



S. Y. AGNON

Harold Fisch

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The
Book of Fables

We have spoken of the combination in Agnon's fiction of the dreaming and waking consciousness, but we have not yet determined what kind of dreams these are. They are surely not typically Freudian or Jungian dreams, though it would be easy to find features to support a Freudian or Jungian analysis. What we seem to have is a specific Agnonian type of dream with a syntax all its own; with anxieties, hopes and terrors which can best be understood against the background of Jewish history both ancient and modern. For this is the fundamental context of all Agnon's thinking and experience.

A work which gives us a special insight into the contours of Agnon's dreamworld, and enables us also to judge its relationship with the world of everyday is a collection named simply *Sefer HaMa'asim* (*Book of Fables*).¹ This is a group of twenty short stories, or rather antistories, written over a period from 1930 to 1951. Here, in these strange writings, the normal bonds of continuity fall away; effects fail to follow causes; the setting of Jerusalem changes without warning to that of Vienna or Buczac; generations and periods are telescoped. The narrator, for instance, suddenly finds himself conversing with his dead grandfather. Forced to leave his work for a few hours whilst the painters are whitewashing his room, he lurches into the past, into the home of his childhood. The symbolic and everyday worlds are yoked together by violence in a way only found elsewhere in Kafka,² though Agnon differs from Kafka in his greater degree of faithfulness both to the dream and to everyday observation. He also reminds us of Edgar Allan Poe with his strange world of mystery and imagination. But, in general, Agnon is not so romantically abstracted from his environment nor so totally immersed as Poe in his own psychic depths. His

Book of Fables are not tales involving radical alienation of that kind.

The last of the *Book of Fables* in the 1951 edition, "The Letter," may be read as a detailed, almost journalistic account of Jerusalem society in the thirties: there are the mandatory police, the bureaucracy, the German refugees with their unhappy complaints about everything they find in the new country. It is all there, even a brilliantly satirical account of a memorial meeting held in honor of some civic leader who has recently passed on. But there is also the faithfulness to the dream. When the narrator gets back home after the meeting, the dead gentleman himself, Mr. Gedalya Klein,³ is waiting for him; they talk about this and that. There is nothing frightening or unexpected about the meeting: it has all the thoroughly predictable and "normal" quality of a dream encounter. Mr. Klein and the narrator try to find their way to a certain prayerhouse they once visited together (in an earlier dream). Finally, Mr. Klein makes some marks with his stick, and there is the prayerhouse suddenly in front of them! "The old man picked up his stick, knocked twice on the wall, a door opened, and in I went."

A typical dream situation which recurs throughout the *Book of Fables* is sudden amnesia. The narrator finds he cannot remember his address, or that he is tongue-struck, or that his feet are dragging and he cannot move, or that he is improperly clad. In the last case, he is in the synagogue without a head-covering or without a prayer shawl. Above all (as in so many dreams of those of us who have to give lectures or attend meetings), there is an obsession with time. The clock is mentioned in practically every fable: one is inevitably late; the post office is closed before he gets there; he misses the last bus; he has to board a ship by

a certain time but the children are lost, and he and his wife chase around the town (which town?) to try and find them, but eventually they get back on board at the last moment as the ship casts off, and find the children waiting there for them.

The three fables I shall describe are "The Last Bus," "The House," and "The Whole Loaf." "The Last Bus" begins with the narrator fumbling with a primus stove needed for boiling water to launder a shirt. Finding there is no kerosene in it, he leaves it and goes off to visit a Mr. Sarit who engages him in conversation regarding various people. The house seems to be a kind of furniture store; it is full of cupboards and chairs, and there is a strong smell of turpentine around. We get a fleeting glance of Mr. Sarit's daughter (by his first wife) "whose green eyes and well-developed limbs put [the narrator] in some confusion." Then Mrs. Sarit (the second) provides him with a kind of launderer's ladle to help him in dealing with the primus problem. Place-names and references to his childhood locate this scene in Buczacz in Galicia. Coming out into the street on a narrow black bridge he finds himself in Jerusalem waiting for the last bus home. A few girls who have been to the theater are waiting at the bus stop, but although they know him they ignore him. One of them has long hair and is wearing slacks. He starts talking to his grandfather but doesn't tell him about his visit to Mr. Sarit, because he remembers that his grandfather wasn't too friendly with Sarit. When the bus comes, he misses it, of course. The girls get in first and he drops the ladle that he is carrying. He is especially exasperated at the thought that the girls have left him behind without even bothering to stop the driver and make him wait for him. His grandfather refuses to let him hire a cab, but takes him

to the office of the bus company, where they make inquiries about another "carriage."

