

CHAPTER 1

Agnon's Childhood

The day I visited Buczacz in 2012 happened to be August 24th, the Ukrainian national day, the day that marks independence from the Soviet Union.¹ Blue and yellow flags hung over the shops, and women in embroidered peasant blouses and men carrying hampers strolled with their children in the fair weather on their way to picnics and celebrations. Buczacz is a small city in the Ternopil Oblast, about 90 miles southeast of Lviv. It has always been a market town for the surrounding agricultural hinterlands. Buczacz has its charms. The River Strypa, a tributary of the Dniester, runs among the hills upon which the town is built, and several distinguished buildings recall Buczacz's earlier rulers. For centuries the town was wholly owned by a single Polish noble family, the Potockis. After the Partition of Poland in 1772, it passed into the hands of the Austrians as part of the province of Galicia. It remained an eastern outpost of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until World War I, when it was incorporated into the independent state of Poland. During World War II, Buczacz changed hands several times between the Red Army and the Nazi Army, and then emerged after the war as part of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. It remained under Soviet rule until the August day in 1991, whose 21st anniversary was being colorfully celebrated around me.

The citizens of Buczacz are descendants of the Ruthenian peasants, who were colonized by Polish nobles, called magnates, in the sixteenth century. The Jews were brought in to administer their great estates, market agricultural produce, import manufactured goods, and, as contractors called arrendators, to help the magnates profit from the lumber in their forests, the mill power of their streams, and, most famously, the grain of their fields, which was turned into alcohol and sold to the peasants. The Ruthenians occupied the bottom rung of a three-tiered social structure in which the Jews were in the middle, with the Polish nobles on top. The three groups were differentiated by extremes of wealth and literacy, as well as by different languages, religions, and political prerogatives. Most Ruthenians were serfs whose labor was owned by the local magnate; Jews constituted a corporate estate with limited protections and onerous tax burdens; most Poles enjoyed wide privileges constrained only by the will of the magnate, whose word was law. When the Kingdom of Poland was dissolved toward the end of the eighteenth century, a fourth rung was added: Austrian provincial officials, who administered laws promulgated from Vienna. The powers of the magnates were curbed, and in 1848 serfdom was abolished. In the final decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ruthenians of Galicia came to see themselves as Ukrainians pursuing national ambitions in intense competition with Polish national ambitions.

Over the course of the long, bloody twentieth century, this pyramid was inverted. During World War I, the Jewish communities of Galicia were decimated by widespread pogroms, and during World War II, the Jews of the region were murdered by the Nazi mobile killing units aided by local Ukrainian helpers. Most of the Polish nobles were killed by the Soviets in 1939–1941, and the general Polish population of the region underwent ethnic cleansing by Ukrainian nationalists at the end of the war. By 1947 there were almost no Poles left. The town, which had once been the easternmost outpost of a European empire, was now on the westernmost border of the vast Ukrainian state. With independence from Moscow in 1991, Ukrainians had come full circle after centuries of subjugation and became their own masters. The vulnerability of that independence, however, was demonstrated by the Russian annexation of the Crimea in 2014.

As I wander around Buczacz on this August day, it is this uniform Ukrainianness that I find so striking. True, there are visible reminders of earlier regimes. The ornate Rathaus or Town Hall and the massive Basilian

Monastery were erected by Count Mikolaj Potocki in the mid-eighteenth century. The stolid Gymnasium was built by the Austrians. But when it comes to the Jews, aside from an overgrown cemetery, there is no trace. The Great Synagogue, a monumental building in its own right, was torn down together with the study houses and other communal buildings. Where they once stood in the town center there is a sprawl of small shops and petty enterprises today. As something of a Jewish nationalist myself, I can understand the pleasure the Ukrainians take in speaking their own language and practicing their own religion on their own land. What is harder for me to fathom is that Jews lived among them for over four hundred years, yet now it is as if they had never existed. When it comes to the young families gathering lazily for celebrations of their national holiday, one cannot expect them to recall what took place over seventy years ago. But their elders have found it convenient to make the presence of the Jews—and the Poles, for that matter—into a passing episode, a matter of foreign bodies that the rich Ukrainian soil has opened up and swallowed. The strolling couples might be surprised to know that in 1870 Jews comprised 67.9% of the town's population and that the mayor of Buczacz, from 1879 to 1921, was a Jew named Bernard (Berish) Stern.

I've come to Buczacz in search of Agnon. Here he was born in 1887 and he lived here until he was twenty, when he left for Palestine. Although this is my first visit, Buczacz has been in my head for many years. Many of Agnon's stories and two of his novels are set in this town, and recently my academic work has focused on a great cycle of stories about Buczacz that Agnon wrote during the last fifteen years of his life. The stories were published as a book called *A City in Its Fullness*, three years after his death. During the course of the research, my imagination was taken over and colonized by those stories. As a young reader I lived vividly within Stevenson's adventure novel *Treasure Island* and came to know each craggy hill and mysterious cove on the island traversed by Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver. In a similar way, the town of Buczacz laid itself out, and became a richly detailed virtual reality long before my visit to this spot in Ukraine. My adolescent reading days are long behind me. But Agnon's Buczacz tales satisfied in me a similar need, a long existing desire to be catapulted backward in time and allowed to peer into the world of my forefathers in Eastern Europe, long before modernity and emigration. As a grown-up reader it was not adventure that I craved but authenticity. The stories delivered that commodity in abundance, as well

