

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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18 Agnon's Yamim nora'im: Then and Now

James S. Diamond

IT IS AT this writing 75 years since S.Y. Agnon's classic anthology of High Holy Day material and lore, *Yamim nora'im* (in English as *Days of Awe*), was first published.¹ This moment provides a good opportunity to raise sets of questions. The first should be asked of any work that has attained the status of a classic: is it as widely read today as its reputation warrants? Is *Yamim nora'im* as valuable and as potent a resource for 21st century Jews as it was for those in earlier generations? Is it still a standard work for rabbis or laypersons who want to prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and who seek to enhance their experience and observance of those days? The second question concerns the origin and objective of the work. How did Agnon come to write it? Why did he write it? And what did he hope to accomplish by it? The two sets of questions are related, for in answering the second, we can hopefully make some headway with the first.

To some extent, to ask about the status and stature of *Yamim nora'im* in our time is a leading question. A strong case can be made that the principle of *dor dor vedorshav* (each generation requires its own interpreter) applies here. The cultural horizon under which Jews today live - not all Jews by any means, but many or even most Jews — and within which they read and interpret the texts and traditions they have inherited, is quite different from the pre-World War II, pre-Holocaust, pre-State of Israel, pre-postmodern, pre-cybernetic, pre-globalized horizon under which *Yamim nora'im* first appeared. In which case it would be quite understandable that it could not address the spiritual condition of those 21st century Jews who want to make Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur less an autumnal Jewish Gathering of the Clans and more an experience of three, or ten, days that are religiously meaningful.

[JAMES S. DIAMOND *z"l* was the director of Princeton University's Center for Jewish Life and a scholar of Hebrew literature. Jim was a collaborator with and dear friend of Alan Mintz *z"l*, together producing the annotated English editions of Agnon's *The Parable and Its Lesson* (Stanford, 2014) and, with Jeffrey Saks, *A City in Its Fullness* (Toby Press, 2016). Unfortunately, these books were only published after Jim's tragic death during Passover 2013; both volumes are dedicated to his memory. This essay was drafted a few months before the accident which claimed his life and we are grateful to Jim's widow, Judy Diamond, for permission to present it here and to Saks who helped prepare it for publication. -Eds.]

1. Originally published by Schocken in Germany in 1937. The English version, *Days of Awe*, trans. Maurice T. Galpert (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), omits some material in the original.

On the other hand, the midrashim, parables, Hasidic vignettes, rituals, customs and teachings that Agnon painstakingly anthologized in *Yamim nora'im* are not costume jewelry or, as Kafka complained, intriguing souvenirs that belonged to our grandparents or great grandparents but spiritual assets created by significant Jewish minds and souls in the past and preserved in the vault of cultural and national memory. That, at least, is how Agnon perceived them, but with one other important assumption in mind: that these are liquid assets, available and usable by any Jew willing to claim and be enriched by them.

Although some may think so, it is not a foregone conclusion that these two perspectives are antithetical and mutually exclusive. It may not be a case of “either/or” but of “both/and.” The disconnect between the present and the past is real and profound. And yet, at the same time, the received texts of our tradition and the values enshrined in them are no less available to us today than they were to our forebears, even as we do not — cannot — read them as they did and even as we appropriate them differently. I believe Agnon understood all this, understood it as well as anyone, and it is this realization that I think underwrites the whole laborious project he undertook of compiling *Yamim nora'im*.

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Why did he undertake it? What was it that impelled Agnon in the mid-1930s to forego more than two years of literary creativity and dedicate his time, often for as much as 16 hours a day, to research, review and evaluate, thousands of texts from the Bible, Talmud, midrash, Zohar and other mystical, Hasidic and halachic lore, and then select and arrange them into an intelligible series and a coherent whole? It was a decision for which he was criticized by some literary critics, including his friend and colleague Dov Sadan. Sadan had heaped praise on Agnon’s stunning novel of 1935 *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*) and now, when *Yamim nora'im* was about to appear, he wrote to him complaining that he longed for more such wonders from Agnon’s literary imagination but instead “you give me an anthology!”² Such rebuke was not something Agnon heard only from others. He had already heard it within himself. A year earlier, when he was already hard at work on *Yamim nora'im*, he wrote to Sadan that the manuscript had grown to about 1,000 pages and he was struggling to reduce it by half.

