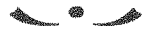
Days of Awe

A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom
for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal
on the High Holy Days



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If the Days of Awe are a time for that direct encounter with divine power and with life's frailty, the tradition seems to have sensed that it is a season when we are in need of much protection. Tradition serves the dual function of shielding us from the intensity of that encounter with God at the same time that it ushers us toward it. And perhaps no other Jew in our century has as well understood these complex roles of ritual and tradition as S. Y. Agnon. Thoroughly at home in the many worlds of tradition, both from his childhood memories of pre–World War One Galicia and from an expert knowledge of Jewish religious literature throughout the centuries, Agnon records traditions with a love and delicacy that betray his awareness that all this is very nearly lost. As a modern writer who was also a scholar and collector of liturgical and folkloric traditions, Agnon saw himself as a link between generations, one of the few who could hand over to the new Hebrew (and now English) reader the richness of the Jewish past. When you read *Days of Awe*, at home or in the synagogue, think of Agnon as an old Jew from a world now vanished who happens to sit down next to you. As you open his book and begin to read, he leans over to you and says, in a Yiddish accent rarely heard anymore, "I remember..." or "Somewhere I saw it written..." and he begins to tell you a tale, an old preacher's parable, or a custom of onetime pious Jews that will open your heart to the splendor and richness, alongside the terror and awe with which Jews have crowned this season.

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On the Fifth or Sixth or Seventh Rereading of Agnon's DAYS OF AWE—Maybe More

BY JUDAH GOLDIN

I

What is a classic? The question is probably as old as the first student of literature, but every student must ask it on his own over and over again, for in the answer he reveals not only something of the character of the specific literary work, but of the relation between his presence and a very large world, a treasury of experience and vocabulary, that he has appropriated. And so, to ask what is a classic, is to engage in literary criticism and self criticism, self examination and understanding, at the same time.

A work becomes a classic the minute I discover that my many moods, my perceptions, my spontaneous terms of reference, my recurring images are startlingly anticipated and given precise formulation by (and in) that work. It sharpens my eyesight, it cleans my mind of the fuzziness produced by my own lack of talent and laziness, it teaches me the words that I need for soliloquy and conversation. It is of course not strange nor solely a polite convention that so often when we speak of classics we refer to early, old compositions. For the masters of ancient pieces too saw clearly and spoke distinctly and with precision. The first to see and the first to record accurately continue to affect us ever after—this is the immortality of truth. And since no one exhausts reality, the classic is not only the ancient. Whoever correctly discovers and uses the right words reveals the world and my life to me, and ever after governs me. He teaches me also to recognize and speak the truth.

II

Since we are handling a serious work, it would be offensive to indulge in whimsy. We have to state, therefore, that Agnon's *Yamim Noraim* appeared twenty-seven years ago (the English abridgement and translation appeared in 1948). It is no less a fact, however, that for anyone to whom Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur have meaning, and who has not cultivated a deafness toward modern Hebrew literature, the volume, from the moment of its appearance, seemed as though it had always been here, as though it had always been the companion of the Machzor (the holiday prayerbook), as though it was the volume which one held in his hands at this season and looked into, read snatches from, studied during moments of the long services when the mind is tempted to take its own, rather than the congregational, course. The book never looked new, and has remained fresh. Or even more accurately: it was never a book (*Buch*), it was from the outset a *sefer*. The Hebrew word, to be sure, does mean "book" but in the folk language it came to be reserved for those literary works which are not to amuse only, or for light reading, but possess a downright seriousness and sacredness. A sefer you study, sometimes beginning at the beginning and going straight through; sometimes you open it at random, read a section and reflect over that section or part of it; sometimes you consult it for specific bits of information: for example, where do the Jews of Jerusalem go for *Tashlikh* (what the translators call The Casting—of sins)? Do the Jews of Kurdistan do at Tashlikh what Ashkenazi Jews do? Sometimes you read a passage in a sefer and begin to recall how the parallel passage in another sefer puts it.

A sefer of course can also amuse you, as when it says, "It is right to eat fish" on Yom Kippur eve, or that "The French Jews are accustomed to eat red apples on Rosh ha-Shanah," or when it reports: "It is not the custom of the inhabitants of Jerusalem to wear kittels on Yom Kippur, the way people outside of Palestine do. For if they were to wear kittels in order to resemble the ministering angels, why, most of the inhabitants of Jerusalem wear white cloaks over their clothing every day, and the resemblance would not be apparent."

But more than amusement, a sefer prefers to give delight, as in the story of the tailor who on the eve of the Atonement settles his accounts with God: Here, Master of the universe, is the list I kept scrupulously of all my offenses against You in the course of the past year, and here, Master of the universe, is the list I've been keeping of all the afflictions and distresses and losses You've put us through this year. If a proper bookkeeping be made, I'm afraid I've been more sinned against than sinning. But this is Yom Kippur eve, when we are all obliged to forgive one another. So I forgive You all, and You too will forgive us all the sins we have sinned against You. "To Life!"