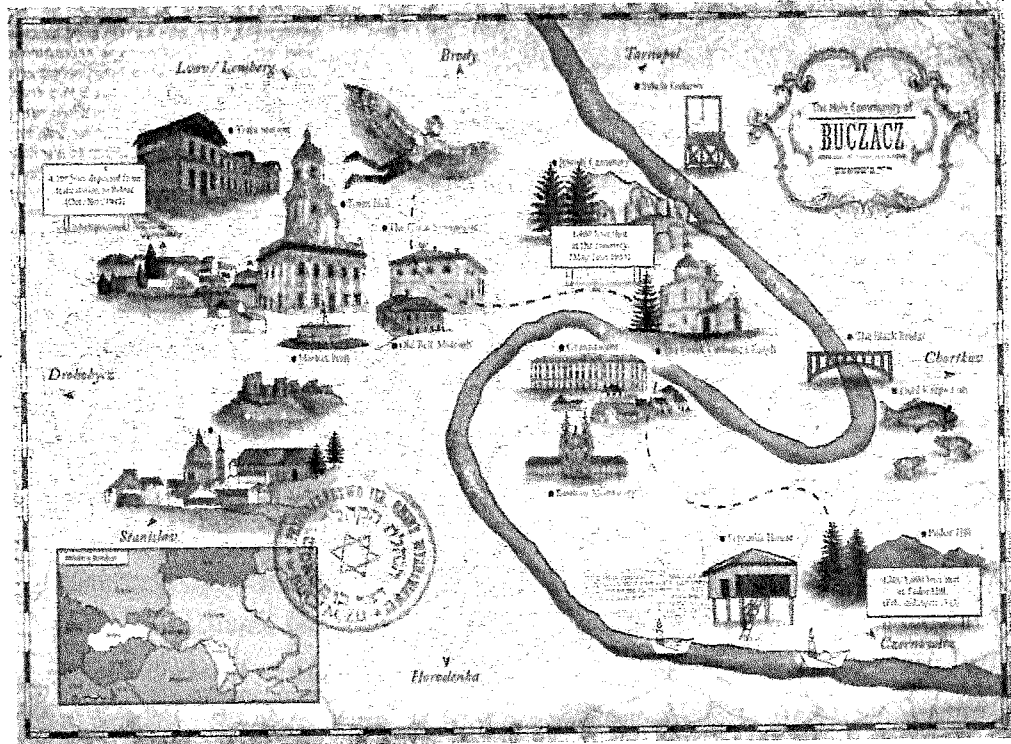


FIG. 1.1 Literary Map of Buczacz. Map used with permission from The Toby Press LLC, from *A City in Its Fullness*, ed. Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks (Toby Press, 2016).

as offering the tang of great fiction. In their epic abundance, they created an imaginative world of their own, a world I was happy to lose myself in.

A truly imagined world demands a map like the one I had found in *Treasure Island*. When I was preparing an English edition of the Buczacz stories, I sat down with a graphic designer in Jerusalem to draw a literary map of Buczacz (fig. 1.1).²

The map projects onto a spatial plane the tales that crowded my mind's eye. There is the Icarus-like figure of the architect, Theodore, trying to escape from the tower of the great Town Hall he has designed and in which Count Potocki has locked him up to die to prevent him from creating any grander building. There are the gallows on which the innocent youth, Yekel, was hanged by the Austrian authorities because of the whim of a Jewish oligarch he had insulted. There, at the bottom, is the one-room house on stilts built by Feivush, the thug who collects the loathed candle tax from his fellow Jewish townspeople. Above it, to the right, are the frogs that consummated the humiliation of a wealthy man who sought to circumvent the community's boycott against the high price of fish. And, speaking of fish, there is

the mightiest finned creature to ever swim the waters of the Strypa, and it is wearing the *tefilin* of a gluttonous money lender. There, on the Strypa, float candles stuck in paper boats to light the way for drowned martyrs to recite penitential prayers in the weeks before the New Year. And, jumping ahead to the middle of the twentieth century, there are the cemetery, the Fedor Hill and the train station, where the Jews of Buczacz were murdered or deported.

Because for so long Buczacz has been living vividly in my mind's eye, seeing the real place is disorienting and dispiriting. Everything is small and shabby! The mighty Strypa is a mere stream, and it looks as if you could leap over it if you got a running start. The commercial center, where the Great Synagogue once bordered the marketplace, is a hodgepodge of graceless shops. After hearing Agnon so often refer to Buczacz as *'iri*, my city, I see with my own eyes that it is really a very small town. Topography provides some small comfort, though. I'm moved to see the Strypa, even if diminished, as well as the famous hills surrounding the town, especially the Fedor Hill. The land endures, even if the Jews who once walked upon it are no more. I knew that the disappearance of those Jews would weigh on me, but I had hoped that the genius of the place would still speak to me.

The true source of my letdown, I realize, is the inevitable gap between an intensely evoked fictional world and the reality of place. I probably would have found even the Caribbean atoll that served as the model for *Treasure Island* to be a disappointment. The same dejection set in when I visited Dublin after having avidly consumed *Ulysses*. I walked by the slate grey Liffy and lay in a hotel bed on Eccles Street while the rain poured down and wondered, "Is this it?"

