agnon describes in “The Sign,” in particular the capacity of Agnon’s rhetoric and poetics to evoke a thing and its very opposite at the very same time.

In my view, the narrator’s announcement of success in diverting his attention from the terrible news that reached him in his Jerusalem home on the afternoon before the holiday of Shavuot is ironic not only because the reference to God’s love in this tragic context makes it such, but also because in its entirety “The Sign” serves as a record and a monument. It is, in other words, a sign of

6. Moshe Granot, *Agnon lelo masveh (Agnon Unmasked)* (Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan Publishing House, 1991), 17.

the city and its dead inhabitants and thus completely undermines the narrator's would-be innocent announcement. Here Shavuot serves chiefly as a window into how the holiday was observed in the narrator's native town. From now on, it seems, Shavuot there—like all other holidays and daily practices—are entirely the province of the past.

The opposition between Shavuot **here** versus Shavuot **there** is part of a system of binaries that Agnon builds throughout the story as a sign and a marker of the Jewish life that was cut off, but in so doing, he also manages to lodge a complaint against Heaven. As already mentioned, from beneath the mask of faith and adherence to the etiquette of the holiday that marks that covenant between God and Israel, there is a welling up of irony in every phase of the story.

Shavuot here, that is, in 1943 Jerusalem, which serves as a frame for the description of Shavuot in the annihilated city, is described in detail in the story: the adornment of the house and the person in preparation for the holiday, the walk to synagogue for evening prayers, the return for dinner and the unfolding conversation around the table, the nighttime departure for the Tikkun Leil Shavuot in the neighborhood synagogue, the arrival at the prayer shed that for some reason is completely devoid of people, something that allows the narrator to have an extraordinary encounter with a figure that is close to his heart, namely, himself.

### Shavuot Eve and the Preparations for the Holiday

The description of the inside and the outside of the house (Chapter 3) and the declaration that “in all the days I had lived in the Land of Israel, our house had never been decorated as nicely as it was that day,” (*‘Ir umelo’ah*, p. 695 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 2) distinguish Shavuot from all other holidays. That the house is exceptionally decorated specifically this year serves to sharpen the dichotomy between there and here, between Exile and the Land of Israel, between nightmare and festivity. Outer and inner, an additional binary, which plays a physical as well as a psychological role in the story, expresses itself in various ways in the text, even in terms of the house which has been dressed in holiday finery: “The sun shone down on the **outside** of the house; **inside**, on the walls, we had hung cypress, pine and laurel branches, and flowers.” (*‘Ir umelo’ah*, p. 695; *A City in its Fullness*, p. 2, my emphasis). The decoration of the house on the inside—a seemingly innocent, heartwarming description, meant to bring the holiday to life, moves the natural beauty of outside inside. But this description, too, carries ironic implications connected to the central theme of the story: namely the explicit diversion of attention away from mourning because of the holiness of the festival and the conflict between faith and its undoing. Thanks to the decorations, the narrator tells us,

All of the flaws in the house had vanished, and not a crack was to be seen, either in the ceiling or in the walls. From the places where the cracks in the house used to

gape with open mouths and laugh at the builders, there came instead the pleasant smell of branches and shrubs, and especially of the flowers we had brought from our garden. (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 695–696 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 2).

This description serves as a form of whitewashing; in the same way that the branches and plants and particularly the flowers cover over the cracks in an extremely temporary manner, so too this Shavuot holiday covers over the mourning for the city only very temporarily and externally. The news that arrived on the eve of the holiday will slowly seep into the narrator's consciousness. And during the Tikkun Leil Shavuot and all that occurs during it, this consciousness will reach its climax.

After describing the house and its holiday dress, the narrator moves on to describe his own holiday clothing. From this description too arises a pair of subtly ironic opposites: body versus soul. The narrator prides himself before his readers in that he holds off wearing his new summer clothes in order to wear them for the first time on the holiday itself. That's what he was raised to do by his mother. Ostensibly, this is the innocent statement of a man who guards the values of his parents in his soul and puts them into practice always and everywhere. On this Shavuot in 1943, that the narrator explains putting off wearing these new lightweight holiday clothes constitutes a special show of restraint and adherence to past custom. There had been a major heatwave before the holiday, and the narrator's old clothes were cumbersome. Even so, he did not capitulate to the dictates of his body and deferred the wearing of his new clothes until the advent of the holiday.<sup>7</sup>