Is delight a feature of Hasidic tales only? Not really. Here is a midrash on the Hosea verse (14:2) "Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God": "A king's son was at a distance of a hundred days' journey from his father. Said his friends to him, 'Return to your father.' He said to them, 'I cannot.' His father sent to him and said, 'Go as far as you are able, and I shall come the rest of the way to you.' Thus, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel (Mal. 3:7): 'Return unto Me, and I will return unto you.' "

And, properly appreciated, a similar quality in a talmudic text: " 'And ye shall afflict your souls in the ninth day . . .' (Lev. 23:32). But do we fast on the ninth? Do we not fast on the tenth? But the purpose of this verse is to tell us that he who eats and drinks on the ninth and fasts on the tenth, is considered by the Writ as fasting on both the ninth and the tenth days."

Delight, amusement, the satisfying of curiosity also are produced by a sefer, for a sefer is a permanent thing, and seriousness is not so stupid as to reject lightness of touch.

III

Yamim Noraim, Agnon named his volume, calling a spade a spade. "Days of Awe" is probably as handy a rendition for a title in modern English as we are likely to get. But here again is an instance of how heartbreaking is the translator's task. For Yamim Noraim is not only the modern, popular expression for the days of Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur; it is the accurate term for the season which puts the fear of God into us. For this is the Judgment period, and when a man begins to think of his blunders and vulgarities and appalling occasions of bad conduct during the past twelvemonth term, it's enough to fill him with terror. The willy nilly sins against God and the sins against man and the sins against every animate and inanimate creature into which we are catapulted (let alone those we carefully plan) simply because no human being is infallible, have a way of parading before our memories and in our dreams with such sinister clarity that it is a supernatural triumph we are not in unrelieved despair. But "It is out of kindness" (kindness? *hesed! hesed ha-el,* God's trustworthy, sure love!) "toward his creatures that the Lord remembers them and reviews their deeds year after year on Rosh ha-Shanah, that their sins may not grow too numerous, and there may be room for forgiveness, and, being few, he may forgive them. For, if he were not to remember them for a long time, their sins would multiply to such an extent as to doom the world, God forbid. So this revered day assures the world of survival. For this reason it is fit that we celebrate the Rosh ha-Shanah as a festive day; but since it is a Day of Judgment for all living things, it is also fit that we observe Rosh ha-Shanah with greater fear and awe than all the other festive days."

When so much is at stake, even in rejoicing one trembles, and even the funny is not ridiculous. "Said Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov: When a man is drowning in a river, and splashes about trying to pull himself out of the waters that are overwhelming him, those who see him will certainly not make fun of his

splashing. So, when a man makes all kinds of gestures as he prays, there is no reason to make fun of him, for he is saving himself from the raging waters—those husks and barbarous thoughts—that come upon him to distract him from his prayer."

IV

If more than two millennia and a half of reflection, questioning and answering and guessing, had not supplemented the bone-thin biblical text, who could have expected so much from the Yamim Noraim? Here is their substance in the Scriptural words: "And in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, ye shall have a holy convocation: ye shall do no manner of servile work; it is a day of blowing the horn unto you. And ye shall prepare a burnt-offering for a sweet savour unto the Lord: one young bullock, one ram, seven he-lambs of the first year without blemish; and their meal-offering, fine flour mingled with oil, three tenth parts for the bullock, two tenth parts for the ram, and one tenth part for every lamb of the seven lambs; and one he-goat for a sin-offering, to make atonement for you; beside the burnt-offering of the new moon, and the meal-offering thereof, and the continual burnt-offering and the meal-offering thereof, and their drink-offerings, according unto their ordinance, for a sweet savour, an offering made by fire unto the Lord" (Num. 29:1–6).

Thus on the subject of Rosh ha-Shanah. On Yom Kippur, the same chapter continues: "And on the tenth day of this seventh month ye shall have a holy convocation; and ye shall afflict your souls; ye shall do no manner of work; but ye shall present a burnt-offering unto the Lord for a sweet savour: one young bullock, one ram, seven he-lambs of the first year; they shall be unto you without blemish; and their meal-offering, fine flour mingled with oil, three tenth parts for the bullock, two tenth parts for the one ram, a several tenth part for every lamb of the seven lambs; one he-goat for a sin-offering; beside the sin-

offering of atonement, and the continual burnt-offering, and the meal-offering thereof, and their drink-offerings" (*ibid.* 7–10).

This too may be added, from Leviticus (16:32–34): "And the priest, who shall be anointed and who shall be consecrated to be priest in his father's stead, shall make the atonement, and shall put on the linen garments, even the holy garments. And he shall make atonement for the most holy place, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar; and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. And this shall be an everlasting statute unto you, to make atonement for the children of Israel because of all their sins once in the year."

Like the high priest on the Day of Atonement, one might say, "There is more written here than I have read to you." But truth to say, not terribly much more. And if we bear in mind the historical reality, that for almost two thousand years out of the two millennia and a half there has been no Temple and none of the appurtenances for cult and sumptuous ritual, even these few words come dangerously close to retreating into the entirely archaic. They escaped that fate because one student generation after another perceived that in addition to their literal content these words carried innuendoes. Legalists, moralists, mystics, homilists, exegetes, folklorists, poets, chroniclers, sophisticates and simple-minded, masters and disciples, at home (wherever home might be) and abroad, in riches and in poverty, in synagogues and schools, in private and in public, in grief or in ecstasy or in patient and impatient expectation of the ultimate redemption—all Israel extracted from these words a multitude of teachings for a whole *curriculum vitae*. Thus the Yamim Noraim became the season of concentrated Teshuvah with detailed instructions for the return journey to God, for charity towards our fellowmen, indeed even to the beasts. ("It is necessary to give one's beast whatever it needs to eat on Yom Kippur." "Once it happened that Rabbi Israel Salanter [19th

cent.] was going to the House of Prayer for Kol Nidre. On the way he saw an animal belonging to a Gentile, which was lost. He saw that the animal was in distress, and troubled himself to lead it home over stones and rocks, through fields and gardens. Meanwhile, all the congregation was waiting for him. When he did not come, they went out to look for him. They found him trying to lead the animal into its master's stall.")