It might seem laughable that Dublin comes to my mind when I think about Buczacz, but I see an essential connection. Both Joyce and Agnon are writers who exiled themselves from the cities of their birth and youth only to spend the rest of their lives writing about them. In both cases, the motive was neither nostalgia nor obsession but rather a fundamental modernist paradox: Universal truths about the human condition can be grasped only by drilling down into the bedrock of particularity. There are no shortcuts. We have to find out ALL about Dublin before we can get at the themes of sonship, fatherhood, language and compassion. And when it comes to Buczacz, we have to learn ALL about the customs and the controversies and the rabbis before we can understand the essence of Galician Jewry in

its greatness and in its decline. It would of course be silly to say that the two cities are comparable. Dublin won a place in the literary firmament because of Joyce, but it remains a formidable presence even without him. Without Agnon, however, Buczacz would have little claim on our attention.

Yet the fact is that Agnon chose Buczacz, and I'm fascinated by the power of that act. Of the dozens and dozens of Galician cities and towns of equivalent or greater stature, Agnon chose Buczacz and endowed it with a kind of immortality. Standing amidst the hills of Buczacz on this August day, my mind generates an even more heretical analogy. I think about Worcester, Massachusetts, the community in which I was born and raised until I left at about the same age that Agnon left Buczacz. At their heights, both Worcester and Buczacz had Jewish populations of about 10,000, and like Buczacz, Worcester was just one of a number of modest New England cities like Springfield, Hartford and Providence that existed in the shadow of a metropolis, Boston. If I had greater talents, and if I placed them in the service of bringing to the Jewish community of Worcester in all its universality and particularity life on the page, would Worcester live forever in the minds of readers? The comparison is fatuous, I know, and not a little deluded, but it helps me to establish a point of personal contact as I gaze at the Ukrainian landscape. I understand that Agnon's decision to ennoble Buczacz was not first and foremost an homage to his native town. Buczacz was being built up and reinforced so that it could bear the weight of standing for a civilization as a whole. And also, so that it could serve as a suitable cradle for the birth of the artist who gave it imaginative life.

The sleight of hand concerning the date of Agnon's birth is an excellent introduction to the author's lifelong devotion to shaping and reshaping his autobiographical persona. Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (later Agnon) was born on the 18th of Av, according to the Hebrew calendar, which was August 8 in 1887. Yet throughout his life, he averred that he was born on the 9th of Av, the summer fast day commemorating the destruction of the Jerusalem temples called Tisha b'Av.³ Why would one choose to identify with such a doleful occasion? The answer is that according to a talmudic tradition, Tisha b'Av is the birthday of the Messiah because the darkest point of catastrophe contains within it the seed of deliverance. Agnon was never shy about his genius and its significance. He not only synchronized his personal history with the fate of the Jewish people but viewed his art as necessary to its redemption.

Is this a sign of delusional grandiosity or assured self-assessment? This is a question that Agnon's life and work force us to return to again and again.

Agnon was the eldest of five children born to Shalom Mordechai Halevi Czaczkes (1859–1913) and Esther Farb (1864/5–1908). Esther was born in Buczacz, the daughter of Yehudah Farb, a merchant in furs and leather and a supplier of manufactured goods to distilleries. The family was well off, and Yehudah Farb played an important role in the leadership of the community as well as being renowned for his devotion to Talmud study. Agnon's father, Shalom Mordechai, originally came from Zalozhtsy near Ternopil and settled in Buczacz when he married Esther. He was a promising Torah scholar, who received rabbinic ordination, but when he married, he gave up thoughts of the rabbinate and became a merchant in furs like his father-in-law. He maintained a shop in Buczacz and traveled widely in order to market his furs and acquire new merchandise.

In order to understand Agnon's early life and education it is necessary to grasp the uniqueness of Galician Jewry at the end of the nineteenth century. When Poland was partitioned in 1772, the Russian Empire and the Austrian Empire each suddenly found itself for the first time ruling over large populations of Jews. Most of the images we have of East European Jewry from this time come from life under the increasingly autocratic and xenophobic regime of the Tsars: economic privation, censorship, exclusion from public life and higher education, and pogroms. The Habsburg monarchs, on the other hand, were enlightened absolutists who affirmed the multi-ethnic nature of their empire. True, there were conversionary pressures exerted on the Jews, as well as the imposition of special taxes; and the refusal to invest in the industrialization of Galicia left the province poor. But Jews, like other minorities, were granted religious freedom and, in 1867, the franchise to vote in regional elections. There were no pogroms. Jews enjoyed free movement within the empire and were allowed to settle in Vienna, which, over the course of the nineteenth century, became a great metropolis with a large Jewish community. The universities in Vienna were filled with Jewish students who had come from the provinces. Anti-Semitism in its modern racialist form was a force to reckon with. But it did not prevent Jews from becoming leading figures in the arts and a range of professions. Let the career of Sigmund Freud, whose family had roots in Buczacz, serve as evidence.