But still my publisher [Schocken] is not satisfied, and I shall be unhappy if I have to cut another 50 pages. In the meantime I am working like a slave. The

2. Dov Sadan, letter to Agnon of Oct. 10, 1937 in *Missod ḥakhamim*, [Letters and correspondence between Agnon and Y. H. Brenner, Ḥ. N. Bialik, F. Lachover, B. Katznelson and Dov Sadan, 1909–1970 (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2002), 268. See also Dan Laor, *Ḥayyei Agnon* [S.Y. Agnon: A Biography] (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, Schocken, 1998), 286–288.

project in itself “interests” me, so what can I do? In the meantime the desire to write a new story gnaws at me literally every day.³

Why did the project “interest” him (and why the quotation marks)? Several reasons can be adduced to answer this question. For one thing, anthologies and anthologizing were very much on the agenda of Hebrew writers at the end of the 19th century and in the early years of the 20th when the ideology of Ahad Ha'am's cultural Zionism was in the ascendancy and the project of *kinnus* [ingathering; anthologizing] was a major means of implementing it. *Kinnus* was

the name that Bialik gave to the enterprise of “ingathering” important works of the Jewish past that appeared destined to be forgotten in the modern world. They were to be preserved and to reenter the bloodstream of modern Jewish culture by collecting them into well-structured and properly conceived anthologies.⁴

Bialik and Ravnitsky's *Sefer Ha'aggadah* and Berdichevski's parallel work *Mimeqor Yisrael* are only the most well-known and monumental products of the anthologizing enterprise, which was by no means restricted to aggadic material. Peretz and others took folktales from the Yiddish tradition and retold them in a more modernist narrative style.

Agnon too was an eager and important participant in the project. Laor tells us that already in the first years of his fruitful stay in Germany (1912–1924) he had created three anthologies in German: a collection of folktales of Polish Jewry, and anthologies on Passover and Chanukah.⁵ These were done during the time Agnon was working for the Jüdischer Verlag, the Jewish publishing house founded by Martin Buber and others with the purpose of bringing acculturated German Jews closer to their Jewish heritage. Another scion of German Jewry who was also deeply interested in using his publishing house to show German Jewry the beauty and the authenticity of Jewish life in the lands that lay to the east, and, along with this, to mediate to them the classic texts of Judaism and Jewish tradition, was Shlomo Zalman Schocken. In 1915 he became Agnon's patron. In Agnon Schocken knew he had a writer whose encyclopedic knowledge of almost all sources and genres of Hebrew literature equipped him superbly not only to write imaginative literature but also to advance the anthological project. Laor

3. Letter to Sadan of September 1936. *Missod haḥamim*, 253.

4. Shahar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2011), 279.

5. Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 280. Laor lists these respectively as: *Das Buch von den Polnischen Juden*, with Ahron Eliasberg, 1916; *Chad Gadja: ein Pessachbuch*, 1914, and *Moaus zur: Chanukkah-buch*, 1918. The latter two were done with Hugo Hermann; see Laor, 710. A collection on Purim was planned but did not materialize. The stories of Polish Jewry came out in Hebrew under the title *Polin: Sippurei aggadot* in 1925 just after Agnon returned to Palestine. It was later included in the volume *Eilu ve'eilu* of his collected works.

relates that “on Shocken’s initiative, Agnon undertook, already in 1916, to prepare a comprehensive anthology on Jewish culture — the provisional title was ‘On the Jew’ — but for some reason he never carried out this commitment.”⁶

Agnon’s time in Germany also saw the germination of one of his most ambitious anthological initiatives: the idea of developing a definitive multi-volume collection of the stories and teachings of Hasidism. This was something he evidently conceived on his own, without prompting from his patron or anyone else, but one in which he sought the collaborative efforts of Martin Buber. Agnon knew and understood Buber’s engagement with Hasidism, and enlisting perhaps the major spiritual figure of German Jewry in the project underscored its promise and significance. The two of them set to work with high hopes, but it never came to fruition. The manuscript of one volume was completed, mostly by Agnon, but, tragically, was lost, along with the rest of his library and papers, in the fire that engulfed Agnon’s house in Bad Homburg in 1924, the event that precipitated his return to Palestine.⁷

But *Yamim nora'im* was not conceived solely out of the anthological impulse. By the mid-1930s, when Agnon started to work on it, its subject, or more precisely its content, had for a long time been a key topos in modern Hebrew literature, as described by Shachar Pinsker:

[I]n the last two decades of the nineteenth century [Yom Kippur] appeared in stories such as David Frishman’s “*Beyom hakippurim*” [On the Day of Atonement, 1880–1881], Ben Avigdor’s “*Elyakim hameshuga*” [Mad Elyakim, 1889], Mordecai Ze’ev Feierberg’s novella *Le’an* [Whither, 1899], and Micha Yosef Berdichevski’s story “*Me’ever lanahar*” [Beyond the River, 1899.]