In the broader context of the story, which concerns the narrator's seemingly great restraint in not lamenting the annihilation of his city on the holiday, the holding off of wearing new clothes seems rather natural. This kind of discipline is part and parcel of the framework of the narrator's life, wherein the holiness of the day supersedes instant gratification or expression of one's desires and emotions. However, the comment that concludes the passage ("If I haven't reached the heights of all of my forefather's deeds—in these matters I can do as well as my forefathers, for my **body** stands ready to fulfill most of those customs which depend on it," *Ir umelo'ah*, p. 696 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 3, emphasis added) turns it all on its head. In the same way that the branches cover over the internal defects only superficially, so too the covering provided by the clothing is merely external. The narrator's body stands at the ready to fulfill all of the bodily

7. Heavy clothes that encumber the narrator are a motif in Agnon's work. In his 1950 short novel, *Ad henah*, the narrator finds himself in Berlin during World War I, and interestingly, his clothes there, not just in the hot Land of Israel, are out of season: "I had no summer clothes or shoes [...] Although this didn't matter as long as I stayed indoors, my clothes weighed on me as soon as I went out." S.Y. Agnon, *To This Day*, Hillel Halkin, trans. (New Milford: Toby Press, 2008 translated by Hillel Halkin), 19.

customs, but his soul is less ready. The soul, in contrast to the body, is not wearing its holiday best; disruption and lament are made their nest within it.

Indeed, when the narrator arrives in the synagogue he cannot contain his imagination, and the carnage rises before his eyes. In the future it will become clear to him and to his developed imagination, that the evil that has befallen the people of his city transcends his wildest imaginings. But that evening of the holiday, when only his imagination is available to illustrate the evil for him, he attempts to find consolation in *piyyutim* that are no longer recited in the Land of Israel, only in certain diaspora Jewish communities. Apparently, he is located in the East, but his heart is in the far West. Here, the prayers are said quickly, without the addition of the *piyyutim*. He remains unsatisfied, therefore, confused and dumfounded.

His shock increases when he arrives home and everything about the holiday is behaving according to the regular script. It is interesting that at this moment of cognitive dissonance, he doesn't lift his head to heaven in protest, rather to the contrary: "I bowed my head toward the earth, the earth of the Land of Israel upon which my house is built, and in which my garden grows with trees and flowers, and I said over it the verse 'Because of you, the soul liveth.'" (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 697/ *A City in its Fullness*, p. 5). The earth apparently has bested heaven. This victory has an additional ironic representation in the form of the Ḥallot, based for the purpose of saying the "Hamotzi" ["Who takes bread from the earth"] blessing that are baked into the shape of the stone tablets that Moses brought down from heaven. The narrator notes that "if the bread comes down from the earth, its shape is from the heavens." (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 698 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 5). In other words, the bread—the essence, the content, and the means of survival—they all come from the earth, and the heavens afford merely the pattern and the decoration.

The contrast between heaven and earth, wherein earth provides shelter, life, bread, deliverance and relief, and all Heaven provides is form, joins the other oppositions in the story: the weak, inferior side, is shown to have priority and strength, lament triumphs over celebration, evil is shown to be stronger than love, the body is listened to more than soul, the outside is brought inside in order to refresh the spirit and to cover over the defects in the house, and death exerts a greater presence than the giving (of the Torah). On this holiday of the giving of the Torah in 1943 one bows one's head toward the good mother earth to thank her, and one does not lift one's head toward a heaven that failed to prevent the Shoah. The significance of the holiday as the festival of the giving of the Torah has shrunk in relation to its meaning as a festival of first fruits of the land. "The meal which the land had given us was good, and good too is the land itself, which gives life to its inhabitants" (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 698 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 6), says the narrator at the beginning of Chapter 9, which deals entirely with the wondrous garden, a real life Eden, which surrounds the narrator's house in Talpiyot and provides for all of its needs. The focus on the land makes the empty, merciless heavens superfluous.