This meant a degree of security and stability for the Jews of Buczacz, who made up a majority of the town and were represented on its town

council. Within the Jewish community this was also a time of eased tensions. Early in the nineteenth century, Galician Jewry had been torn apart by sectarian conflict. The long-established regimes of Talmud study and synagogue custom and communal authority had been challenged and undermined by the propulsive spread of Hasidism and its popular, enthusiastic spirituality. The rabbinic establishment, whose members were called *mitnagdim* (sing. *mitnaged*), was attacked from a different angle by small groups of modernizing intellectuals called *maskilim* who sought the inclusion of history, science, and languages into the traditional Jewish schoolroom, and who, above all, abhorred what they viewed as the superstitious obscurantism of the followers of Hasidism (*Hasidim*). That strife, which in its time convulsed communities and split families apart, had subsided into entente and accommodation. Take the Czaczkes family, for example. Agnon's maternal grandfather, Yehudah Farb, was a confirmed *mitnaged* and a stalwart of the Old Beit Midrash, a man for whom the study of the Talmud was the sole pinnacle of Jewish learning. Agnon's father, on the other hand, in addition to being an accomplished Talmudist, was a Hasid and a follower of the Chortkiv Rebbe (Chortkiv is about 23 miles east of Buczac). Agnon would accompany his father to the local Hasidic prayer house and on occasion took trips to the Rebbe's court in Chortkiv. But the boy would also pray with his grandfather in the Old Beit Midrash. He could do both without conflict because the old battle lines had receded, and the two camps had made common cause against the forces of modernization and westernization that were threatening the world of traditional study and observance.

These boundaries were more permeable than we might imagine today. Despite the piety of Yehuda Farb's household, his daughter, Esther, was allowed to learn German, and she became very fond of German poetry, especially Schiller. Her own daughters, Agnon's sisters, were sent to a Polish-language school, without apparent protest by her father, the Talmudist. There was a curious double standard in place that allowed girls an exposure to gentile culture, whereas boys were expected to hue to the curriculum of classic Jewish studies, at least publicly. Agnon read German poetry with his mother and was given a private tutorial in German with a teacher from the local Baron de Hirsch school. Altogether, from our vantage point in the twenty-first century, it is not easy to grasp the nuances of Jewish life in Buczac in the 1890s. We tend to see an intensely learned and believing traditional community that is the opposite of our acculturated, multicultural

world with its fringe of ultra-Orthodox Jews, who maintain a connection to that pre-enlightenment world of centuries ago. This picture is inaccurate at almost every level. But rather than trying to correct the perception of a whole era, I seek to be precise about Agnon's Buczacz.

Most all the Jewish families of Buczacz remained traditional. The term Orthodox does not truly apply because, in contrast to Germany, there was no Reform movement that dissented from the communal consensus. Most all Jewish boys were educated in a *heder*, in which the language of instruction was Yiddish and only Jewish subjects were taught. Most all Jewish males owned a seat in one of the town's synagogues and appeared there every Sabbath, if not every day. Nevertheless, these same Jews—men and women alike—were very aware of great changes in the larger world and at home. Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers, which began to circulate widely in mid-century, reported on world politics and the fate of far-flung Jewish communities, as well as the Galician scene. Zionist clubs and organizations were active in Buczacz, and the whole community closely followed Theodore Herzl's proclamations and diplomatic maneuvers; his death in 1904 occasioned anguished communal mourning. Smaller groups of Jewish anarchists and socialists advocated their positions and tried to win souls among servants and the working classes. Since the granting of the franchise in 1867, party politics became a noisy, messy, and sometimes violent affair in Buczacz, especially in the run up to the elections to the regional assembly.

When it came to languages, Buczacz had its private and public spheres. In home life and worship, each group had its own language. The Poles spoke Polish among themselves and listened to the service in Latin and the sermon in Polish in their Roman Catholic churches. The Ukrainians spoke Ukrainian/Ruthenian, prayed in Church Slavonic and listened to their sermons in Ukrainian in their Greek Catholic churches. The Jews spoke Yiddish to each other and studied Hebrew/Aramaic sacred texts in Yiddish and recited prayers in Hebrew; well-educated men knew Hebrew and could read Hebrew newspapers and write letters in Hebrew. Despite these separate domains, the marketplace and the public square were of necessity a babel of languages. A Jewish man or woman who operated a shop would need to know enough Polish and Ruthenian to do business, and communal leaders would conduct their transactions with the government in German. Young men who studied in the gymnasium, many Jews among them, studied their

subjects in Polish and were taught by teachers with strong Polish nationalist allegiances. Ambitious young men who sought a university education had to make a choice between the competing German and Polish cultural spheres. Members of a previous generation were likely to look in the direction of Vienna, as was the case with Agnon's older relation and Buczacz native, David Heinrich Müller, who became a professor of oriental languages at the University of Vienna. Polish universities were beginning to attract students as well, as was the case with another, younger relation of Agnon's, Emanuel Ringelblum, also a native of Buczacz, who went to Warsaw to obtain a doctorate in history and sociology and who later organized the famous Oyng Shabbos archive in the Warsaw Ghetto.

This is the hybrid world into which Agnon was born. He was raised within a family sphere that was strongly traditional and saturated with pride in scholarly ancestors. Piety was taken for granted and Torah learning deemed the highest value. At the same time, the boundaries of this sphere were permeable. As he grew up, he was increasingly exposed to contending non-Jewish cultures in Buczacz itself and to the assertion of modern political ideologies in the wider world.