I was sorry that my grandfather had lowered his dignity to trouble himself to come from the other world, especially as when he left this one they didn't use buses. I was sorry that I had caused him humiliation.⁴

The superintendent says there is another old carriage but he has no idea when it will start out. The narrator knows very well that it is hopeless to wait for this, but his grandfather urges him on, confident that they will soon move off. The narrator finds his tongue has "thickened" and he can say nothing. The official is obviously having a joke at the expense of them both. On the way to the old carriage (it is really not a bus but, judging by the quaint terminology, it is a disused railway coach from the Galician period) the old man slips and falls, but the narrator doesn't worry because "dead people can't hurt themselves." The problem is what to do now—the narrator starts walking home. It is a pleasant mild evening: he runs into five acquaintances, one of whom he knows by name and who has cause to dislike him. Another passerby of dignified appearance who might have befriended him leaves him with a barely muttered greeting and the faintest hint of a smile. He is left feeling lost and troubled, alone at night "walking behind those men of whom one was my enemy and the other four were not my friends."

Part of the vocabulary of this dream is evidently erotic. There is the ladle, the primus, the girls to whom he is attracted but who seem not to respond to his presence. The sense of emptiness and inadequacy (the empty primus) has evident sexual implications. But this is secondary to the main theme of the various episodes: the young girls just coming from the theater are,

as we would say, "moving with the times"—they catch the bus; so is the superintendent who has his laugh at the pair of latecomers who cannot get home; so in a way is Mr. Sarit with his two wives, his successful business, and his careful timekeeping (he goes to bed early and has regular habits). The underlying symbolism of the dream enforces the contrast between the onward pressure of time, and the brooding presence of the past—the grandfather who is "behind the times" and to whom the narrator is still spiritually bound. Hence his inability to respond as he would like to Sarit's daughter and to a girl wearing slacks. His involvement in the "new" world and the anxieties and discomfitures to which it gives rise are a source of "humiliation" to his grandfather. But on the other hand, his involvement in the old world gives him little comfort; his grandfather's foolish solicitude keeps him from "getting home" to his rest, and the patriarchal gentleman whom he meets at the end passes him by with barely a nod leaving him to the company of the somewhat hostile group of Jerusalem residents.

The pervading theme of homelessness is here picked out with clear erotic and historical references. The pressure of onward time, and the remembrance of times past leave the narrator in "great distress." He is an alien in Shebush and an alien in Jerusalem. How will the man carrying the burden of the past and of his own inadequacies and unfulfilled desires finally reach home? The old coach will not enable him to make it, and the new indifferent generation cares little whether he makes it or not.

The historical theme is even more clearly underlined in the symbolism of "The House." We find ourselves in a well-ordered, comfortable and freshly cleaned

Jerusalem house on the day before the Passover. Everything radiates a feeling of domestic sanctity and warmth. But there is also a sense of much activity and tension—the tension arising from the many preparations for the festival. They have not slept the whole week, says the narrator; the house has had to be thoroughly cleaned, the pots changed over, and the last traces of leavened bread have had to be scrupulously removed. There has been haircutting, washing, and baking. The following day, i.e., the eve of the festival itself, will also be a day of intense activity and preparation. And so, worn out with his exertions and in expectation of further exertions still to come, the narrator falls asleep almost before he has a chance to eat his evening meal. His sleep is pleasant and refreshing as befits a man whose home is what it should be on the eve of the Passover, but he is aroused at four o'clock (he hears the clock striking) and, going to the door, is annoyed to find that his nocturnal visitor is "a little Arab boy, somewhat ruddy and stout, of a strain bequeathed to the country by the crusaders." He feels a desire "to strike the little bastard on his jaw" for waking him so rudely in the middle of the night. But he overcomes the impulse and after asking what he wants gives him a drink of water. The child seems to be either impudent or incredibly simple, and remains stupidly where he is. Finally the narrator gives him some of the bread that had been left over before the final clearing out prior to the Passover. This is what the child was after, and he runs away with the bread. Going back to bed he finds he can no longer sleep; he now begins to worry about his landlord who has just got back to town and is threatening him with a notice of eviction. He feels he must go and see him, and try and get the matter smoothed over. In passing, the narrator mentions

two customary dreams, one of a pleasant and heart-warming house of prayer in the old country, with its white walls, its candles and its fresh Sabbath smell; the other of a big cold house (evidently in central Europe) of forbidding aspect with many windows and a hostile landlady.