And since charity delivers from death, on the climactic tenth day, *The* Day (as even the talmudic treatise is called) on Yom Kippur, one acted the part of the angels, proving to oneself that one could rise above the mundane, that in God's righteous love one would be acquitted in this Trial, and therefore one dressed in white—and the ark was given a white curtain, and the reading desk was laid with a white coverlet, and when the feast before the Fast was finished, a white tablecloth was spread on the table, and where just a few minutes before there had been dishes with food now holy books were laid.

Not merely one's own world, but the whole world, the cosmos was affected. Rosh ha-Shanah became the anniversary of Creation, the anniversary of Abraham's and Isaac's preparedness to yield to God's extremest demand; Yom Kippur, the anniversary of the receiving of the Tables of the Law that were not to be broken again. The alarms sounded on the shofar on Rosh ha-Shanah became statutory obligation, invocation of the stored up merits of the Fathers, summons to shake off habitual lethargy, and anticipatory echo of that great blast whose signal declares Redemption; even as it is said (Isa. 27:13), "And it shall come to pass in that day, that a great shofar shall be blown; and they shall come that were lost in the land of Assyria, and they that were dispersed in the land of Egypt; and they shall worship the Lord in the holy mountain at Jerusalem."

God alone is king—or, in view of an ancient manner of speaking as well as political realities still with us, He is King

over all kings and kings of kings. Rosh ha-Shanah is the time to affirm this, and not in whispers only. In seemingly infinite ways the long recitations of this day and of Yom Kippur and of the days between repeat and underscore this. Prayers and shofar-service reinforce one another as they proclaim this theme. At least since about the first quarter of the second century kingships (*Malkhiyot*), Remembrances (*Zikhronot*), and Ram's-Horns (*Shofarot*) have been the three pillars of the worship structure, even as in public fasts earlier Remembrances and Ram's-Horns constituted the principal parts of the special service. "Kingships, Remembrances, and Ram's-horns," a 15th century philosopher explains, ". . . arouse the hearts of men to a belief in the . . . three principles and their ramifications. . . . For Kingships corresponds to the principle of the existence of God, to which the formula of the prayer testifies: 'And so we wait for Thee, O Lord our God, we wait soon to see the splendor of Thy might, when Thou wilt raze the idols from the earth . . . when the world will be perfected under the sovereignty of the Almighty . . . inhabitants of the world will perceive and know, that to Thee every knee is bowed, and every tongue avows Thee. . . . They will all take upon themselves the yoke of Thy kingship . . .'

"The section of Remembrances teaches the doctrines of divine providence and reward and punishment, to which the formula of this prayer testifies: 'Thou callest to mind how the world was made and rememberest all those formed of old; before Thee all hid things are laid bare. . . .'

"The section of the Ram's-horns is an allusion to the third principle, which is the Revelation of the Torah from heaven. Therefore it begins: 'Thou wast revealed to Thy people in the cloud of Thy glory on Thy holy mountain, to speak with them. From the heavens Thou madest Thy voice heard. . . .' "

The view of this philosopher is not too far removed from the ideas inherent in the liturgy as a whole. More immediately to the point is the idiom of the *Malkhiyot, Zikhronot,* and *Shofarot* benedictions. Malkhiyot: "Our God and God of our fathers: Reign over the whole wide world in Thy glory . . . and let everything made know that Thou didst make it. . . ." Zikhronot: "Our God and God of our fathers: In a remembrance for good recall us before Thee . . . and remember in our behalf, O Lord our God, the covenant and the love and the oath which Thou didst assert to our Father Abraham at Mount Moriah . . . and there is no forgetfulness before Thy glorious throne. . . ." Shofarot: "Our God and God of our fathers: Sound the great shofar for our freedom . . . and gather our dispersed far and wide from the ends of the earth, and bring us to Zion, Thy city, with rejoicing. . . ."

On Rosh ha-Shanah the obligation to hear the sounding of the shofar is a statutory obligation. But such "trumpetings" stir up so much fear and excitement and hope, it was well-nigh predictable that in the early mornings of a whole month before the arrival of the New Year such sounds would come to be practised in rehearsal for the solemn performances, and that Yom Kippur would not be permitted to withdraw without the accompaniment of one more long sustained blast. "It is the custom in all Israel," wrote Rav Hai Gaon of the tenth-eleventh century, "to blow the ram's horn at the close of Yom Kippur; we have found no reason to believe that it is an obligation, but it seems to be a memorial of the Jubilee, as it is said: 'Then shalt thou make proclamation with the blast of the shofar on the tenth day of the seventh month; in the day of atonement shall ye make proclamation with the shofar throughout all your land' (Lev. 25:9). Since the reckoning of the Jubilee year is not certain, the custom was established of blowing the ram's horn every year as a memorial of the Jubilee. This is the sense of the saying: 'In the Jubilee year . . . on Yom Kippur, the Court blew the ram's horn. Slaves were sent home and fields returned to their original owners' (Rosh ha-Shanah 8b). This is the memorial of the Jubilee which they kept during the time when the Temple still stood."