This is what we know of Agnon's schooling. He began *heder* at age three and was a pupil in three different *hadarim*. At age nine, he ceased studying in a classroom full of other children, and instead was tutored privately by his father. Because of his father's varied intellectual interests, the education received by the young Shmuel Yosef was broader than the norm for families in similar religious circles. To the usual concentration on Talmud, the father added exposures that reflected his own passions. Shalom Mordechai Czaczkes was attracted to the *aggadah*, the legendary and narrative sections of the Talmud, and not just to its legal portions. He had a lifelong devotion to the works of Maimonides and left a scholarly manuscript on the subject when he died. He read some poetry with his son, and he made him aware of Galician Hebrew writers. When he was twelve, Agnon studied for a year in the Old Beit Midrash with Rabbi Shmuel Yisakhar Shtark, an author of books on *halakhah* and *aggadah*.

Then he was free. After his bar mitzvah, Agnon studied on his own in the Old Beit Midrash. There were German lessons with the teacher from the Baron de Hirsch school, occasional sessions reading German poetry with his mother, and chances to sit with his father reading Hasidic texts in the prayer house of the Chortkiv Hasidim. But otherwise, Agnon was left to his

own devices to make use of the extensive library in the Old Beit Midrash and educate himself. This freedom, so at odds with our usual notions of the restrictive regimen of yeshiva education, requires some explanation. The practice of sending academically gifted young men away to centers of advanced learning, such as the famous yeshivot of Volozhin and Slobotka, far to the north in Lithuania, was not the custom in Galicia, where students studied closer to home. In Agnon's particular case, the freedom he enjoyed was an expression of the trust his parents placed in him. They could trust him to apply himself assiduously to the study of the canon of rabbinic learning. That canon was understood broadly in Agnon's family, and that liberality gave him license to range freely over the highways and byways of Jewish classical writing. He was like a graduate student granted access to the open stacks of a great university library and allowed to follow his interests wherever they led him. After discharging his debt to his Talmud studies, on a given day he could pick up the *Yeven Metsulah* and indulge a fascination with the Khmelnytsti persecutions of the seventeenth century or devote himself to the study of kabbalistic customs in the *Hemdat Yamim* or lose himself in the allegorical stories of Nahman of Bratslav. And then there was European literature itself, which he would read at home rather than in the beit midrash. He could manage some reading in German, but by the end of the nineteenth century, not a small number of the classics of German, French and English literatures had been translated into Hebrew or Yiddish. When Agnon was eleven, one of the first books he purchased with his pocket money was E. Salkinson's Hebrew translation of *Othello*. And then there was the growing library of modern literature written originally in Hebrew by M. H. Luzatto, M. Y. Levenson, A. Mapu, Y. Perl, and Sh. Y. Abramovitch.

From this formative period of free study, we can observe the emergence of three continuities in Agnon's life. To begin with, he had the soul of an autodidact. He was elusive of teachers and prescribed courses of study. Reading on his own and following his own interests fitted him perfectly. During his long sojourn in Germany, he read widely and voraciously, but he had no interest in the venerable universities that attracted so many other Jewish students from the East. Second, Agnon moved back and forth between sacred studies and modern literature with no feeling he was crossing a heretical boundary. He internalized the trust extended to him by his parents by trusting himself. He believed that all the artifacts of culture he consumed, sacred and worldly, were being distilled in the alembic of his art

for a higher purpose. Third was his chronic, incurable bibliophilia. During World War I, Gershom Scholem, ten years Agnon's junior, came across Agnon going through the card catalogue of the Jewish library in Berlin. Asked what he was doing, Agnon answered, "I am trying to find a book I have not read." Agnon was a lifelong collector and *amateur* of Hebrew books. The formative trauma of his life was the destruction by fire of the library he had lovingly assembled in his home in Bad Homburg in 1924.

Of the titles of the books Agnon consumed during late childhood and adolescence with such intense and free-ranging curiosity, we know next to nothing. Our ability to make conjectures and to reconstruct something of his intellectual itinerary comes from the poems and stories that he himself wrote during these years. The fact he was writing literature means that he was reading literature and, like all fledgling writers, learning to write by imitation. Agnon started writing early. In a 1927 letter to M. A. Jacques, Agnon expresses delight and pride in his precociousness:

When I was nine years old I wrote a ballad about a boy who lit candles and floated them on the river on the first night of *selihot*, which was the custom when I was a child, and about a water sprite in the form of a girl who took him away. Even before that I wrote a poem about missing my father when he was away on a journey. From then on I was like an unstinting fountain. Every day I wrote a formidable poem.⁴

Portrait of the artist as a young *graphomaniac*? Agnon is exaggerating only a little. From the time he turned sixteen in 1903, to his departure for Palestine five years later, this teenager published sixty items in the Hebrew and Yiddish press. He wrote many times that number, because for every piece that was accepted for publication many were rejected and many more held back and never submitted.

More surprising than this juvenile profusion is the very fact that this Talmud student, this denizen of the *beit midrash*, should be writing literature altogether. Make no mistake: Agnon was not writing liturgical poetry or pious tracts but literature in the modern secular sense we use the term. He was experimenting with writing not merely as a mode of self-expression but as a vocation, as a life's work. And we know from the fact that he succeeded in becoming a great writer that this was a defining moment in his young life. The hundreds of poems and stories he wrote during his adolescence, almost

none of which he later chose to include in his published works, were in the service of a consolidating resolve to become a writer.