This will help you to understand the feelings of a man like myself, and the fear he has of having to wander, especially of having to leave a place in which I felt at home immediately I entered it.⁵

Looking around for his landlord, Mr. So-and-So, he pursues him from his home to the post office, and then to the bank, but time is short for he has left some leavened cakes at home which have to be finished during the forenoon prior to the festival. He finally meets up with Mr. So-and-So meaning to make some pleasant conversation. However, he finds himself unable to speak. After foolishly following him around for a while, he invites him to his house: to this his landlord brusquely replies that he will visit the house whenever he feels so inclined—indicating clearly that he looks upon the house as his own property and sees the narrator as an unwanted tenant. Finding himself now without money, the narrator has to walk home where, of course, he arrives at a late hour after the festival has already begun. To his profound dismay, he finds the leavened bread left from the night before still unburnt. The table is laid for the festive meal, but all is come to naught—the house is ritually disqualified, and they have to leave it. But the ritual disqualification is but the symbol for a deeper cause of homelessness:

A wife understands her husband. Looking at me she realized that all my efforts with the landlord had been in vain. She knew that we were condemned to leave our

home. So she wrapped herself round; she took the boy and I took the girl, and we left.⁶

Going down the street they hear from someone's home the sound of the recital of the Passover Story or *Haggada*, "This day we are here; next year in the Land of Israel. This year we are bondmen; next year we shall be free." Agnon draws the moral:

It is not enough for a man to dwell in the Land of Israel, he must also pray to be free. . . . A home from which you can be ejected at any time is no true home.

This fable cannot be understood without bearing in mind the character of the Passover-archetype, which for the Jew is probably as powerful as any of the Jungian psychic structures. The sense of urgency and haste which the narrator and his family feel is right there in the biblical source:

And the Egyptians were urgent upon the people, that they might send them out of the land in haste; for they said, We be all dead men. And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders.

(*Exodus* XII, 33-4)

The pressure upon the narrator and his family in the preparations for the Passover is the pressure of the ongoing challenge of Jewish history itself, the Exodus from Egypt being the classical prototype, the concrete symbolization of its terrors and its joys. For the Exodus spells both liberation and exile, and between these two poles Jewish history is lived in all its existential paradox. The narrator has come home: here in Jerusalem was a place where he had felt at home immediately on arrival. At the dream center of the fable it blends with the intimate warmth of the prayerhouse in his father's

village in eastern Europe. The first sentences underline the calm and joy which the house radiates from its freshly whitewashed walls, and its sparkling floor. His sleep is the sleep of the man who has come home and presides over the festive board. But it is a troubled sleep. The little Arab boy who disturbs him is descended from some philandering crusader who eight hundred years before had mingled his strain with the local Saracens. He represents that alien series of occupations starting with the Romans—the word “ruddy” (*admoni*) to describe his color immediately suggesting *Edom* the traditional, hated name of Rome—and ending with the British, which has made the Jewish Homeland into a problematical home indeed. Romans, Byzantines, Nabateans, Arabs, Turks, and British have at one time or another taken possession of it, so that although he has come home at last, the Jew has not yet lost the sense of homelessness. He must still fight for his right of possession. The narrator’s family ejected from their home and walking out into the street are reenacting the archetypal Passover ritual in terms of modern history.

It will be seen that symbol and allegory combine to form a narrative pattern which gains logical coherence only when the underlying mythic structure is understood. This structure might be termed the Jewish theme of linear history, which though seeming to consist of an endless cycle of exiles and returns, redemptions and catastrophes, is felt nevertheless to be moving on to some desired and all-justifying consummation. Hence the forward pressure, the feeling of having to reach a destination.

The clock is no peripheral symbol in Agnon’s dreamworld. In a large number of these tales (as, for instance, at the beginning of *A Guest for the Night*)

he projects the experience of the Day of Atonement—another fundamental Jewish archetype—and the constant underlying sensation is that the Day is moving on, it is drawing to a close, there is a further duty still to be performed. Will the narrator successfully discharge the burden of prayer and observance “in the time” remaining? And, always, there is the brooding presence of Days of Atonement gone by in eastern Europe, in central Europe; ancestral echoes and urgent present responsibilities, making together a microcosm of Jewish history.