Is there any wonder that in times when it cost one's life to observe a religious commandment, men crawled into cisterns, into cellars, into vats if necessary, to hear the required shofar sounds—and even then were concerned, had they heard the sound itself, or only its echo?

v

All this (and even that is "no more than a paintbrush takes from the tube") out of about two fistfuls of biblical verses? Is artifice exempt from all restraint? "Why was the Confession composed in the plural, so that we say, We have sinned, rather than, I have sinned? Because all Israel is one body and every one of Israel is a limb of that body; that is why we are all responsible for one another when we sin. So, if one's fellow should sin, it is as though one has sinned oneself; therefore, despite the fact that one has not committed that iniquity, one must confess to it. For when one's fellow has sinned, it is as though one has sinned oneself." Thus, apparently, that remarkable mystic of the sixteenth century, Rabbi Isaac Luria.

Or again, this time from Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Rymanov: "Why is the wearing of shoes prohibited on Yom Kippur? Because all the worlds are elevated on Yom Kippur when Israel does complete Teshuvah; the earth upon which we live is elevated too, and is called holy ground. Therefore, it is forbidden to step upon the earth wearing shoes, as it is written (Exod. 3:5): 'Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.' "

Again and again one moves far away from the literal, the lexicographical limitations of the word; yet only out of context is the movement an act of violence. For the text of the Bible and later the text of the Talmud and the Midrashim too were not simply historical documents, but the spectacles through which one saw immediate life in sharper focus. Without these texts one literally could not see life. And like all who wear eyeglasses, these generations of students and saints and plain folk

were hardly conscious of the fact that they were wearing anything at all. This is the way one sees clearly. Of course many of these men were scholars; but the notion that scholars see only texts is one of the silliest bits of misinformation to be taken in by. *Il regarde ce que je regarde, mais je vois ce qu' il ne voit pas.* It's not texts scholars see—we're talking of scholars, not journeymen—but life, life looked at through the texts that are eyewitness reports on life. The texts are the lenses to see life with. Actually, it's only when we take off our glasses that we squint, that we become aware of the fact that something is not quite right, the view is hazy and the object blurred. And who, in the variety of life's experiences, has twenty-twenty vision?

So life, everything in life, comes into sight through these texts; and soon it is impossible to distinguish between text and life. The words of the verse or of the legal formula or of the sage's saying throw into sharp relief the authenticity of life's subtleties. "A tale is told of one who sat in study before the zaddik Rabbi Mordecai of Nadvorna, of blessed memory [19th cent.], and before Rosh ha-Shanah came to obtain permission to be dismissed. That zaddik said to him, 'Why are you hurrying?'

"Said he to him, 'I am a Reader, and I must look into the festival prayer book, and put my prayers in order.'

"Said the zaddik to him, 'The prayer book is the same as it was last year. But it would be better for you to look into your deeds, and put yourself in order.' "

Or this: "It is fit and proper during these Days of Awe to study the admonitory books of the early and later moralists, which awaken a man's heart to Teshuvah. One ought not make them all of his study, for they lose their effect on the soul when one has concentrated too much on them. For as it is with cures of bodily ailments, so it is with soul ailments. One ought rather to study admonitory books a little every day, until he feels himself that the words have come into his inner-

most parts and turned him to his Father who is in heaven."

"Children of Israel, know that the soul will not be at ease in this world though it come into all the kingdoms of the earth, knowing that there is a world where it will be at ease and rest. So it is written (Jer. 6:16): 'Thus saith the Lord: Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls.' "

" 'The Lord, the Lord' (Exod. 34:6). 'I am he who is the Lord before a man sins, and I am he who shall be the Lord after a man sins' (Rosh ha-Shanah 17a). Rabbi Samuel Eliezer Edels [16th–17th cent.] raised a question: 'What need is there for compassion before a man sins?' But it is cited in the *Duties of the Heart* [11th cent.] that one of the righteous said to his disciples: If you had no sin, I should be afraid of that in you which is greater than sin, pride. For pride, which is more serious than sin, is to be found in the man who thinks he has not sinned.—From which we learn that even before he sins a man certainly needs compassion to atone for a proud heart."

"A tale is told of a certain hasid who went to see his rabbi. Before entering the house he thought to himself, It might be worth while to receive the 'forty stripes,' so that the zaddik will find no defect in me. He was still thinking of this when the door opened, and he entered. Greeting him, his rabbi said, 'What is the reason why the sages, of blessed memory, took one from the forty stripes, making them thirty-nine, when it is written in the Torah, "Forty stripes he may give him" (Deut. 25:3)? Yet the sages commanded that only thirty-nine stripes be given. The reason is that when a man commits a transgression and is flogged, perhaps if he received a full forty stripes according to the letter of the Torah he might think that he had wiped away his iniquity. Therefore, the sages, of blessed memory, went and took one from the forty (Makkot 22a), in order that the sinner might know that he had not yet received all his punishment, and had still to better his ways.' "

Artificial exegesis? Then so is the product of the sculptor who perceived what was in the stone the others rejected.