Agnon was not alone in this resolve. By the turn of the twentieth century, the emergence of a Hebrew writer from the chrysalis of a Talmud student was not an unprecedented phenomenon. Moshe Leib Lilienblum, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Michah Yosef Berdichevsky, Mordechai Ze'ev Feierberg, Yosef Hayyim Brenner, and Uri Nissan Gnessin—in fact nearly all the pioneers of modern Hebrew literature—had made the same journey. They were raised in fervently devout homes and immersed in religious studies in their youth before turning to Hebrew writing. Yet Agnon's path was fundamentally different, and it is this difference that sets him apart from the course of Hebrew literature in the twentieth century and constitutes his greatness. It is therefore crucial first to understand the general paradigm in order to understand Agnon's distance from it. The collective biographical, generational experience of these young writers was rooted in rejection and rebellion. At a time when the authority of traditional society was already crumbling, these young Talmud students were secretly exposed to Enlightenment ideas and then to the new Hebrew writers. Unbeknownst to parents, in-laws, and wives, they underwent a crisis in which the plausibility of traditional faith and the observance of the commandments collapsed. For some, this crisis of faith was experienced as a loss, a vertiginous fall into a vacuum of meaning; for others, it was a welcome rite of passage and the sloughing off of an old skin. In all cases, the crisis inevitably triggered banishment from family and community and self-exile to the metropolis and the challenge of belatedly acquiring the rudiments of a secular education. Writing Hebrew literature became a way—often a tortured, existential way—of finding a modern voice outside the walls of the tradition but within the fold of the Jewish people. These writers were co-opted by the Zionist movement as pioneers in a national renaissance, but they themselves felt far from reborn. They were wary of ideological movements and doubly suspicious of the presumption of ideology to fill the role of religion.

How Agnon stands apart from his generation is a question of great complexity and great importance. It is one of the purposes of this biography to comprehend it. At this early stage, it can be said in the broadest strokes that Agnon's turn to Hebrew writing and his decision to leave Buczacz were different from the negations of the Hebrew writers of his generation. Surely there was much in the social and religious fiber of Buczacz as a

provincial town in decline that elicited his antipathy and judgment and made it unthinkable as a staging ground for his literary career. Yet beneath and behind the compromised present, Agnon discerns in the traditions of learning and piety deep reservoirs of spiritual value. By virtue of his turn to writing and to the vocation of art, Agnon had become a citizen of modernity. Yet he understood his role as a modern Hebrew writer as restorative rather than rebellious. He would tell the truth about the depleted present, but he would also reimagine what was most enduring in the hoary religious civilization of Polish Jewry.

Here, then, is the fundamental difference. Agnon understood his turn toward Hebrew writing as an extension of his family heritage rather than as a rejection of it. By acceding to his vocation as a Hebrew writer, he was not fleeing from his duty to Jewish faith and learning but fulfilling it. This awareness must have been inchoate at this early point in Agnon's life. But it's worth jumping ahead for a moment to a much later stage in his career to see where this trajectory is leading. In the 1937 story, "The Sense of Smell," and again in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1966, Agnon stressed his family's descent from the biblical tribe of Levi, whose task it was to care for the holy objects in the ancient Jerusalem sanctuary, and to sing sacred songs to accompany the temple service. When the Temple was destroyed, the vocation of sacred song was passed on to the great liturgical poets, the *payyotanim*, and later to the great *hazzanim*, the synagogue cantors. In the fallen age into which Agnon was born, song and poetry have been replaced by prose and storytelling. His art, therefore, is the perpetuation of his levitical lineage within the world of modernity.

To be sure, there is something self-serving in this schema. In one stroke Agnon succeeds both in minimizing the degree of breakage in becoming a modern writer and in elevating the role and bringing it on par with the great practitioners of the sacred arts from the past. Later in life, as Agnon disappeared into his persona as a pious sage, the master modernist sought to normalize and harmonize his relationship to religious tradition. In his eyes, writing modern fiction, as least in the way *he* practices it, is a continuation of the tradition of Jewish learning and sacred song fitted to the needs of the era. Now, even if we make adjustments for the later Agnon's grandiose sense of his place in Jewish history, we can learn something useful about Agnon the adolescent. Deciding to become an artist, instead of a rabbi or a learned shopkeeper, indeed meant taking a contrary and provocative stance toward

the world of his birth, a stance that would inevitably require him to leave it behind. Nevertheless, both for Agnon himself and for those close to him, this provocation was muted by several factors.

