
Poland as a "Promised Land" in Agnon's *Tales of Poland*

1.

Three sites create the setting, the subject, and the impetus in the writing of S.Y. Agnon (1888-1970), the greatest of the modern-day Hebrew writers (and recipient of the 1966 Nobel Prize for literature): Poland, the Land of Israel, and Germany. But while the Agnonist stories that take place in the Land of Israel happen mostly in the first half of the twentieth century, and those in Germany mostly during the First World War, Poland serves as the place for stories that happen from the middle of the Medieval period until the time between the two World Wars, a span of eight centuries.

This article focuses mainly on a single story titled "In the Depths" ("Bimetsulot"),¹ taken from a series of 16 short works entitled *Tales of Poland* (*Polin: Sipure agadot*). These stories document the start of Jewish settlement in Poland and are written in Biblical Hebrew. The ancient layer of the Hebrew language, chosen by Agnon for his Poland stories, was intended to create an affinity between the settlement of the tribes of Israel in the Promised Land in the days of the Bible and Jewish settlement in Poland in Middle Ages. Taking account of the intimation that Poland was also a kind of choice land, I aim to examine the relations between Jews and Poles, which in this story, as in all the stories of the Poland anthology, involve an ambivalent, nostalgic expression shot through with conflict and reconciliation.

¹ "Bimetsulot" was translated as "Torrents of Death" by I. Singer and published in *Jewish Digest* (Houston), 1/12 (Oct.-Nov., 1950): 60-64.

2.

Agnon's story "In the Depths" first appeared in *Hatsfira* in Warsaw in 1917, and in time was gathered into an anthology of Poland stories (*Tales of Poland*) in the second volume of Agnon's complete stories entitled *Of Such and of Such* (*Elu ve'-elu*, 1953). Dov (Bernard) Fruchtman (my late father, born and raised in Poland, immigrated to Israel in 1950), who wrote his Master's thesis on the Poland anthology and published several articles pursuant to this thesis, maintained that the geographical and historical setting of this collection is East Galicia, generations before the partition of Poland, with the heart of the stories being Agnon's city of birth, Buczacz.

The city lies in a mountain valley, through which flows the River Strypa. Several bridges span the river as it cuts through the entire length of the city. These structures were subject to vandalism, and more than once one of the bridges was destroyed, disrupting the connection between the city's two halves. The Strypa, which empties into the Dniester, is not unique to Buczacz, just as the synagogue or study-house is not unique to the Jewish community it serves in every Polish town. Many Jewish communities lived on the river bank, and Jews crossed bridges to pray with their fellow Jews at the main houses of worship. So the story "In the Depths", in which the river, the bridge, and the prayer-house feature as important elements in the design of the plot, is a kind of synecdoche for Jewish existence on the soil of Poland in general, and of East Galicia in particular.

"In the Depths" has enjoyed a good number of analyses because of its complexity and the mystery attached to it. It combines two consecutive dramatic plots interconnected through Jewish solidarity on the soil of Poland, a solidarity which crosses the divide between the living and the dead. The two plots unfold in two different places and in two different eras, but are connected by a mysterious bond. Both plots mix genuine historical content with miraculous and legendary material. I have chosen to present the story "In the Depths" in this discussion because it covers three eras, that is, three stages of time, in the elaborate relationship between Jews and Poles, and in that way becomes a microcosm of the perception of Agnon, of the Jews themselves, and of the history of their long settlement in Poland.

The two consecutive plots, each continuing on the other in a surprising way and crossing the boundaries of time and location, life and death, are preceded by a prologue. The prologue of "In the Depths" describes ideal relations between Jews and Poles. There is a large village called Asonovki in the state of Podolia. In that village as elsewhere in Poland, "Jacob will not envy Esau and Esau will not be an enemy to Jacob, for he has been

peaceable on his land ever since the days of yore." (*Of Such and of Such*, p. 364) But the name of the village "Asonovki", which contains the Hebrew word *ason* – catastrophe, may hold an intimation of the calamity that is about to strike it, despite the declarations that "Israel will dwell in safety" and that the relations between Jacob and Esau are good from the beginning of time. Moreover, the names that Agnon applies to the Jews and the Poles, Jacob and Esau, make them the archetypes of brothers between whom lurks the potential of envy, enmity, and to be lead astray and into endless conflict, but it is in their power to reach reconciliation, forgiveness, and brotherliness.

The portrayal of the good relations between Gentile and Jew in the Prologue matches that which appears in the other Poland anthology stories about the beginnings of the Jewish settlement of Poland. The Poland series opens with a short account called "Antiquities", ("Kedumot", 1919) in which the Jews, having left the land of the Franks (ancient Germany) because of terrible persecution and unbearable decrees, are at a crossroads and ask themselves and the Creator where to go. From heaven falls a leaf on which the words "Go to Poland" are written. Sure enough, this heavenly instruction contained a promise that has been fulfilled. The king of Poland and his ministers welcomed the Jewish band seeking refuge with great honour, allowing the wandering Jews to settle in all the lands of the Polish realm, to preserve their religious hue, and to engage in widespread commerce. When in Kawęczyn forest near Lublin the Jews found trees on which were carved tractates of Talmud, they realized that they were not the first to settle in Poland, and the beginning had its own beginning.