VI

From more than one thousand books, during many years of *studying* (I would not have hesitated to use the word "reading" if it hadn't fallen into such passive meanings and inactivities in recent times), Agnon has assembled homilies, comments, laws, reflections, letters, recollections, conversations, critical observations, word-of-mouth reports—whatever refracted something of the authentic light of the Yamim Noraim. He marked margins with his fingernail—how sure is his touch! It took him, he says, two and a half years of sixteen hours a day to compose this book—by which he surely means, 2½ years of 16 hours per day simply to organize what over years and years he had been observing, thinking about, and treasuring up for who knows what purpose. A work like *Yamim Noraim* cannot be produced by twice two and a half years of reading, even sixteen hours a day. Anthologies, golden treasuries, reliques, smorgasbord samplings of the so-called finest specimens of this or that literature, possibly—if the compiler has the necessary industry and the bright formula. I'm reminded suddenly of *The Riches of Chaucer* Charles Cowden Clarke hoarded up in the nineteenth century, with the instructive byline, "from which his impurities have been expunged . . . his rhythms accentuated." One need not go off to English literature for illustrations; there are several closer to home that have become the rage. And how pretty are the pictures they summon up; how sweet the sentiments; how homogenized the piety they exhibit.

Ta shema: come now, listen to what *Yamim Noraim* is: an assembly of all the voices of Israel, the demanding and the soft-spoken, the very early and the ones off the beaten track along with the later and those on the main route of this extraordinary tradition, that loves the world and therefore rebukes it. An anthology is the product of calculated rummaging, and in 2½ years, working 16 hours a day, a man can collect a lot, enough for one book, and even more. In that interval it is also not im-

possible to arrange the collection in a more or less reasonable order. The net result is something like literature on its good behavior, like a shop window with the very attractive samples on display. *Yamim Noraim,* on the other hand, is not preoccupied with literature. It is the result of faithful listening in on voices for a long long time, until the characteristic tone is learned well. It is an attempt to capture the way a whole continuing folk has responded to the collision with life and death. This naturally involves *everything,* not only the sacred good sense of Rabbi Hayyim of Brisk who, when asked why he was so lenient in matters of food for the the sick on the Day of Atonement, replied, "Not that I am lenient when it comes to Yom Kippur, but that I am strict when it comes to saving a life"; it involves no less the astonishing confidence and insight of that rabbi who was inclined to be strict in regard to the great Fast, because *his* teacher had observed that "Since the Yom Kippur fast is enjoined by the Torah, then fasting on that day must have its basis in the very nature of our being; and, therefore, this fasting nourishes the body the way food does on the other days!"

Since *Yamim Noraim* undertakes to register the response of all Israel, it not only quotes the reminiscence of a farmer in America suddenly overwhelmed by the Kol Nidre melody as birds with their singing assist the cantor in his song, but also reports the carefully drawn up orders of the service which every worshipper will follow, for example:

The Reader takes his stand before the Ark and lowers his prayer shawl over his face. Two men are stationed, one at the right and one at the left of the Reader, as it is said. . . . Each of them takes a Torah Scroll in his hand, one standing on one side of the Reader, and the other on the other side, and says with him three times, "With the knowledge of the Omnipresent" (=God's consent). . . . Then the Reader chants Kol Nidre in the chant handed down by our fathers from past generations. . . . After reciting Kol Nidre three times, the

congregation cries out with the Reader, "And forgiven shall be. . . ." Then the Reader recites once, "Pardon, I pray Thee. . . ." Then the congregation recites three times in a loud voice, "And the Lord said: I have pardoned. . . ." Then the Reader recites after them. . . . Then the Reader recites the benediction with the phrase "who has kept us alive". . . . The congregation finishes before the Reader so as to be able to respond, Amen. . . . If Yom Kippur falls on a Sabbath, the Ninety-second Psalm is recited.

And so on, and on. To get the full flavor of Agnon's delight in the decorousness of ordered detail, one must really refer to the Hebrew volume; see, for example, this order of the Yom Kippur Eve service in *Yamim Noraim,* pages 298 and 299. That several such long passages in the Hebrew original cannot be reproduced effectively in the English version is quite a commentary on the impoverishment of our vocabulary and on how far from the shore we have been swept.

VII

But to be perfectly honest, we are all shipwrecked, and ultimately it has little to do with Hebrew or English, or Esperanto for that matter. Start thinking of the mess we so frequently make of our lives, and words fail: no words seem to express exactly the deep regrets we want to feel and all the heartache we must learn to put up with. Suddenly we envy the originality of that brilliant countryman who, lost in the woods on Yom Kippur, without a prayer book to his name, recites the alphabet and directs it skyward: It's beyond me, God; You combine these letters into the right words and sentences, for You know what I want to say.