The family, to begin with, delighted in his cleverness. The capacity to write verses was considered a gift rather than a satanic transgression. Agnon's father had written some poems, and there was a cousin named Hayim Czaczkes who published frequently in the Galician Jewish press. There was no necessary reason to think that writing verse was a heretical or irreligious act. In the summers, when Agnon would spend his days reading and writing in the forest, the family circle would gather in the evenings to hear him read aloud what had been written that day. Even his pious grandfather, Yehuda Farb, was gratified to see his grandson's writing appear in Yiddish and Hebrew newspapers. Another factor was the hospitality of the publishing venues. There were many regional and local Jewish newspapers in Galicia, most in Yiddish and some in Hebrew. The flourishing of a Jewish press was one of the major developments of the second half of the nineteenth century, and in Galicia there were none of the problems with censorship that bedeviled publication efforts across the border in Russia. These newspapers were hungry for material from young writers, especially from traditionally minded writers like Agnon, who could provide seasonally appropriate stories and poems about Purim and Hanukah and other holidays. The exhilaration of seeing his name in print at such a young age could not help but make Agnon feel that he was talented and that even greater success would be his as he grew older and mastered his craft. The very plausibility of a life in letters was embodied by several figures who encouraged the young writer. Yitzhak Fernhof, a leading figure in the renaissance of Hebrew writing in Galicia, made his living as a teacher in Buczacz, and befriended the young Agnon. In 1906, Elazar Rokeah, the colorful descendent of a rabbinical family from Safed in the Galilee, began to publish a weekly called *Der Jüdische Wecker* in Buczacz and made Agnon his assistant. A much grander opportunity presented itself in the winter of 1907 when Agnon was invited to Lemberg to become the salaried assistant to Gershom Bader in putting out a new Hebrew weekly called *Ha'et*. Agnon spent two months in the great metropolis meeting other writers and Zionist leaders, in addition to performing his editorial duties and contributing his own writing. By March, however, *Ha'et* had failed, and Agnon returned to Buczacz unpaid. Nevertheless, the

taste for the literary life had been acquired, and returning home must not have been easy.

A year later, Agnon boarded a ship in Trieste bound for Jaffa. He would return to Buczacz only twice over the course of his life. Yet before we let the young man proceed to the next station in his journey, it is worth pausing to reflect on how little we know about his childhood. We understand something of the family and its lineage against the background of the times; we have the outline of his schooling; we see his juvenile successes as a writer. Yet in the sixty or so precocious poems, stories, and sketches Agnon published before he left Buczacz, in Yiddish and Hebrew, there is almost nothing about himself, no self-portraiture, nothing that would open a portal to his inner experience as a child. Those early literary efforts are of considerable importance to Agnon scholars, who have turned them over to find early preoccupations that were developed in later works. The earlier writings are mostly imitative, and there is little there that would portend the emergence of a great talent. Agnon's own retrospective judgment on them was severe. In the 1926 letter to Jacques mentioned above, he writes, "The Lord be praised that from the verse I wrote as a child not one word has survived." (This statement was, however, false and Agnon knew so at the time.)

Yet, Agnon did not leave us empty handed. Between 1923 and 1938, Agnon wrote a series of extraordinary autobiographical stories that visit key moments in his childhood and adolescence. The publication dates of the stories from early to late follow the development of the autobiographical protagonist from early childhood to adolescence. The stories were placed as a unit by Agnon in the volume of his collected works titled *Eilu ve'eilu* ("These and Those"). It is to those stories we will now turn to seek a deeper look at Agnon's childhood. This act of looking backward, our looking backward at Agnon looking backward, is a gesture that will repeat itself in each stage of the author's life. This is because Agnon's autobiographical reflection takes place only at a remove in time and place from the lived experiences. Just as the treatment of childhood is deferred, the years spent in Ottoman Palestine are not returned to until Agnon arrives in Germany, and portraits of the artist in Germany do not arrive until the 1950s. This deferred autobiographical retrospect will form an essential component in our attempt to take Agnon's measure in each of the stations of his life. First the facts and then the belated refashioning of them.

Before turning to the stories of childhood, I will offer several generalizations about these retrospective fictions of self. They are, everywhere and always, just that: fictions. Agnon does not write memoir or "straight" autobiography, which are separate modes of writing in which historically real authors endeavor to describe their earlier historically real selves or render an account of episodes in their earlier lives. He is writing stories that do not aspire or pretend to be an objective portrayal of events. Neither do they aim to deliver a solely psychological truth that comes from an archeological exploration of the self and its earliest traumas and formative experiences. Rather, Agnon returns in his fiction to earlier stages in his life in order to fashion and elaborate his own self-myth. By the term self-myth, I do not mean the narcissistic management of image and reputation; I mean the purposeful construction of a symbolically laden narrative about the writer's life. This is the story of the writer's life he fashions and conveys to us, and its telling, with him squarely at the center, is justified not because he has achieved fame but because his life has representative importance. It has the potential to tell us something deep and universal about what is, or should be, most important to us.

The new Hebrew literature was replete with depictions of childhood, and it is only against this background that Agnon's stories come into their own. Bialik, Feilerberg, and Brenner, together with Mordechai Aaron Ginsburg and Sh. Ben-Zion and others, wrote influential representations of childhood (read: boyhood) that were all, in one way or another, extensions of the critique of traditional Jewish society. Singled out for excoriation was the *heder* as a site in which the child's natural curiosity is quashed and his self-esteem, as well as his body, abused by boorish teachers. Performance and rote memorization confer approval rather than understanding and acuity. The sphere of religious experience is suffused with dread and superstition. Everyday life means suppressing the exuberance of childhood in order to avoid falling victim to the demonic forces of sin and impurity. The more promising a boy is as a budding scholar, the greater the likelihood that he will be treated like a valuable piece of merchandise, married off around the time of his bar mitzvah, ripped from his family and placed in the clutches of an acrimonious mother-in-law. If this is what early life is about, who could emerge from it unmaimed? Who would not rebel against it? Who would not revile the society in which it was rooted?