The story "Rain" ("Geshem", 1924) also puts forth the realization of Jewish experiences in Poland. The Hebrew words for "rain" and "realization" derive from the same root. In the year 893, the Jews of Ashkenaz (Germany) sent a delegation to Leszek, King of Poland, to request a grant of land for them to settle. The magical belief in the metaphysical powers of the Jews impels the priests to advise the king to make their settlement on Polish land conditional on them bringing rain to the land. The Jews promise nothing, answering instead, "Salvation is the Lord's." This response is enough to convince King Leszek and his priest-counselors to acquiesce to the plea of the delegation. The delegates return to Ashkenaz, bearing the good tidings. Furthermore, they tell those who sent them that they saw ancient Jews in the land to which they are to migrate. Here too, as in "Antiquities", we encounter the motif that Jews had been settled in Poland since ancient times, and that the tales of the first settlement in the ninth century CE do not attest to the actual initial settlement there. The Jews in Poland have an ancient past, not documented. In "In the Depths" the antiquity of the Jews on Polish soil is

summed up in the phrase "For he [Jacob] has been peaceable on his land ever since the days of yore." That is, almost always, Poland has been the traditional choice, where the beginnings of Jewish settlement predate what is known from the earliest available sources.

3.

The pleasant routine of Asonovki village and of other villages thereabouts included a pilgrimage to Buczacz, which served as a kind of capital city for the rural Jews. The journey of the villagers to the big city is a faithful copy of the pilgrimage to Jerusalem on the three pilgrimage festivals in the days when the Temple stood. But here the pilgrimage took place on Rosh Hashana (New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement). "And on their journey to the city they met their brothers scattered about in the villages all around, and they came together to Buczacz to pray there." (*Of Such and of Such*, p. 365) The Jews seem to have maintained ties among themselves that bridged distances, and Jewish autonomy knew no frontiers.

Does avarice, envy, or simply inexplicable hatred for the Other drive a cruel and bloodthirsty squire to cunningly rouse his servants, who know his mind and are alert to his insinuations, to suddenly disrupt the age-old peaceable way and overturn all? The motivation behind this act, which brought terrible catastrophe upon the Jews of Asonovki, is not told in the story, only the deed itself. This event encapsulates the second stage in the relationship between Jews and Poles: the stage of persecution, ravages, and mindless animosity against the Jews, who led a rich way of life replete with activity and possessed of firm and solid patterns. What is strange and infuriating in this second stage, when the life of the Jews changed from heaven to hell on earth, is the passive manner in which they accepted the extreme change that took place in their lives, from absolute good to absolute evil, as if it had been expected throughout all the good years.

Here is the dramatic climax of the first plot in "In the Depths". A squire stands watching the Jews of Asonovki cross the bridge on their way to Buczacz on the eve of the New Year to pray to their God, as they do every year with their brothers. The squire's words to his serfs, as a wicked leer plays on his face – "My heart is fearful lest the bridge break beneath them and they hurtle into the depths" (Ibid.) – are immediately understood by the rapt servants, as a "fearfulness" that is supposed to be realized. "Why stand you idly?" The squire urges his serfs to execute the plan he has devised and has expressed euphemistically. The loyal serfs lie in wait

for the Jews' carts, and the Jews of Asonovki, seeing them waiting on the bridge, understand at once what is in store for them. They hurriedly take out their prayer-shawls and wrap themselves in them, "for they said, 'We shall not come to our God in unholy garb.' And they prepared themselves for death." (Ibid., p. 366)

The vivid description of the Jews thrown down from their carts into the river depths recalls, most ironically, the account of the Egyptians being hurled from their chariots into the depths of the Red Sea. Matters are thus reversed: the innocent Jews of Poland are punished like the Egyptians who in their time went out to pursue the children of Jacob and bring them back to Egypt. In Biblical times the Jews stood and watched the drowning Egyptians with the joy of God's salvation, and in Poland the squire and his serfs stand and watch the drowning Jews with malicious joy. And God, whom the Jews were on their way to worship, offers no salvation.

4.

If the story ended there it would be clear where Agnon's irony is directed. First it would be directed at the Jews, who rush to come to terms with their fate. Instead of crying out against their God, who is not with them in their time of trouble, they envelop themselves in their prayer shawls to appease Him. Then it would be directed at God, who in biblical times provided rescue and salvation to His people but whose hand does not reach out to redeem them in Poland. But the story does not end with the Poles cruelly drowning the Jews of Asonovki in the river which in the story is called *Ye'or*, the biblical name for the Nile. Thus ends the first plot of the story; the succeeding one will complete the Polish scheme against the Jews, but at the same time the Jewish defense against Polish blood libels will also be perfected.

In the third part of the story, which contains the second plot, the dead Jews of Asonovki, in a different age and a different place, proffer salvation to the living Jews of a village called Demishov. Jewish solidarity, it seems, knows no bounds, while the polarization of Poles and Jews advances relentlessly.