The sinner who craves forgiveness confesses; which is reasonable, if only one knew how adequately to confess. And so there are the ingenious lists arranged in alphabetical order. Since for people with the fear of God in them even a list from A to Z seems abridged, the sentences are doubled for each let-

ter: two for A and two for B and two for C; and when the alphabet gives out, there are still categories to refer to, such as, "For the sins for which we owe a burnt-offering . . . for which we owe a sin-offering . . . for which we deserve the punishment of. . . ." The mood is so overpowering that one becomes, so to speak, addicted to confessing, and recites the Confessional at each of the Day's services, though by the hour of the Closing of the Gates of Prayer an abbreviated, modified form is all one has the strength for—if you count the recitation in private at the afternoon service *before* Yom Kippur begins, there are five recitations. This still does not account for the recitations along with the Reader. The very fact that these catalogues of transgressions are drawn up as formulae and in the editorial we, reveals the delicacy and impeccable manners of the liturgists.

"The order of the confessions in our prayer books and festival prayer books is alphabetical; everyone recites them. The man who knows he has committed one particular sin ought to cry as he mentions that sin and confess to it with particular emotion. And if he has committed a sin that is not mentioned in the confession, he says that sin in a whisper to himself and confesses to it from the depths of his heart and cries over it. But he ought not to raise his voice, for one does not confess for a personal sin loudly, as it is said, 'Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered' (Ps. 32:1). But if his sin is well known, he may confess it loudly, if he wishes."

As everyone knows, of course, and as Rabbi Eleazar ben Azariah expounded: "It is written, 'From all your sins *before the Lord* shall you be clean' (Lev. 16:30). Yom Kippur makes atonement for transgressions committed in man's relations with the Omnipresent. But Yom Kippur does not make atonement for transgressions in men's relationships with one another, until the transgressor has appeased his fellow." In other words, confession brings relief when there is genuine reform. Yom Kippur has little tolerance for humbug.

Even at the risk of appearing greedy (for he *has* given us so much), I must express surprise at Agnon's omitting the following (or have I overlooked it, despite my rereadings? If so, I beg his pardon):

"Once, as Rabban Johanan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins. 'Woe unto us!' Rabbi Joshua cried, 'that this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste.'

" 'My son,' Rabban Johanan said to him, 'be not grieved; we have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving-kindness, as it is said, "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6).' " [Abot de-Rabbi Natan, IV]

I think I know why Agnon omitted this passage, for it has been abused by all the sentimentalists. But we need not pay them any mind, for they abuse many fine things, and this anecdote does report a revolutionary discovery—that, unlike what all historic religions display, unlike even the natural impulse of every pious creature to bring something to, do something for, his God—as any lover is frustrated if he is reduced to words only—it *is* possible to worship God and to show one's love for and to Him, without giving Him a material gift. In at least this respect He is unique. If we cannot win His good opinion by means of holocausts, we can win it by acts of loving-kindness to our fellowman.

An idea like this takes a long time to sink in, and in reality it never entirely displaces the primary impulse. If only there were the Temple: what a busyness could go on, what a tangible reassurance it would be to see the High Priest change from one set of garments to another, the Pelusium linen and the Indian linen, to know that he must bathe and rinse, prepare the beasts, sprinkle the blood, go in and out of the Holy of Holies on this one occasion of the year, pronounce the Confessionals and sound the ineffable Name. Oh, to prostrate oneself, to await the re-

port of the dispatched scapegoat! How glorious was that high priest Simeon,

"When he looked forth from the Tent
And when he came out from the sanctuary!"

Turn to pages 253–255 and examine what Ben Sira wrote about him twenty-one hundred years ago.

Deprived of such exhibitions for close to two thousand years, the House of Israel seized hungrily on descriptions by poets and liturgists to nourish their imagination in their famine, to satisfy their longing for the color and romance which worship and ceremony ordinarily provide. If after the first century there ever was a time the Temple was sorely missed, it was on the Day of Atonement. Where now will the sins of Israel be atoned? So long as they could, many made their way to the Wailing Wall. But it only underscored their sense of desolation. On Yom Kippur one recited the whole service of the high priest, wept that because of our sins gone is this magnificence; but at least the course of recitation gave the imagination an opportunity to dwell briefly in the House of the Lord.

And from recollection to recollection: the House lies in ruins —those Lebanon cedars, the Ten great sages, murdered by the empire—they too are a sacrifice, they too are a vicarious atonement. "The liturgical poem beginning, 'These I do remember,' which is recited after the description of the Temple service, is in memory of the ten who were martyred by Rome, who were killed for the sake of the unification of the Name of God. For when the Temple still stood and the altar stood in its habitation, sacrifices were offered upon the altar every day. But now what is offered are the souls of the righteous."

". . . At this time we can say: Abraham built one altar, and that woman built seven. . . . But our brothers are beaten and driven like cattle to the slaughter, to death and annihilation, blows and humiliation—nevertheless they have not forgotten Your Name. This being the case, what is so miraculous about the Binding of Isaac?"

VIII

Agnon has perfect pitch. One is grateful to the publisher who explains in his closing note, "Passages for which no sources are given are by the author; they serve as an introduction or transition, and are most of the time summarizations of source material." The fact is, you can hardly tell when the source lets up and Agnon takes over. Even when he is not citing sources, his voice is indistinguishable from theirs, or theirs from his. And only by consulting the primary sources fastidiously can you begin to discern the miracle of his sound effects.

