

## On the 50th anniversary of Agnon's Nobel Prize

 [jpost.com/magazine/on-the-50th-anniversary-of-agnons-nobel-prize-454383](http://jpost.com/magazine/on-the-50th-anniversary-of-agnons-nobel-prize-454383)

**Rabbi Jeffrey Saks, a publisher and fan of Agnon's work, reflects on the impact of the Hebrew literary leader.**



Agnon's library and working room  
(photo credit: Wikimedia Commons)

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, one of the leading modern Hebrew novelists and short-story writers, pseudonym of Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes, was born on July 17, 1888, in Buczacz, Galicia, then part of Austria-Hungary and now Buchach in Ukraine, and died on February 17, 1970, in Rehovot. This year marks the 50th anniversary of his receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature – the first and only writer to receive it for writings in Hebrew. Agnon's works deal intimately with the religious and spiritual traditions of the Jewish people, and with the return to Zion, including its settlers, pioneers and city dwellers. Steeped in the Jewish literary canon, he was influenced by German literature and folktales.

In his speech at the Nobel banquet in Stockholm, Agnon said: "As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the exile. But always, I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem. In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my

brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile.... To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.” Among Agnon’s “songs” is the 1931 novel *Hachnasat Kalla* (translated as *The Bridal Canopy*). Its hero, Reb Yudel Hassid, wanders through the ghettos of the tsarist and Austro-Hungarian empires. His second novel, from 1938, *Ore’ah Noteh Lalun* (translated as *A Guest for the Night*), describes the material and moral descent of European Jewry after World War I. His third novel, from 1945, *Tmol Shilshom* (translated as *Only Yesterday*), deals with the problems facing the Westernized Jew who immigrates to Israel. There are also numerous short stories and anthologies.



Recently, Toby Press began reissuing Agnon’s works in English, edited by Rabbi Jeffrey Saks. Eleven volumes have already been published, with another three to follow. Saks contributes an introduction to each volume, and many of the stories are annotated to provide the reader a source for many of Agnon’s more obtuse biblical, Talmudic and historical references.

### What is Outbrain

I recently had the opportunity to discuss Agnon with Saks. Who are Agnon’s literary influences? Obviously, the eastern European hassidic tale had an influence on him. And how indebted was Agnon to the library of the traditional Jew – the Torah, Talmud and Midrash? Agnon was a child *illuy* [genius] in his native Galician town of Buczacz. After a few years in *heder* [religious school], the *rebbe* [teacher] told his father, “I have nothing left to teach him,” from which point he learned one-on-one with his father, who was a *rabbi* and *talmid hacham* [Jewish scholar] but made his living in the fur trade. When the father was unavailable, young Agnon, Shmuel Yosel Czaczkes, as he was then known, would sit in the town’s well-endowed *beit midrash* [academy of learning] and read. He apparently had a voluminous mind and retained everything. And daily Torah study, especially Talmud and Rambam, remained a life-long habit, even in the period when he was not ritually observant. The classical sources, and the sparse, tight lyricism of midrashic Hebrew, were the most important influence on him as a stylist – and remember, part of his accomplishment as an author was that he was working in a language that was being reconstituted as it flowed out of his pen! He had also mastered later Jewish literature: medieval *piyyut* [liturgical poems], hassidic tales and *haskala* literature. Readers who see in some of his writing merely a retelling of hassidic tales are completely missing the point, for he is usually turning them on their head, infusing didactic legends with a very modern ambiguity and irony. One of his important influences was *Rebbe Nahman of Breslov*, who, of course, was a master storyteller, but of a distinctly non-conventional Hassidic mold. In many ways *Rebbe Nahman* was the first modernist Jewish author, dealing with questions about modernity, crisis, transformation, faith, tradition, heresy, etc. in the framework of stories that are closer to European folklore than to what we think of as conventional hassidic tales, for example, the famous story of the little boy who whistles instead of davening or the *Baal Shem Tov* off on some miracle-working wagon ride. The early Hebrew writer *Yosef Haim Brenner* already recognized the influence

of Rebbe Nahman on Agnon as early as 1909. Agnon was often compared to Kafka, a comparison he strongly bristled at, going so far as to claim – falsely – that he'd never read Kafka. What is true is that Agnon was already writing in the surrealistic style we now call Kafkaesque before he had ever heard of Kafka.