In spite of some differences in the ways the theme functions in all these texts, it is safe to say that Yom Kippur was employed in all of them as a background for recording the collapse of traditional Jewish institutions and for describing the tensions between fathers and sons, between tradition and the allure of modernity. These elements are the building blocks of the narrative of apostasy and loss of faith that is so common in the literature of the period.⁸

Pinsker goes on to show how the literary representation of Yom Kippur was modified in the 20th century in the fiction of such ostensibly secular writers as Brenner, Schofman and Gnessin. Yom Kippur figures in their works not so much as a marker for the alienation of their protagonists from the tradition but as a moment for a Joycean epiphany that enables them to reconfigure their inner world and reconstitute it into something more coherent and even joyful.

6. Dan Laor, “Agnon and Buber: The Story of a Friendship, or: The Rise and Fall of the ‘Corpus Hasidicum’ “ in Paul Mendes-Flohr, ed., *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective* (Syracuse & Jerusalem: Syracuse University Press & The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2002), 62.

7. The full story of this ill-starred project is in Laor’s essay. We learn there that years later both Buber and Agnon each succeeded in publishing respective anthologies of Hasidic lore: Buber’s *Or haganuz* (1947) and Agnon’s *Sippurei haBesht*, which was published posthumously in 1986 and contained material that Agnon had collected, some of which had appeared in his lifetime.

8. Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 337.

Thus it was that in 1934, when Moritz (Moshe) Spitzer, who was then editor-in-chief of Schocken Verlag, floated to him the idea of doing an anthology on what we call in America the High Holy Days, Agnon responded positively and unhesitatingly.⁹ He did so not only or merely for the historical reasons I have just noted, reasons that he, as a Hebrew literary artist, knew as well as any of his colleagues. He did so for reasons that were deeply personal and which take us to the wellspring of his literary imagination and from which much, if not all, of his astonishing and monumental corpus flows. A look into the origins and objectives of *Yamim nora'im* will help us understand not only why Agnon created it but will also point the way to answering the larger questions I posed at the outset.

*

During the time he was working on *Yamim nora'im* in the mid-1930s, Agnon, contrary to his remonstrance that the project was keeping his creative muse at bay, was writing two significant works of fiction that are almost contemporaneous with the anthology: the story "Pi shenayim" ("Twofold") and the novel *Oreah natah lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*). Both appeared in 1939, and both deal substantively with Yom Kippur. They deal with Yom Kippur by problematizing the day both as idea and as experience. Both story and novel turn on the notion that Yom Kippur is a touchstone of Jewish sensibility and that it does not come easily to many modern Jews. Both story and novel are written in the full awareness of how Yom Kippur functioned in the narratives of Feierberg, Berdichewski, Schofman and Gnessin. When we look at them together we get an idea of what Agnon intended to achieve with *Yamim nora'im*.

Yom Kippur takes up the first five chapters of the novel. The unnamed narrator, who had years earlier emigrated to Jerusalem, arrives back in his hometown of Shibush on a visit late in the afternoon on the eve of Yom Kippur. The town constitutes a microcosm of the reality that will be depicted in the 75 chapters that follow, and the impaired spiritual condition of its inhabitants serves to define that reality. A young man, Daniel Bach, accompanies the narrator to his hotel and when the two of them arrive there, Bach wishes him a full atonement.

I took his hand and said to him, "The same to you, sir." Bach smiled and said, "If you mean me, it's a wasted greeting, for I don't believe the Day of Atonement has any power to make things better or make them worse. ... I'm a skeptic. ... I don't believe the Almighty cares about the welfare of His creatures. But why should I be clever with you at dusk on the eve of the Holy Day? I wish you a full atonement."¹⁰

9. Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 28of. Spitzer was reprising the project of creating anthologies for all the Jewish holidays that Agnon had done for the Jüdischer Verlag in Germany in 1914–15.

10. *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 4.