"That marvel Rabbi Solomon Judah Rapoport [19th cent.] wrote: The liturgical poems of the Sephardim are mediators between the soul of man and its Creator, and the liturgical poems of the Ashkenazim mediators between Israel and its God. [Bikkure ha-Ittim VIII]

"However, in essence there is no difference in the prayers between one place and another, except for a few changes that do not affect the style of their blessings. But all Israel, in all their habitations, unite their hearts as one to pray to one God in one prayer, in the tradition that has been handed down to us by Rav Amram Gaon [9th cent.] according to the usages of the two academies of Sura and Pumbedita, who received it from the Saboraim, who received it from the Amoraim, who received it from the Tannaim, who received it from the members of the Great Assembly, who were the ones who instituted the prayers for Israel."

Where does Solomon Judah Rapoport stop and S. Y. Agnon begin? And how would one distinguish between the cadence of Agnon and the cadence of Amram; in fact, between Agnon's and that of a much older source that furnishes the background incantation?

" 'The hallowed stones are poured out at the head of every street' (Lam. 4:1). When the Temple was destroyed, the Holy One, blessed be He, scattered its stones over all the world, and

every place where a stone fell, a House of Prayer was built. [Aggadat Eliyahu, quoting a midrash]

"It is for this reason that a House of Prayer is called a little sanctuary, because it has a little of the Temple, a stone of the Temple, which is sunk into every House of prayer. [*Ibid.*]

"It's therefore not nice behavior on the part of those who, when they feel crowded in the synagogue, leave it and go outdoors."

I wish the last paragraph had not been omitted. There is nothing stuffy about the remark; it's an old, old complaint, but entirely Agnon's too, both sentiment and language.

The Aramaic passages he translates into Hebrew read as though they never were in anything but the Holy Tongue. He will begin with one source, pass on—even in the same paragraph—to another, and bring two generations into a dialogue as immediate as though they had been speaking on the same day, with Agnon keeping the conversation going, because he is at home in their tone of voice, inflections, idiom, and concerns. Literary craftsmanship is certainly behind this: conscious, alert, discriminating selection of the right words and the appropriate sentence construction, images and mannerisms. We are not talking after all of a rustic bard; let us not forget that Agnon is an artist. How is it then that the work never loses its poise, never sinks into the contrived, into affectation?

Here style is an *effect,* a result, a necessary consequence of something vaster than literary exercise. Effect of what? It is the natural outpouring of what in Hebrew is called *Ahavat Yisrael,* and which may certainly be translated into English as *Loving Israel,* with "loving" as a transitive participle, and yet perhaps in some recessed echoes of the word suggesting also the adjective which describes that historical entity known as Israel, that long sequence of descendants of Abraham who understood and understand that the seed of Abraham must be at the same time disciples of Abraham. Passage after passage in *Yamim Noraim* carries a kind of vibrato of this theme. Exclamations of Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev are well known.

But many many citations are astir with it. How in fact could those responsible for the text of the English version have dared to omit the saying attributed to the martyred Rabbi Solomon of Karlin, "Der grester yezer horeh is az mi far-gest az mi is ein ben melekh," "The worst of the impulses to evil is to forget one's royal descent"? (And that Agnon should have left it untranslated from the Yiddish is canny instinct!) The genealogy of that remark can be traced back to the second century Akiba; it can be traced almost a millennium farther back than that, to the heartbroken lover of Israel who announced the promise, still read on the Sabbath between New Year and Atonement Day, "I will love them *nedavah* . . . I will be as the dew unto Israel; he shall bloom as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his fragrance as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall again make corn to grow, and shall blossom as the vine; the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon" (Hosea 14:5–8). That love can be traced right down to yesterday and found in the love poetry of the late Rabbi Kook, as well as in the very selections to which Shmuel Yosef Agnon (long may he flourish) is irresistibly drawn again and again.

"Rabbi Akiba said; Oh your good fortune, Israel! Before whom are you made clean, and who is it that cleanses you? (None but) your Father who is in heaven, as it is said (Ezek. 36:25), 'Then *I* will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean.' "

"How exalted is the rung of Teshuvah! The night before he did Teshuvah this very man was separated from the Lord God of Israel, as it is said, 'But your iniquities have separated between you and your God' (Isa. 59:2); he cried out and was not answered, as it is said, 'Yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear (Isa. 1:15); he performed the commandments, and they were thrown back in his face, as it is said, 'Who hath required this at your hand, to trample my courts?' (Isa. 1:12); 'Oh that there were even one among you that would

shut the doors' (Mal. 1:10); and today, after doing Teshuvah, that same man clings to the Divine Presence, as it is said, 'But ye that did cleave unto the Lord your God are alive everyone of you this day' (Deut. 4:4); he cries out and is immediately answered, as it is written, 'And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer' (Isa. 65:24); he performs the commandments and they are accepted with pleasure and joy, as it is said, 'For God hath already accepted thy works' (Eccl. 9:7). Yes, even more—they are much desired, as it is said (Mal. 3:4): 'Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in ancient years.' "

". . . Let the admonishers who come to admonish Israel be careful to speak softly. . . .