In fact, they were both influenced by Rebbe Nahman. Kafka read him in Buber's German translation; this is seen especially in his cycle of stories *Sefer Hama'asim*, with its dream sequences, free association, etc. Freud's influence is also visible here, although it should not be overstated. [Freud's father was a native of Agnon's hometown, Buczacz – ed.]. Other influences were more readily recognized, and Agnon credited Proust, Cervantes and some of the Scandinavian writers – he especially pointed to Flaubert. He spent 12 years living in Germany in 1912-24, where he absorbed a lot of this. He was also conscious of the Hebrew and Yiddish authors that preceded him – Mendele [Mocher S'farim], Sholom Aleichem, Brenner, etc., and was probably very deliberately attempting to show that he could do it better [than them] by revisiting some of the same themes, plots, etc. The main accomplishment was to distill the entirety of Jewish literature, from Tanach through the Sages through Hassidism, and to recast it into the mold of thoroughly modern literature. How connected was Agnon to the Zionist project of the development of a new Jewish culture and literature? Very. Rabbi Kook [Abraham Isaac Kook, later the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Mandatory Palestine – ed.], who Agnon meets in Jaffa upon arrival in 1908, immediately recognized Agnon's potential to contribute to what Rabbi Kook saw as the return to and creation of an authentic Jewish culture as part of the national return.



Rabbi Kook said about an early Agnon story: “This is a true Hebrew/Jewish story, flowing through the divine channels without any barrier.” Of course, the very act of creating modern literature in Hebrew is itself a Zionist act. Contemporary Israelis sometimes are put off by Agnon’s Hebrew, which is not exactly Hebrew of 2016. But it’s certainly a mistake to say Agnon’s Hebrew is to Tel Avivians of today what Shakespeare’s English is to contemporary Londoners. His stories are set in three main locales: The ancestral world of his native Buczacz; Germany of the period he spent there – 1912-24, including the events and impact of World War I, although this second setting is the smallest overall – and, most significantly, Eretz Yisrael, especially Jaffa and Jerusalem, of the Second Aliya, the period of his first living here. It’s of course in the stories set in Eretz Yisrael that he has the most to say about the Zionist endeavor – interestingly, almost no story is set post-hakamat hamedina [after the establishment of the State of Israel – ed.] even though he was still writing up until the very end of the 1960s. And here, you see some of the Agnonian irony and feel the bite of Agnon as a tragedian because not all aliya stories have a “happy ending” – see especially his magnum opus *’Tmol Shilshom*. SAKS WRITES at the end of the foreword to Agnon’s *Two Tales* (which contains the stories *Betrothed* and *Edo and Enam*): “When we describe these *Two Tales* as exemplars of Agnon’s modern stories, we mean set in the ‘new world’ of revived Jewish life in the Land of Israel, not the yishuv hayashan of Jerusalem of old, nor Galicia of Reb Yudel in *The Bridal Canopy*. But they are modern in a more essential way as well. In the end, Jacob, like so many of the Jews of the Second Aliya, departs for America; *Gemulah*, in a story that portrays tensions between source and destiny (Meshulam Tochner’s hermeneutical

explanation of the title), cannot survive in the new Jerusalem when taken out of her native element. These stories, authored shortly before and immediately after the establishment of the State of Israel, raise very 'modern' questions about Jewish life, and like so much of Agnon's writing, explore the connection and disconnection between 'what was and what is,' 'tradition and modernity,' 'there and here' – and the degree to which the two sides of each of these dyads can be bridged, if at all."What is the relevance of Agnon's work to the modern Israeli? This is a tough question. Like much of the classic bookshelf, Agnon, along with Bialik, etc., gets whittled off the curricula more and more each year. I have no doubt that he is not sufficiently appreciated by contemporary Israeli readers, many of whom, as I mentioned, find his Hebrew stilted or off-putting. And yet, the questions he raises, especially about the viability of Israeli literature and culture to act as a continuation, not a breach, of Jewish culture, should be important. It's not surprising that he is read and loved in the worlds of the secular batei midrash: Elul, Alma, etc., precisely for this reason. In this context Gershon Scholem, an Agnon friend and admirer, wrote: "[T]he reader of Agnon cannot escape the feeling that more and more of the master's work was produced as a kind of desperate incantation, an appeal to those who would come after him. It is as though he were saying, 'Since you no longer accept the continuity of tradition and its language in their true context, at least take them in the transformation they have undergone in my work; take them from someone who stands at the crossroads and can see in both directions.'"Scholem's image of someone standing at the crossroads is a beautiful description of Agnon as a traditional figure between eastern European traditional Orthodoxy and modern Israeli life. These new editions are a wonderful opportunity for English-speaker readers, even though they are no substitute for the original Hebrew, to enter the magical world of S.Y. Agnon. *The writer is a professor of medicine, director of the Jakobovits Center for Jewish Medical Ethics at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, and a senior physician at Soroka University Medical Center.*