Upon his return from synagogue, the narrator's family comes together for the holiday evening meal, and the narrator unburdens himself of the heavy load upon his heart by telling stories of Shavuot from his hometown, before the arch enemy came and killed all the Jews of his city. From these memories that the narrator shares with his wife and children, one can pull out additional oppositions: Jews / Gentiles, old / young, flowering / withering, the simple folk / the town leaders. But in contrast to these binary oppositions that arise from the description of Shavuot in the Land of Israel—mass receiving of the Torah as opposed to a massacre, land versus heaven, here versus there, outside versus inside—all of which represent irreconcilable poles, the contrasts described in the stories of the Diaspora do not retain a strict oppositional tension. A wagon filled with greens sent in honor of Shavuot by Count Potocki to decorate the Great Synagogue of the city, undoes the gap between Jews and Gentiles. The great enthusiasm on the part of the elders of the city for the artistic talent of the writer/narrator, who was a boy at the time, bespeaks a warm connection between the generations. The socio-economic gap between rich and poor is negated, though here an ironic arrow is shot; it is not for socialist humanist reasons that this gap is undone, rather “since the enemy has destroyed them altogether, I shall not distinguish between them here.” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 701 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 10). Whereas a nostalgic light had bridged the oppositions and gaps at the beginning of the stories of his city that no longer is, the final statement disrupts this. As the story continues, this line becomes even thicker with irony. With a saccharine tone and self-righteous note the narrator adds: “The Holy One Blessed Be He has been gracious to Israel: even when we remember the greatness and glory of bygone days, our soul does not leave us out of sorrow and longing. Thus a man like me can talk about the past, and his soul doesn't pass out of him as he speaks.” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 701 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 10) Is this the kind of graciousness that we expect from the Holy Blessed One? That he allows a total extermination and extinguishes the heart in the face of it? And this extinguishing of the heart is a true act of compassion? After all, it's clear that the heart has broken with sorrow and longings for the vibrant city that was exterminated, leaving only a story behind.

### **The Way to the Synagogue on Shavuot Night—Reminiscences, Meditations, and Biography of a Place**

#### **A. Childhood Memories of the Destroyed City**

After the holiday dinner, during which the narrator tells stories of his city, he leaves his home to attend the Tikkun Leil Shavuot at the Synagogue (chapter 14.) “My home is near the house of prayer,” the narrator will tell us later, in chapter 17 (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 703 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 12), but since his intention, in typical Agnon fashion, is to meld his walk to synagogue with the thoughts and

memories that arise that night owing to the information about the Shoah, the walk becomes longer and with it the comparison between there and here, the past and the present, between God and His poets, and the narrator and the others at the synagogue.

The first salient contrast is between those who read the text of the Tikkun Leil Shavuot and the narrator himself, who prefers to read the *Azharot* of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol (Rashbag). The dualism and contrast embodied in the soul and poetry of this great medieval Hebrew poetry perfectly match the framework of opposites that is laid out in “The Sign.” In Ibn Gabirol’s secular poetry, the poet emerges a man filled with arrogance and superiority with respect to the lowly world, whereas in his sacred poetry, he acknowledges the nothingness of human beings in relation to God. Gabirol—the haughty and proud, on the one hand, and the lowly and subservient, on the other—embodies the two-sided situation of the narrator at the Tikkun Leil Shavuot, in separating from the community in order to express his great admiration for and surrender to R. Solomon Ibn Gabirol: “I shall admit freely that I don’t follow them in all of their ways. They read the Order of Study for Shavuot night and I read the book of hymns that Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, may his soul rest, composed on the six hundred and thirteen commandments.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 701 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 10)

It’s worth noting that in the parallelism of arrogance and surrender shown by Ibn Gabirol and that of the narrator, there is one exception that calls for explanation. While both of them raise themselves above the people around them, Gabirol surrenders to God, whereas the narrator surrenders to Ibn Gabirol. More than that: the narrator prefers Ibn Gabirol over other poets, because whereas other poets excel in praising God, Ibn Gabirol’s poems “moan from the sorrow of Israel in Exile and seek out their redemption and return.” (chapter 14, p. 701)

The protest against heaven is twofold: the narrator chooses a human being rather than God as an object of veneration, because his poems deal with the sufferings of Israel rather than praise of God.