This exchange prepares us for what the narrator will soon encounter. At the hotel he finds that the fast is about to begin and it is too late to eat anything, much less a full pre-fast meal. So he takes his maḥzor and his tallit and goes to the Great Synagogue.

In my childhood I thought that there was no bigger building in the world than the Great Synagogue, but now its area had dwindled and its height shrunk, for to eyes that have seen temples and mansions the synagogue appears even smaller than it is.

There was not a man I knew in the synagogue. Most of the worshippers were recent arrivals The radiance that is wont to shine on the heads of the sacred congregation on the Eve of Atonement did not shine . . . and their prayer shawls shed no light. In the past, when everyone would come to pray and each would bring a candle, in addition to those that burned in the candelabra, the synagogue was brightly lit, but now that the candelabra had been plundered in the war and not all came to pray, the candles were few and the light was scanty. In the past, when the prayer shawls were adorned with collars of silver, the light used to gleam from them upon the heads of the worshippers, but now that the adornments had been carried off the light was diminished. The cantor did not draw out the prayers — or perhaps he did, but that was my first prayer in my home town, and it was Atonement Eve, when the whole world stands in prayer, so I wanted to draw out the prayers even more and it seemed to me as if the cantor were cutting them shorter all the time. . . .

After the service they did not recite psalms, nor did they chant the Song of Unity or the Song of Glory, but locked the synagogue and went home.¹¹

This experience of a less than satisfying Yom Kippur is reprised in the story *Pi shenayim*, but in a more compressed way. When it originally appeared in the Hebrew literary periodical *Moznayim* it carried a subtitle: “Pi shenayim o meḥussar yom” [“Twofold: or The Day That Was Missed.”]¹² The subtitle encapsulates the whole story. The narrator here is situated in Jerusalem on Yom Kippur eve just as darkness is falling, and, as in the opening of the novel, he is late. In the story’s opening sentence he declares: “At that hour I had not prepared myself for Yom Kippur.” The consequences of his failure constitute the substance of the story. The narrator attends the Kol Nidrei service in his local shul and finds it insipid. He returns the next morning late and finds the service already underway but the seats empty. After sitting there for a short time he is uninspired and leaves. Outside he is put off by people standing and socializing. He falls into wistful reveries about past Yom Kippurs that were more meaningful, one from his boyhood when he was about seven or eight, and one from when he was older and living in

11. Ibid. 5.

12. *Moznayim* IX:5 (1939). In the collected works of Agnon the story is in the volume entitled *Samukh venir’eh*, 128–142.

a German city. These memories are particularly powerful as he recalls the sights, sounds and smells of the brilliantly illuminated synagogue of his boyhood:

Countless large candles, one for each worshipper, were standing and burning, and the smell of wax and honey filled the synagogue and mixed with the smell of the straw covering the floor, and a new light sparkles from the candles. Wrapped in his tallit, father stands among the other worshippers, with a large, radiant tallit-crown of silver over his head. Frightened and flustered I stood gazing at father, and the doubly radiant light shining from his forehead.

How I loved the night of Yom Kippur! The Gates of Heaven are open and God Himself, as it were, bows down to hear the prayers of Israel. He needn't bow, since He knows the heart of every man, but out of affection for the Jewish people, He bows down, like a father who inclines his ear to his little boy.¹³

But soon these reveries evaporate and the narrator finds himself again in the tawdry present, as he stands outside the synagogue he has left. As the day passes, he slowly musters up his strength to go back inside. But then the greenish Dome of the Rock¹⁴ on the Temple Mount gleams in the distance, and this impels him to want to go the Western Wall for the remaining prayers. But first he must recover his tallit from the neighborhood synagogue where he had left it earlier that day. When he cannot do so — someone else seems to be sitting in his place and wearing it — he goes home, where he has two tallitot. But then he cannot decide which one to take, and as the day wanes, he decides he will go back to the neighborhood synagogue for the concluding services. Before he can set out he hears the Shofar and he realizes it's too late and the sacred day is over. Having not really had a fulfilling Yom Kippur, he takes upon himself the pious custom of observing a second day of Yom Kippur. He makes every effort to do this but during the day another problem arises. That year Yom Kippur fell on a Thursday, and so now it is Friday and he begins to think about putting up his Sukkah, in accordance with the custom of doing so immediately after Yom Kippur. But time rushes on and very soon Shabbat comes, and his break-the-fast meal becomes his Shabbat dinner. The story concludes with a reflection he has years later: though he has become more deliberate about his observance of Yom Kippur and now gets to shul early and sometimes stays there from sunset to sunset, "And yet, I am still restless because of the missing Yom Kippur which passed me by empty-handed."¹⁵

13. The translation by Jeffrey Saks appears as "Twofold" in S.Y. Agnon, *The Outcast & Other Tales* (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2017), 149–62.