Joyce in his dream novel, *Finnegans Wake*, celebrates a cyclical theory of history which he had derived from the Italian historiographer, Giambattista Vico. Finnegan blends with Adam, with Tristram, with Sinbad the Sailor and the ancient heroes of Ireland. All the heroes of the past become one hero. There is no change, no progress: it is, in short, an historical pattern which rests upon a nature myth, upon birth, copulation, and death—the pattern of the seasons. Agnon’s fiction likewise rests on an underlying concept of history, but instead of the dreamy changelessness of *Finnegans* with its ever-recurring motifs, we have the onward pressure of things to be done invading the inner province of the psyche. Here is the special existential background of Agnon’s fiction. The Arab boy has a definite historical existence: he belongs to the present as well as to the past, to the outer world of consciousness as well as to the inner world of the psyche. And the narrator is challenged to react. He will either strike him on the jaw or give him bread. But act he must; he cannot slip away from him into a dreamy indifference. Even in sleep, history throws out to us its challenges and choose we must.

"A Whole Loaf" with the same tendency to the grotesque, and the same obsessive concern with the passage of time as the other two stories just described, is a very much more "contrived" fable. The narrator having been kept indoors during the whole Sabbath day by the intense midsummer heat of Jerusalem, goes out in the evening to look for a restaurant to eat a meal—his first meal of the day. His wife and children are abroad, and he has to manage for himself. Here is a hint of the theme of homelessness we encountered in *Edo and Enam*. An elderly acquaintance, the scholarly Dr. Yekutiel Ne'eman, beckons him in passing and engages him in conversation about his family. They go on to discuss Ne'eman's book, a book about which there is some difference of opinion among scholars. Some say he made it up himself, and some say he drew his opinions from an earlier authority. At all events,

from the day it was published, the world has changed a little for the better, and a number of people have even made a point of living according to what is written in it.⁷

Before they part, Dr. Ne'eman gives him a bundle of letters which have to be sent off by registered mail, and asks him to be kind enough to take them to the post office.

The narrator, instead of going straight to the post office, turns aside to other concerns. First, he spends some time in a synagogue, then he is tempted to satisfy his hunger first instead of worrying too much about the letters. He walks along daydreaming about all sorts of succulent dishes but makes little progress either in the direction of a restaurant or the post office, until finally he runs into Mr. Gressler who diverts him from both objects. Mr. Gressler is a successful and mate-

rialistic hail-fellow-well-met individual, a Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, whom, says the narrator, he had known "as long as I can remember." Mr. Gressler's company had often given him great pleasure, and yet it is also owing to Mr. Gressler that the narrator's house had been burnt down, for it was Gressler who had persuaded a neighbor to set fire to his property in order to claim the insurance, and the fire had spread to the narrator's dwelling. To give a touch of fantasy to the incident it is related that the firemen, who had been at a party when called to deal with the blaze, poured brandy on the fire to keep it going instead of putting it out!

After a brief ride in Gressler's carriage, the narrator jerks at the reins in order to avoid meeting an undesired acquaintance—an inventor of mousetraps—and as a consequence both he and Gressler topple in the dirt, the narrator being badly shaken and bruised. Picking himself up out of the dirt he immediately makes his way to the nearest restaurant, a somewhat classy affair, where he places his order for dinner, adding that he wanted a whole or uncut loaf with it. This would make it a rather special kind of meal. Everyone else is served before him: time and time again the waiter comes along, but it turns out that the loaded tray is always intended for another diner. At one moment he spies a little boy munching a roll of bread,

just like that which my mother of blessed memory used to bake us for *Purim*. I can still taste it in my mouth. There is nothing in the world I would not have given for just a taste of that roll.⁸

Hour after hour passes until he hears the clock striking ten-thirty. At that he jumps up, suddenly remembering that this is the time the post office closes, and he must rush to mail Dr. Ne'eman's registered

letters. Naturally, as he jumps up, he knocks over the tray containing his meal which the waiter is at last bringing to him. The proprietor begs him to wait until a fresh meal can be prepared, and so he waits, full of remorse at having failed in his errand, until at last the restaurant is closed and he is locked in without having eaten anything. Sitting looking at the soiled tablecloth and the remains of all the meals that have been eaten, he observes a cat and a mouse emerge, both intent on gnawing the leavings. Dr. Gressler passes by the window but fails to respond to his call. At last he falls asleep. In the morning when the staff arrives to clean up, he leaves the restaurant, weary, hungry and alone. The letters are preying on his mind, but it is Sunday, and in the Jerusalem of Mandate times the post office is closed on Sunday.