Agnon drafts Solomon Ibn Gabirol in order to express veiled disappointment with God. He does this by way of a play on the word “shem,” referring at once to the name שלמה (Solomon), which appears in an acrostic in the poems of the revered poet, and also serves as a name for God. Name versus name, with the second Name, that is God, failing to answer the expectations of the first one, that is Solomon Ibn Gabirol, whom the narrator identifies with and whose pains the narrator feels, in his discussion of the famous poem, “Request,” which begins as follows:

At the dawn I seek Thee,  
 Refuge and rock sublime,—  
 Set my prayer before Thee in the morning,  
 And my prayer at eventime.  
 I before Thy greatness

Stand, and am afraid:—  
All my secret thoughts Thine eye beholdeth.<sup>8</sup>

The narrator asks rhetorically: “Is it possible that such a righteous man as this, whose **name** [*shem*] was written in the prayer book, did not find God [Hashem] before him at all times and in every hour, so that he had to write “At dawn I seek Thee, Refuge and rock sublime [my rock and my strength]”? Not only did God [Hashem] make him see Him, but even when the poet found God [Hashem], fear fell upon him and he stood confused.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 701 / *A City in its Fullness*, 9–10) As a way of fixing the dual meaning of the word “shem,” this word will notably appear yet four more times in chapter 14 alone.

The narrator’s double astonishment about the Name that fails to fulfill the expectations of the person whose name is inscribed in the siddur does not originate in Jerusalem on Shavuot eve, 1943. Rather it first arises in his hometown, when as a young boy, the narrator first alights upon Ibn Gabirol’s “Request” in the siddur that his father brings back for him from the fair. Doubt begins to eat away at him back then.

From then on, Ibn Gabirol becomes the entity to which the narrator directs his prayers, his religious intentions and yearnings. Alluding to the famous verse from Song of Songs 3:1, “By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loves; I sought him, but I found him not,” traditionally interpreted as an allegorical representation of the love between Knesset Israel and the Holy One Blessed Be He, the narrator says: “As I lie down at night I see this saint rising from his bed on a stormy windblown night. The cold engulfs him and enters his bones, and a cold wind slaps at his face, ripping his cloak and struggling with its fringes.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 701–702 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 11). The young boy directs his inner world not toward God but to the man who, despite his name being inscribed in the siddur, cannot seem to find Hashem [The Name, that is, God].

Another encounter with a poem by Ibn Gabirol, “O poor captive in foreign land,” (chapter 15) as sung by the old cantor in his city, prompts additional astonishment about the Master of Universe: “It was a little hard for me to understand why God didn’t hurry and take her out of captivity, or why He didn’t have mercy on the poor old man who stood, his head bowed, begging and praying for her.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 702 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 11) Here we have an additional contrast between a young innocent boy, who reads the poem literally and expects an

8. From Nina Davis, *Songs of Exile* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1901), 29. <https://archive.org/details/songsofexilebyheosalaiala/page/z8/mode/2up>. “At Dawn I Seek Thee” is an eleventh century piyyut by Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, one of the piyyutim of the “Reshut” for “Nishmat kol ḥai,” a prayer asking for permission to recite “Nishmat kol ḥai,” known in many Jewish congregations and sung to many different melodies.

immediate result, and the old cantor, who clings to the ritual and perhaps isn't even sensitive to the difficult content in the *piyyutim* he sings.

Except that the boy has grown up. As time goes on he too clings to the traditions and the rituals, and since the *piyyutim* of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol are so close to him, he never once misses reading them on Shavuot night, even in Erets Yisra'el where they are no longer recited. That is, the same opposition between him and the community in Erets Yisra'el that is mentioned first in Chapter 14 repeats again in Chapter 16, except that here the narrator explains the reason for the Tikkun Leil Shavuot: "in remembrance of our father who stood trembling all night in the third month after going out of Egypt to receive the Torah from God Himself. (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 702 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 12) This explanation, which provides historical depth to the thousands of years of the custom of Tikkun Leil Shavuot, also indirectly explains the narrator's stubbornness in continuing to recite the Azharot of Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol even in a place where it is no longer customary to recite them. From the time that he happened upon these *piyyutim* that captured his heart, this custom has distinguished him from others in the community.