14. In the 1930s the Dome was of copper, which turns green with oxidization. The gold leaf cover we see today overlies anodized aluminum and was added in 1994, a gift from King Hussein of Jordan to restore the original gold that was melted down in the middle ages to repay some caliph's debt.

15. See also the story "Tallit aheret" [Another Tallit, 1951] which is cut from the same fabulative cloth as "Pi shenayim." A translation by Jules Harlow appears as "Another Tallit" in *The Outcast*, 187–9.

What has happened here? Why did the narrator fail to have a fulfilling Yom Kippur? It is not for lack of knowledge; he knows what the day is about and what he must do on it. When he decides to observe a second day he consults the Shulḥan Arukh for the exact procedure. There is, furthermore, no indication that he has the same skeptical metaphysical perspective as that expressed by Daniel Bach in the novel; he is rather predisposed to having a good Yom Kippur experience.

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So here we have two texts roughly contemporaneous with *Yamim nora'im* and in both of them Yom Kippur is problematical. To suggest a single or main reason why this is so would diminish the thick complex of issues that Agnon throws up in them. I see at least three interrelated issues that form the ideational substratum on which *Yamim nora'im* rests: time, solitude, and childhood.

We understand this more fully when we situate the three contemporaneous works in a larger context. From 1932–1945 Agnon wrote a score of stories that comprise the cycle *Sefer hama'asim* [The Book of Deeds]. “Pi shenayim” is part of that cycle. In most of these stories the narrators are variations of the same persona: an addled and hapless man who simply cannot get it together. The title “The Book of Deeds,” as Baruch Hochman noted over 40 years ago

is scathingly ironic. “Deeds” [*ma'asim*] suggests positive religious as well as profane action, and any kind of action seems virtually impossible here — most of all, acts of real piety The tales vary widely in detail, but they characteristically involve missions accomplished late, badly, or not at all. Many of the stories involve lapses in ritual observance — especially that connected with the Day of Atonement and the ritual cleansing of guilt.¹⁶

That is true enough, but there is more to it. The core issue in the stories of the *Sefer hama'asim* cycle, as Ariel Hirschfeld notes, is time — the press of time in general, and in some stories the more particular Jewish challenge to take leave of secular time so as to be ready to enter sacred time.¹⁷ The narrators in almost all these stories are struggling either to complete a task before a deadline or to make the transition into sacred time and the observances it entails in the face of the unceasing and inexorable flow of minutes and hours.¹⁸ These are difficult transitions, to be sure, for merely to be alive in this world is to live in time and its relentless impingements, and to be a Jew in this world requires an awareness that sacred time is qualitatively different from secular time; leaving the latter and

16. Baruch Hochman, *The Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1970), 164.

17. Ariel Hirschfeld, *Likro et Agnon* [Reading Agnon] (Tel Aviv: Aḥuzat Bayit Publishing House, 2011), 202.

18. See, e.g., the stories “Leveit Abba” [To Father’s House], “Hannerot” [The Candles], “Habbayit” [The Home].

entering the former involves entering into a different mode of being. It is not hard to see why these narrators are always late and why they often open their narration by admitting that they have not used time properly so as to prepare themselves for the deadlines they have either set or that the clock imposes on them. The opening of the celebrated story "Pat Shelemah" [A Whole Loaf, 1933] is paradigmatic of the works of the period:

I had not tasted anything all day long. I had made no preparations on Sabbath eve, so I had nothing to eat on the Sabbath. At that time I was on my own. My wife and children were abroad, and I had remained all by myself at home; the bother of attending to my food fell upon myself.¹⁹

We see in this opening a second feature of the existential situation of the narrators of *Oreaḥ natah lalun*, "Pi shenayim," and all the stories of that period: they all live in apparent solitude. The Guest in *Oreaḥ natah lalun* spends his year back in his much diminished hometown of Shibush as what Hochman calls an *isolado*. Though he meets and goes among people, with many of whom he establishes a relationship, he is essentially detached from them and from family. He is not at home in his permanent dwelling; he is on his own, a guest in a hotel, a temporary lodging. In Agnon's world "the free individual must define himself in solitude."²⁰ Likewise, the narrator of "Pi shenayim," goes through Yom Kippur utterly alone. While he does ask his two children to shine his shoes — he wears them even though he knows of the Yom Kippur prohibition of leather shoes — they do not seem to accompany him to the services.