The symbolism is patent. As Israeli critics have pointed out, Dr. Ne'eman (Faithful) is a *persona* of Moses the Lawgiver, the man who had written a book which some might think his own but which others believe was copied from a greater authority than himself. The world has become a little better since it was written. He lays a charge on the narrator which the narrator must carry out. But the narrator has another friend, the egregious Mr. Gressler. He is the antitype of Ne'eman: coarse, living it up, and caring little who gets hurt in the process. The narrator, though drawn to his company, has in fact little to thank him for. For it is Gressler who, in the past, had brought it about that "his house was burnt down." Here the Jewish historical theme (the burning of the Temple) merges with an event in Agnon's own life, namely, the burning of his home in Germany in 1924, an event to which he often reverts. It is Gressler who diverts him from the task

with which Dr. Ne'eman has charged him, and after being diverted, he forgets about the "letters" altogether and concentrates only on satisfying his hunger. This he fails to achieve, partly because in a dream such desires are usually frustrated, and partly because he sets himself a high aim—he wants "a whole loaf," something both satisfying and dignified, something like the Sabbath meal he has missed, a meal which will remind him of the delicious whole rolls which his mother used to bake for the feast of *Purim*. But he is left both hungry and alone. Gressler takes no notice of him at the end of the tale, and amid the garbage and the vermin of the locked restaurant he reaches his nadir. He has satisfied the demands neither of the "id" nor of the "superego." The charge laid on him by Ne'eman remains unfulfilled. But the letters are still in his pocket . . . and some day, maybe, he will get around to mailing them.

Here again we have the Jewish history-consciousness imposing itself on the pattern of the dream-symbols. The clock is moving on, tasks have to be performed, decisions have to be taken. It is not merely that the narrator makes the wrong decisions, but that at the crisis of the story he is unable to decide at all—should he eat or should he go to the post office? This is a natural enough dream-situation. But what gives it its special covenant dimension is the sense of responsibility (the word for "registered" in Agnon's Hebrew also means "responsibility") symbolized by the letters which, though covered with filth, spilt wine, and gravy by the overturned tray, still have to be delivered, together with the sense of a past world not "wholly" recoverable, symbolized by the special meal with its "whole loaf" to adorn and dignify it.

This is clearly an allegorical tale like so many of Kafka's tales, and like *Pilgrim's Progress*; but its force is not entirely owing to allegorical contrivance. We recognize the main features intuitively. We have known Mr. Gressler from infancy, and as for Ne'eman, he has existed from ancient times and he is still around. He reminds us of ancestral responsibilities still waiting to be discharged. Such a tale is thus an image of contemporary existence in the historical present. And here is where Agnon differs from Kafka. "A Whole Loaf" is, among other things, a naturalistic account of a Saturday night in Jerusalem in the twenties. We see the Arabs in their fezzes, the orthodox Jews in their fur hats (*streimels*); there is traffic, there are cafes and hotels; you see the different types coming out to take the air after a burning day of hot desert wind (*hamsin*). You meet the scholar at his lighted window, the successful man of property in his coach; you visit a little synagogue with its candles and benches, and a fine restaurant with its magnificent appointments and its babel of tongues.

If Yekutiel Ne'eman is the Moses of the Bible, he is no less the embodiment of that Moses who still exists as an active part of Agnon's religious consciousness and of the community of Jerusalem which he here describes. Just, as the Arab boy who disturbs the narrator's sleep in "The House" is both a symbol of the red-haired Edom-Esau whom Jacob-Israel had alternately fed and fought in the book of *Genesis*, and a living part of the human landscape of Palestine with which the new Jewish settlers have somehow to reckon. What binds together the world of symbol and the world of everyday is a biblical dimension of ongoing time which communicates with us simultaneously

through dream and through our waking consciousness: it is both without and within, both near and far-off, both past and present.