## B. The History of the Narrator's Neighborhood

All of these things about the Diaspora—about the difference between the narrator and others around him, about his childhood and the place of Rashbag in his biography—emerge as part of the narrator's musings as he walks from his house to the synagogue on Shavuot Eve, 1943. The objective closeness of the synagogue to his home does not deter his abundance of thoughts and memories. Subjectively, a mental-spiritual distance is marked out between the narrator and the neighborhood synagogue, as he himself attests: "That night the way made itself longer. Or maybe it didn't make itself longer, but I made it longer. My thoughts had tired out my soul, and my soul my feet. I stopped and stood more than I walked." (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 703 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 12) This prolonged walk affords the narrator the opportunity to tell not just about his annihilated city in Eastern Europe but also to recount the history of the Jerusalemite neighborhood (Talpiot) where he now lives and where a wooden hut serves the function of a house of prayer.

But before the narrator dedicates six relatively long chapters (19–24) to the history of the neighborhood where desert land is turned into a flourishing garden, he returns in chapter 8 to the main theme of the story. Indirectly and ironically, he hints at the limits of God's power to save Israel. Like the Psalmist in his day, the narrator expresses astonishment on the night of the giving of the Torah that the heaven and the earth fulfill their destiny: "They stand and fulfill their tasks: the earth to bring forth bread, and the heavens to give light to the earth and those who dwell upon it. (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 703 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 12) So

in Jerusalem and so too, it seemed, in his city, which was destroyed. In light of what happened to the Jews, God didn't have to let heavens and earth function as if nothing at all had happened. But in the Diaspora, the narrator explains, as if defending the Creator of the World—but subtly criticizing Him—God behaves differently:

In The Land of Israel, the Holy One Blessed He, judges the land Himself, whereas outside The Land he has handed this supervision over to angels. The angels' first task is to turn their eyes aside from the deeds of the gentiles who do evil to Israel, and therefore the heavens there give their light and the earth its produce—perhaps twice as much as the Land of Israel. (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 703 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 13)

Is this not a sign of the powerlessness of God [*Hamakom*] in the world that is supposed to be His place [*mekomo*] entirely?

The birth of the neighborhood—the story within the story of “The Sign”—is miraculous. But it is an earthly human miracle in which God plays no part. Only at the beginning of chapter 24, the last in a series of six chapters dedicated to the sufferings associated with the establishment of the neighborhood, do we read the line, “By the grace of God upon us, we rose up and were strong.” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 707 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 18) And this after the previous chapter, which culminated with a description of the riots that the Arabs unleashed against the residents of the neighborhood on Shabbat Naḥamu (the Sabbath after the fast day of the 9th of Av) 1929, that same year that symbolized Eternal Israel in gematria.

The mention of God's grace in the thoroughly secular context of resilient pioneers who stubbornly and against all odds turn a desert into a settled land is merely a hackneyed turn of phrase. The emphasis upon Shabbat “Naḥamu” (Be consoled) as the occasion for riots is no less ironic than the reference to Eternal Israel in conjunction with the riots.<sup>9</sup>

More ironic even than that: the presentation of the beginnings of the neighborhood as a result of one man's wonder over the beauty of the place when in reality it is a place of thorns, brambles, and rocks, but one where you can see “the Dead Sea on one side and the Temple Mount on the other” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 703 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 13). When the neighborhood is finally established after a long string of evil decrees, riots and wars, the narrator tells us that “[t]he Dead Sea would smile at us almost every day, its blue waters shining in graceful peace between the grey and blue hills of Moab. The

9. On the ironic connection to Shabbat Naḥamu, see the chapter on *Bidmi yameha* (In the Prime of her Life) in Nitza Ben-Dov, *Vehi tehilatekha* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 2006, 47–48), where Agnon by choosing the eve of Shabbat Shabbat Naḥamu for the wedding of Akaviah and Tirtsa Mazal hints to unhappy marriage.

site of the Temple would look upon us. I don't know who longed for whom more; we for the Temple Mount, or the Temple Mount for us." (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 707 / *A City in its Fullness*, 17) In raising the possibility that the place of the neighborhood took priority over the place of the Temple, the narrator glorifies the neighborhood, but also offers ironic comment on God's dwelling place: it's not enough that from the Temple Mount God looks out on the neighborhood and makes no effort to ameliorate the sufferings of its founding; God actually seems to envy the neighborhood. The Dead Sea, with its sparkling blues looms in stark, ironic, meaningful opposition to the ruins of the Temple, which merge in the neighborhood that is situated between these two poles.