No wonder that in the lonely aridity of the Yom Kippurs of the present the respective narrators are overtaken by memories of those of the past, when the power of the day was fully known to them. The memories go back to childhood but they are more, much more, than wistful reveries or a self-indulgent submission to a pleasant nostalgia. They are memories of precisely what the narrators of the two texts in question are *not* having: a real or authentic religious experience. The memories are not so much ideational as sensate: of radiant light coming from the candles and refracted off the silver neckbands of the worshippers' tallitot, and of the particular smell of the honey wax candles and the straw on the floor. What Shachar Pinsker writes of the depiction of Yom Kippur in Gnessin's novella *Beterem* [Beforehand, 1908] is surely operating in Agnon's:

It is clear that Uriel's [the protagonist in *Beterem*] religious experience might be concealed and suppressed at the back of his consciousness, but there are some occasions when it comes to the fore. The numinous can be stimulated in different ways — by sensory sights, sounds, and smells

19. "A Whole Loaf" in S.Y. Agnon, *A Book that Was Lost and Other Stories*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2008), 373.

20. Hochman, *The Fiction of S.Y. Agnon*, 161.

and by memory and introspection. In some cases, the religious experience or the sense of the numinous is attached to specific religious texts and formulations (Jewish and non-Jewish) that are activated and brought to new life within the act of narrative. In other cases it is attached to specific people and moments in time. Sometimes it affects the current life of the protagonist, and in other cases it can appear and disappear without any evident consequences. Most of all ... it seems to strike the protagonist especially in moments of great despair and calamity.²¹

This is the fictional milieu in which *Yamim nora'im* was written and against which it should be read. These are the issues I believe it was intended to address. It is true that the first rule of reading fiction is to separate the author from the narrators he or she creates. The protagonist in all the stories noted here is assuredly not Agnon. But there is no minimum distance an author must maintain from his characters, and sometimes it can be very close. In Agnon's case it is very close indeed. Laor's exquisitely detailed biography of Agnon tells about as much as can be known of his doings in the world of people and events. The narrators of these stories offer important clues about the author's inner world.

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Most anthologists usually introduce their collections with prefatory remarks about the anthology — the material or items that were collected, the criteria by which they were selected, and the principles or order by which they were arranged. More often than not, there is also a personal note in which the anthologist explains his relationship to the material and why he compiled that particular anthology. Agnon's short preface to *Yamim nora'im* delivers on the former; it is conspicuously lacking in the latter. It begins with these words:

For the benefit of my brethren and friends who seek to know about Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur and the days in between, I have collected some items from the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, from the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, from halachic and aggadic Midrash, and from the Zohar and other books written by the early and later Rabbis, of blessed memory; and I have arranged this material in three sections, according to the order of the days, each section and its issues.

Agnon then proceeds to explain his anthological methods and principles. It is all succinct and quite without affect. Other than the opening sentence, the preface to the first edition offers no indication of what impelled him to do the collection or what he personally hoped to accomplish by it. Dan Laor reports that the preface was more elaborate but it was condensed by a directive from Schocken, who wanted the introductory matter to be concise.²²

21. Pinsker, *Literary Passports*, 353f.

22. Laor, 284f. Additionally he notes that when Agnon acknowledges the individuals who inspired and assisted him in his anthological endeavor, the name of Moritz Spitzer is not mentioned.

This changed in 1946 when *Yamim nora'im* came out in a third edition (a second was published in 1939) This edition was to be done by the New York branch of the Schocken operation and for it, Laor tells us, "Agnon arrogated to himself the right to publish a special introduction ..."²³ That introduction supplies the missing personal detail that the original preface lacked and in the third edition it appears after that preface as a separate text under the title "Zikaron basefer." The words are from Exodus 17:14, which Robert Alter translates as "a remembrance in a record." In our parlance the title is best understood as a personal memory. I cite here the key portion of the text of the introduction because, as Barukh Kurzweil first noticed,²⁴ it furnishes the experiential background out of which *Yamim nora'im* sprang and also serves to bring all the texts mentioned here into their proper relation, as the reader will clearly see:

The heavens were crystalline and the earth was at peace. All the streets were empty. A fresh wind wafted through the world. And there I am, a child of four, all dressed up in holiday clothes, taken by someone from my family to the synagogue, where I stand beside my father and my grandfather. The synagogue is full. The men are all in white, wrapped in prayer shawls, with their silver neckbands enfolding their heads, and books in their hands. A myriad of candles all planted in long rows of sandboxes give out a wondrous light and a lovely fragrance. And an old man stands bent before the podium. His prayer shawl drapes the whole top half of his body, and sweet and pleasant sounds issue from inside it. I stand by the window of the synagogue shivering in amazement at the lovely sounds and the gleaming silver neckbands and the wondrous light and the sweet smell of honey that the wax candles give off. It seemed to me then that the ground that I walked on and the streets that I walked through, indeed the whole world, were nothing but the entry way into this building. I was not yet able to conceptualize ideas and so the notion of the beauty of holiness was not known to me. But I had no doubt whatsoever that at that hour I felt the holiness of the place and the holiness of the day and the holiness of the people standing in the house of God in prayer and in song. And even though until that hour I had never seen anything like this, it did not occur to me that it could stop. And so there I stood looking around at the synagogue and at the people standing in it, and I could not differentiate between one person and another, for all of them and the whole building together with them appeared to me as one single organism. A deep joy suffused me and I was engulfed by a great love for that place and those people and those melodies. Gradually the melodies subsided, then they echoed faintly, and soon they stopped. My spirit constricted within me and suddenly I let out a great cry. My father and my grandfather were alarmed and everyone tried to calm me

23. Laor, 381.

24. In *Havayat yom hakippurim bekhitevei Agnon* [The Yom Kippur Experience in the Writings of Agnon], *Ha'aretz*, September 28, 1958. Collected in his *Massot 'al sippurei Shai Agnon* [Essays on the Stories of Agnon] (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1970), 269–282. See especially 277ff.

down. But my tears kept streaming as people began asking each other what it was that made the child cry. No one knew.

Now I will tell what it was that made me cry. The moment when the service stopped, the enchanting wholeness that I had felt disintegrated. Some of the men had removed their prayer shawls from their heads and some began conversing with each other. The demeanor of those for whom I felt love had changed. Their stature and the stature of the place and the day were diminished. That is what made my heart sad and that is what made me cry.

Several years have passed and the amazement that I felt then still holds a place in my heart, as does that pain. And every Yom Kippur, when I see fellow Jews, “all garbed in white, glorifying You like winged seraphs,” exchanging prayers of petition for purposeless prattle, my spirit constricts as on that day.

Many times I asked myself: are not the prayers and piyyutim the means by which Israel connects with their Heavenly Father? How can a holy people subvert the holiness of its sacred days with idle talk and trivial things? How can they sully the glory of days and hours that, once gone, are lost forever? Thoughtful people do not forget even for a moment how special those days are. But what is a simple person, one who cannot always be at that level when he stands facing his Creator, what is such a person to do? But God is our stronghold, and so one should always ponder how to find the way to Him, all the more so during the ten days when the Holy One, blessed be He, disposes Himself toward those who seek him. One should, therefore, not let those unique hours given for Israel’s fulfillment pass fruitlessly.

Reflecting on all this gave me the idea of composing an epic work on the Days of Awe, one that a person could read for inspiration during the intervals between the different parts of the service. But who am I to come after the prayers and piyyutim composed by the great and holy ones of our people? Who would find anything substantial in a book written by one such as I? So I put the idea away. But each year, during the days of confession and seeking God’s mercy, when I would look through the relevant sources to understand better what God asks of us, I would mark with my fingernail any edifying text I came upon. Eventually I was prompted to copy out those texts and weave them into a book for Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the days in between. I am grateful to God for turning my idea into actuality and enabling me to present this new work replete with ancient wisdom from the Written Torah and the Oral Tradition. It is a book to read and contemplate during the breaks in the service. Nothing in it was written by me. I have rather proceeded like an artisan who is given fine silk to make a garment. All he needs to add are the threads to hold it together.²⁵

Anyone who has ever read Agnon knows that we should never take what his narrators tell us at face value. Very often they mean the exact opposite of what they are saying. Here, however, Agnon himself is addressing the reader in his own voice, without irony and the Galicianer shtick that are the hallmarks of his