We see some shared motifs in the plot of the Asonovki Jews and the later plot set in the village of Demishov. In both cases a wicked plan against the Jews takes shape in the mind of an authoritative Polish figure and incites a mob and bring catastrophe to the Jews. In both, the catastrophe occurs on a "great" Jewish festival (New Year or Day of Atonement) when the Jews congregate, presenting a "suitable" time and a "golden" opportunity

to pounce on them as they are assembled together. The Jews' acceptance of their collective and immediate fate is also common to both plots. The prayer shawls in which the Jews wrap themselves, and the river as part of Poland's natural scenery, likewise play a central role in the two connected plots woven into a single tale.

Thus is the plot that subsequently unfolds in the lives of the Jews in Poland: The governor of Demishov sends his serfs to the river to catch big, fat fish for a banquet he is arranging for his guests. The fishermen, instead of catching fish with their rods, snag carcasses of fowl, a horse's head, and a cartwheel in their nets. The reader understands that the hour has come for the many possessions of the Jews of Asonovki, which sank to the depths so long ago, to float up to the surface. When the fishermen raise a human corpse in their nets and take it to the priest for burial, a plan materializes in his mind. He announces that this is the body of a Christian child whom the Jews had slaughtered in order to bake *matzot* with his blood. The fishermen-serfs want to wreak havoc on the Jews at once, but the priest asks them to hold back because there are judges in the land, and he must incriminate the Jews "legally" and in a calculated manner.

The very fact that there are judges who are likely to restrain the mob's savagery against the Jews tells us something about law and justice in Poland in later periods, for in the earlier era all the squire had to do was drop a hint to his serfs about his scheme in order for them to take up positions on the bridge and plunge the Jews' carts, with everything on them, included the precious human cargo, into the river.

Now, in the later plot, the priest suggests "planting" the body in the Jewish prayer-house. This will be done by the keeper of the candles there, a Gentile. This fact attests to the trust and cooperation between Jews and Gentiles, and on the other hand to the betrayal of this trust, which turns the Polish servant into a fifth columnist in the Jewish house of prayer.

In the priest's scheme, the corpse, which will be found in the Jewish prayer-house on the Day of Atonement, is meant to prove to the judges that the Jews indeed are guilty of murder. But this is not an ordinary blood libel. The priest starts a rumor that a Christian child has disappeared and is nowhere to be found, and simultaneously requests the bloodthirsty mob to wait for the right moment to strike at the Jews. The rumor reaches the Jews, and like the Jews of Asonovki, who in their time accepted the unthinkable verdict submissively and wrapped themselves in their prayer shawls, ready and prepared for martyrdom, so the Jews of Demishov await salvation and do nothing meaningful to escape their terrible fate. Instead, as the Poles arm themselves with sticks and axes with which to strike the Jews, the Jews

on white garments, cover themselves in their prayer shawls, and assemble all together in one place, namely the synagogue. Furthermore, as since time immemorial, Jews from the surrounding villages join them, and their impending death does not deter them. Instead, they say to each other, "We shall die in a great throng of martyrs."

Here the mysterious element enters the story. Sure enough, all the Jews of those parts squeeze into the synagogue of Demishov as always, but on that Day of Atonement they are especially cramped, more so than on any other occasion, as if many more Jews, of a different place and a different era, had joined them. Because of the heat and the crowding, the gathered Jews remove their prayer shawls, and at that instant it is revealed that among them are unknown people, mute and remaining covered in their prayer-shawls. These silent men wrapped in their prayer shawls suddenly rise as one, move to the archive of holy texts and from there draw out the corpse that had been hidden there to incriminate them. Carrying the body, they slip away with it into the depths of the river.

Meanwhile, the Poles surround the prayer-house, calling for those inside to bring out the slaughtered child. Getting no response, they enter the synagogue and scour it in search of the body, in vain. In their search they cause great damage to the prayer-house, but touch no one. The anger and the incitement do not deprive them of their senses. When they fail to find the incriminating evidence they restrain themselves and do not kill any of the Jews. Safety and good fortune has befallen the Jews of Demishov at the hands of their brothers, the Jews of Asonovki, who had drowned in the river generations earlier.

5.

The story's epilogue contains the third stage of the tangled relations between Jews and Poles. It returns to the fishermen angling on the Strypa bank, and raising with their rods not fish but human corpses. The corpses are wrapped in prayer shawls, which makes it clear to the stunned fishermen that these are the bodies of the Jews who at the time of the Master of Buczacz had drowned in the waters of that river. A great mourning falls on Demishov, seemingly shared by Jews and Poles alike. The next day the Jews go out to redeem at full price their dead from the fishermen so as to honour them with a Jewish burial. The idyllic relationship between Jews and Poles as described in the prologue no longer prevails, yet they still cooperate and enjoy fair relations.

What remains of the two plots joined to form a single story is a custom among the Jews of Demishov whereby they do not cover themselves with prayer shawls when they go to worship on the evening of the Day of Atonement, the most significant service in the Jewish calendar. And thus, the relations between Jews and Poles have left their mark on the customs of the Jews down through the generations.