Following on this notion that the Temple envies the neighborhood, an amazingly heretical statement, to be sure, the narrator states: "We, whose minds are given over mainly to things of this world, build great and beautiful houses for ourselves, and suffice with little buildings and shacks for prayer." (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 707-708 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 18) The small prayer shack as opposed to the large homes joins the priority assigned in this story to life on earth on this holiday, that is less a celebration of the giving of the Torah from heaven and more on the life and bounty of the land.

To summarize: the long digression that the narrator takes in order to tell, on the one hand, of the destruction of his Galician city, and on the other hand, of the building of his neighborhood in Jerusalem—occurs in the context of his extended walk to the prayer shack, which ought to be a relatively short walk but that takes on larger proportions in thought and spirit on this particular Shavuot night in 1943. This prolonged walk serves a literary as well as an emotional function. Emotionally, the narrator, who heard on the eve of the holiday that all of the Jews in his city were murdered, cannot return to his routine path from his house to the synagogue, as if it were just any other holiday. This departure from routine is part of his difficult reaction to the terrible news. On a literary level, this gives him the opportunity—and this too is part of his reaction to the bad news—to pit against one another the individual (that is, himself, given that the bad news pertains chiefly to him since there are few people from Buczacz in his neighborhood with whom to share this simultaneous celebration and mourning on that holiday) and the community of those who pray at the neighborhood synagogue. Part of this are the oppositions between past and present, childhood and adulthood, destruction and building, the wooden prayer shack and the stone houses, God the merciful who seemingly offers salvation to His "chosen people" and Ibn Gabirol, the wondrous *paytan*, whose piyyutim are powerful and eternal, while he, the narrator, is a mere mortal, who exemplifies the contradictions and contrasts typical of human beings.

## Alone in the House of Prayer at the Tikkun Leil Shavuot

Upon arriving at the House of Prayer the narrator finds himself all alone (Chapter 25), a continuation of his long walk, during which he is wrapped up in himself. With no one else there, he has the chance in the empty space of the prayer to contemplate the plants and flowers that adorn the neighborhood synagogue and to smell their fragrance. “Already at Ma’ariv,” he explains, “I had taken note of the smell, and now every blossom and flower gave off aroma with which God had blessed.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 708 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 19) The emphasis on the blessings of God even here comes in a context that immediately renders it ironic, because the plants and flowers that give off this pleasant scent were gathered by “a young man, one who had come from a town where all the Jews had been killed.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 708 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 19). And he did here what he did there “before all the Jews there had been killed.” Apparently, God’s blessing is limited to plants and flowers and to the scent they emit, but does not extend to the Jews who gathered these plants to decorate their houses of prayer.

More than that, in addition to the plants, flowers and roses that decorate the house of prayer there were memorial candles “without number and without end.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 708 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 20, chapter 26). Lest one forget, the lovely light these candles cast on the space of the synagogue, rendering it magical, memorializes “Six million Jews [who] have been killed by the Gentiles; because of them a third of us are dead and two-thirds of us are orphans. You won’t find a man in Israel who hasn’t lost ten of his people.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 708–709 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 20) Hence, this decoration is a harsh reminder of the murder and orphanhood of the Shoah.

The synagogue is adorned with flowers, but the narrator’s eyes are pierced by thorns. This opposition of flowers and thorns is part of the opposition of this holiday, which the narrator ostensibly celebrates with flowers and greenery, and yet his personal feelings are all repressed mourning and a thorn in the eye. If there is a certain concealed irony in everything described above, it is hard not to sense in the description of the synagogue on the night of the Tikkun Leil Shavuot a clearly defiant tone: “The Eternal had a great thought in mind when He chose us from all peoples and gave us His Torah of life. Nevertheless, it’s a bit difficult to see why He created, as opposed to us, the kinds of people who take away our lives because we keep his Torah.” (*Ir umelo’ah*, p. 709 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 20) The paradox in the covenant between The Holy One Blessed Be He and the people of Israel is that only Israel maintains their side of the covenant, hence the expression, “a bit difficult,” is difficult and ironic all at once.

Chapter 27 opens with words that connect the “grace of God” with the narrator’s capacity to shift his mind from the absurd and terrible historical fate that he has been describing until this point. However, while the narrator may be able to take his mind off this difficult philosophical question—how is it that the Chosen

People can be wiped out on account of being the Chosen People?—he cannot take his mind off of the immediate and total destruction of this city that he knows as intimately as the back of his hand. His bodily reaction to this is to close his eyes. In doing so he distracts himself somehow, but this way he doesn't see the dead of his city, only those who lived in it.