25. *Yamim nora'im*, 3rd ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1946), front matter. The English edition, *Days of Awe*, does not present this passage; the translation is mine, JSD.

style. In this deeply personal piece Agnon supplies the reason why the exhausting project of compiling *Yamim nora'im* was, as he told Dov Sadan, of “interest” to him. “Interest” in that letter was in quotation marks because, as we now see, his motivation was more and deeper than merely intellectual. The anthology represents his response to the spiritual condition of the narrators of the stories he created during the time he was working on it. The verbal connections between this specially written introduction and the synagogue scenes in *Oreah natah lalun* and “Pi shenayim” make this clear. Those narrators live in an impaired reality when the dross of the world obscures and darkens the doors of perception, but their memories recover from their early years a more luminous reality. In “Pi shenayim” the narrator goes back to when he was a boy of seven or eight, but here, in this introduction, Agnon goes back much earlier, to when he was a child of four. This tells us that the cause of the clouded perception of the various narrators is not modernity per se but the simple and inescapable reality of being an adult in this unredeemed world, when the clouds of glory that Wordsworth invoked in the Immortality Ode have departed, or, in Buberian terms, when “the exalted melancholy of our fate [is] that every Thou in our world must become an It.”²⁶ Bialik gave us the most exquisite explication of this sensibility in his classic memoir of childhood, *Safiah* [Aftergrowth]:

It has been said very truly that man sees and grasps only once in his life, during his childhood. Those first sights, virgin as when first they left the Creator's hands, are the embodiment of things, their very quintessence. What comes later is no more than a defective second edition. It is done after the fashion of the original, to be sure, and is faintly reminiscent of it, but it is not the same thing. I have found this to be true of myself. Whatever I have seen and deemed worthy of blessing in the skies above or on earth in the course of my life has been enjoyed only by virtue of that original, that primal seeing.²⁷

Primal seeing. That is what Agnon experienced on Yom Kippur in the prayerhouse of his childhood, when time and separateness were transcended in the splendor of the numinous. That is what he suggests we Jews need to recapture in our synagogues if we are to surmount the constrictions of time and the bleakness of individualism and experience the High Holidays as actual days of awe. To be sure, we cannot recapture true primal seeing, for were we to do so such perception would not be primal. What Agnon hopes to catalyze is “a defective second edition” of that consciousness, something akin to Paul Ricoeur's idea of “a second

26. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, in *The Writings of Martin Buber*, ed. Will Herberg (N.Y.: Meridian Books, 1956), 49.

27. *Aftergrowth and Other Stories*, trans. I.M. Lask (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1944), 43.

naiveté.”²⁸ *Yamim nora'im* was intended to serve for contemporary Jews as a spur to attaining it, and the material he collected as a bridge to the Maḥzor. The midrashim and stories and homilies are meant to function as the textual equivalent of the madeleine that enabled Proust's narrator Marcel to recapture lost time.

Can they do so in our time and our place? The question is more easily asked than answered. Agnon compiled *Yamim nora'im* with certain assumptions, however tacit, about his readers and certain givens about their sociology. He presupposed a modicum of Jewish literacy and some familiarity with the material he collected. He wrote in a society that was much less open, fluid, mobile and individualistic than what has evolved in North America and less sectored than contemporary Israel. For those Jews today who attend services on the High Holidays primarily seeking a religious experience, *Yamim nora'im* is a necessary book, but it is not sufficient. There is still a need for some prior material and experiences, verbal and non-verbal, sensate and ideational, that could help us apprehend the world in child-like (not childish) freshness and thus begin to open us to the sublime discourse of the Maḥzor. For the original concern that led Agnon to compile *Yamim nora'im* is still very much relevant: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and the days in between, are not to be squandered. Those “days and hours ... once gone, are lost forever. Thoughtful people do not forget even for a moment how special [they] are.”²⁹

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28. See the final essay in Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 347ff.

29. In the years after *Yamin nora'im* was compiled Agnon seems to have modified or expanded his notion of what Yom Kippur and the Days of Awe can achieve. In such stories as “Baderekh” [On The Road, 1944] and “Im kenisat hayom” [At the Outset of the Day, 1950] it is not the primal vision of childhood that is recaptured in the synagogue on Yom Kippur but a more generalized memorialization of and reconnection in the living present to the communal Jewish past. See Malka Shaked, *Haqemet shebe'or haraqla'* [Wrinkle in the Skin of the Sky] (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2000), chapter 2, 28–48.