"There is a tale about an admonisher who came to Tiktin and spoke words of admonition. The Gaon Rabbi Meir of Tiktin burst into tears and said to the admonisher, 'Why have you shamed me publicly, and broken the rule against shaming one's fellow man in public?'

"Said he to him, 'God forbid, rabbi! I was not speaking of you.'

"Cried the rabbi, 'But *they* are all righteous! And who of them could have sinned if not I?' "

"A certain rich man once stayed behind in the House of Prayer on the night of Yom Kippur after the prayer, to read through the Book of Psalms. Said the Gaon Rabbi Joseph Dov of Brisk [19th cent.] to him: 'A soldier who deserts the army and leaves the country is guilty of the death penalty. But if he should not leave the country, but merely desert one regiment to join another belonging to the same king—for example, if he was assigned to the infantry and deserted to the cavalry, or the other way around—what is the verdict then? Perhaps because he is still serving his king, he isn't considered a deserter? Or perhaps, because he is not serving in the regiment where he was assigned, he is called a deserter anyhow?'

"The rich man stood there, wondering what the rabbi was trying to say.

"Then the rabbi continued and said, 'But I have clear proof that, nevertheless, that soldier is called a deserter. For everyone must serve his king in his own regiment. In the same way, each and every man in Israel must serve the King over all the world with the service that has been laid upon him. The rich man must do charity on the eve of Yom Kippur and give back their pledges to the poor who cannot redeem them; and the poor man who cannot do charity has to do Teshuvah and pray a great deal. Therefore it is the way of the poor to stay in the House of Prayer on the night of Yom Kippur to recite Psalms, and the way of the rich who have given a great deal of charity to go home and sleep.

" 'Now you, my friend, have deserted your own regiment, and have come to serve your Creator with the service of the poor, thinking to do your duty in that way. You too are called a deserter, for every man must serve his Creator in the camp where he is assigned.' "

These are thoroughly typical.

What is *Ahavat Yisrael?* It is that clean tenderness towards the people summoned once and then repeatedly to exemplify God's strict and compassionate will, regardless of obstacles within and without. *Ahavat Yisrael* has, to be sure, the sizeable element of loving a distinct people (one loves a person; beware of those who love the injunction to love!), not just an accidental human mass, but an assembly listening, sometimes attentively, sometimes with half a mind, to the Voice whispering, calling, prodding, threatening, promising, comforting, always urging to lift life on earth to decency, to dignity, to purity, to that graciousness of thought and speech and act which makes visible everywhere and in every face the image of God.

Lebanon, Lebanon, Lebanon, the prophet called; roots as Lebanon, fragrance as Lebanon, the scent . . . as the wine of

Lebanon. For, Agnon reassures us dozens of times quoting the verse of Zion's greatest lover, "Though your sins be as scarlet, *ka-sheleg yalbinu,* they shall be white as snow." What else is called Lebanon? The Temple, the *bet ha-mikdash,* the Sacred House. And, as Agnon (only Agnon?) concludes: "And our sages, of blessed memory, said (Mishnah Taanit IV. 8): 'In the days of the gladness of his heart' (Cant. 3:11)—that is the building of the Temple. May it be rebuilt speedily in our days. Amen."

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August 1964

NOTE

I like the English translation of *Yamim Noraim* and have used it throughout except where I felt a different rendition did more justice to the original. Several corrections, however, may be recommended:

Page 15, lines 4–5: Even though Agnon too understands the clause as the translators render it, it should be translated, "The intermediaries descend to Gehinnom and are there singed and then rise again" etc.

Page 90, lines 5–6: The first two clauses in the quotation from Jeremiah should not be read as interrogatives, despite the literal sense. They are taken, midrashically, as positive declarations, thus: "This son of Mine, Ephraim, is precious to Me; indeed he is My darling child."

Page 242, lines 9 and 10: The regularly printed editions certainly read this way; but it may be that they do not preserve the correct reading. See in this connection, J. N. Epstein, *Introduction to Tannaitic Literature* (Hebrew), Jerusalem, 1957, page 514.

J. G.

Preface

THE ARGUMENT OF THE WORK

For the benefit of those who wish to be informed in the matters of Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur and the Days Between, I have assembled some sayings from the Torah and from the Prophets and from the Writings, from the Talmud Babylonian and Palestinian, from the halakhic Midrash and the aggadic Midrash, and from the Zohar and from other books written by our Early Rabbis and Latter Rabbis, of blessed memory; and I have arranged all these sayings in three books, according to the order of each of the periods, each period and its matter.

To make this book palatable to all, I have abridged lengthy passages and at times altered the style of the Rabbis; for those holy authors, their generation being fit and all men eager to hear words of Torah, had not the time to improve their style. Yet, although I have not kept to their style, I have kept their meaning very well indeed. The laws which I cite in this work, such as the laws of Rosh ha-Shanah and the laws of Yom Kippur, I cite not to set up as an authority, but to lend dignity to the work.

Those customs which are common to all the festivals and not the matter of Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur solely, I have not given at this point. Nor have I given prayers and liturgical poems and penitential prayers here, for every person has prayer books with liturgical poems and penitential prayers at hand, a thing which is not true of other matters relating to Rosh ha-Shanah and Yom Kippur, which are scattered about in various places.

I have taken some things from the books by the Latter