In contrast to his current condition where he is standing alone in the synagogue in Jerusalem, the narrator notes that “in my town everyone came to prayer” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 709 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 21) and with his eyes closed he can see all of them. This binary distinction is fascinating: open eyes show him murder and devastation, whereas closed eyes show him life and prayer. Open eyes demonstrate that he is alone in the Jerusalem prayer shack, whereas closed eyes return him to the bustling synagogue in the city of his youth, enabling him to “put everyman in the place where he used to sit and where he studied, along with his sons, sons-in-law, and grandsons.” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 709 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 20–21) Closing his eyes somehow has the power to resurrect the dead, bringing to life “the people in my city in their deaths as in their lives.” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 709 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 21), as the narrator says in chapter 28. Resurrecting them by closing one's eyes constitutes a form of a distraction from their true state, which one cannot evade if one looks with open eyes at the seemingly endless number of victims who can never be brought back to life.

The narrator's personal encounters with figures who represent his lost city—the old cantor, Hayyim the sexton and Shalom the shoemaker (in other words, Life *Hayyim* and Peace *Shalom*, both names steeped in irony)—that hover on the thin line between dream and reality, life and death, past and present, prepare the background for the most mystical encounter of all: that between the narrator and Ibn Gabirol.

While he is still standing alone in the small Jerusalem synagogue on Shavuot eve, the doors of the ark are opened, revealing before the grieving narrator the image of a man whose head is resting between the Torah scrolls and whose voice is calling out from the ark. Similar but also different from Moses in the Tent of Meeting, who speaks with God face to face, this man with a kingly countenance, too, speaks with the narrator. But as the narrator notes, “he did not speak to me with words [*peh el peh*—mouth to mouth]. Only the thoughts that he thought were engraved before me, and these created the words.” (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 713 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 26) Along the way, in chapter 39, the narrator returns and recalls his naïve and simple understanding of the meaning of the *piyyut*, “At Dawn I seek Thee,” and the compassion that he feels for he who seeks out God [Hashem] and when he finds Him, stands in fear, and how the *piyyut*, “O poor captive in foreign land” heaps pain upon pain. While reminiscing, he once again recalls when he heard the *piyyut* in the first place. It was from the old cantor in the Great Synagogue in his city, which is now desolate. These memories, and the

conflict between past and present tear off the mask of necessary restraint, which nothing other than a gag order and the putting up a bodily front, which bring him to tears. Solomon Ibn Gabirol, the pains of which the narrator has mourned since he was a child, now feels the narrator's pains. In other words, the two fuse into one, and contain one another.

This fusion is not just spiritual, but also physical and emotional. Rabbi Solomon draws close to the narrator, he describes, "until I found myself standing next to him, and there was no distance between us." (*Ir umelo'ah*, p. 715 / *A City in its Fullness*, p. 28) As they are together, cleaving to one another, the narrator can hear the name of his city coming from the lips of R. Solomon. More than that: the narrator hears Solomon looking for a sign so as not to forget the name of the city. The sign that he decides to make is very typical of him: to put the name of the city as an acrostic in a poem, as he was wont to do for his own name, Shlomo. The narrator is unable to remember the poem, but he is consoled that the name of the city sings out on high, with Hashem [God]. Indeed?

After all, we already learned that in the dichotomy laid out in "The Sign" there is a preference for earth over heaven. Therefore, the acrostic sign that Solomon, now in heaven, made for the city—is nothing other than a metaphor, a figure for the sign that the narrator himself is making for the city, here on earth. Indeed, it is here that the narrator places a monument for his city. The encounter between the narrator and Solomon Ibn Gabirol—the narrator's source of inspiration ever from the time his father brought back a siddur for him from his trip to the fair until today—is an encounter with himself. And in the same way that he himself continued to read the piyyutim of Solomon Ibn Gabirol, in the same way that he stood alone at the Tikkun Leil Shavuot in the neighborhood synagogue and wept for his city that was no longer, so too he gave his city signs that are impossible to forget. The Sign is his thoughts that turn into letters, that developed into words, and eventually became of the stories of *A City and Its Fullness*.

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