For his part, Agnon would not. But he does succeed in finding a place to stand apart from this nightmarish vision and to offer a more affirmative understanding of traditional Jewish experience. He manages this in part by avoiding the *heder*, the synagogue, and the stringencies of ritual discipline, that is, those areas in which boys portrayed in the writing of other authors felt repressed, constrained, or abused. Agnon also makes the fundamental move of prising apart the degraded reality of Jewish society from energies and values that remain nurturing to the spirit. Furthermore, by availing himself of the child's point-of-view and its unique capacity for wonderment, Agnon is in fact able to reverse the oracles and elicit from childhood something very different from abasement and terror. The construction of childhood is always, in some fundamental sense, a retrojection of adult attitudes. The generality of Hebrew writers, who lost their faith during adolescence and rejected the claims of religious tradition, portrayed childhood as already shot through with the kind of delusions and interdictions that made apostasy all but inevitable. Agnon was speaking from a relationship to that tradition that was complex and ambivalent but certainly not hostile and rejecting. His conception of a childhood that led to his identity as an adult would therefore be very different from that of the other members of his generation. Finally, Agnon was lucky in his origins. He was born into a family that was financially comfortable and secure in its religious commitments yet not fanatical. He was an admired and trusted eldest child. Much trouble was taken over his early education, after which he was given freedom to pursue his own course. Buffered from the worst excesses of a contemporary Jewish childhood, Agnon was thus in the fortunate position of being able to assess his early life without the rancor and deprivation that were the lot of others.

The earliest memories of childhood in Agnon's autobiographical stories are connected to books as material objects. In the 1923 story, "My Grandfather's Talmud," the eponymous object of the title is the more-than-twenty oversized folios of the Babylonian Talmud. Yehudah Farb, Agnon's maternal grandfather, was renowned in Buczacz for the extraordinary feat of having completed the study of the entire Talmud eight times. The Talmud volumes that rested on the highest shelf in his bookcase were printed in Lemberg by Avraham Yitzhak Menkes, an edition known for its wide margins, good paper, and elaborate frontispiece illuminations. The grandfather ordered ten sets of this Talmud. As each tractate was printed, the narrator of the story delights in telling us, ten sets of unbound folios were shipped to Buczacz.

When all the folios had arrived, two bookbinders were summoned to take up residence for a week in the grandfather's home to assemble the sets, enclose them in sumptuous leather covers, and apply the gold leaf lettering for the titles. One set he kept for himself and installed on the uppermost shelf of the bookcase, and the remainder he donated to the *batei midrash* of the town.

It is not the mother and her breast that form the first memory but the bookcase and its contents.

This bookcase was one of the first memories of my childhood. I remember when I was an infant being placed on the floor to crawl around on all fours. I once got myself to the bookcase, opened its doors and felt around inside. I sat there astounded to realize that what I thought was a single bloc was actually divided into many pieces. I didn't calm down until I had pulled out one volume after the other and the grown-ups caught on and took me away. From that moment on I was drawn to the bookcase, and no other objects could compare to it. I even used it to measure my height. When I grew tall enough to reach the highest shelf, which held the *gemarot*, I was filled with joy and I cried out, "Look at me. I'm a *gemara* lad!" (216)⁵

Set down on the floor to play, the infant makes his way to the bookcase because it is a focus of adult interest, and he wants to know what it is all about. From a distance, the rows of books seem like a formidable and unbroken preserve kept from the child behind glass doors. The great discovery, exciting in its intensity, is that these revered objects are many rather than one, and therefore they can be handled and played with. The child's intrepid curiosity at once diffuses the aura of the books and appropriates them for his pleasure. Being whisked away only intensifies the attraction. In time he learns that the Talmud resting on the highest shelf has been invested with more sacred prestige than any other object in his world, and it is by this standard he measures his physical growth. The joy he expresses when he finally reaches the high shelf encapsulates the duality of Agnon's presentation of himself as a child. While the objects of Jewish life engage and enchant him, his pleasure depends on an assertion of his ownership over them.

We see this again later in this same brief story. In the meantime, the grandfather's set of Talmud becomes invested with more and more value. When the grandfather is sitting at study over these volumes, a sense of beneficence descends on the house, and the wafting of fragrant spices is

released each time the bookcase is opened. It is next to this bookcase and from this set of volumes, rather than in the *beit midrash* and its library, that the narrator is later tutored by his father. But before that, when the infant has grown into a young child, we are given another scene of appropriation:

When my father or grandfather was in the house, I would sit and learn. But if they went out, I would practice forming the letters of the *Gemara*. Often I would copy the ornamental scrollwork on the opening page of the volume or the filigreed frame that surrounded the first letter of the tractate, and from these I would create a *mizrah*. In those days if someone had told me there were more beautiful drawings than these, I would not have believed them. It's also true that there was no one to whom it would have occurred to say such a thing. (219)

The moment parental oversight is lifted, the boy shifts his attention from studying the text to imitating its visual materiality. Looking at the frontispiece of tractate *Beitsah* from the Menkes printing of the Talmud (fig. 1.2), it is easy to see what attracts him. For a boy brought up in a world that frowns upon the making of images, this elaborately reticulated ornamentation is a feast for the eyes. But it is not enough to ogle it; he has to make it his own. He is training his hand to draw the letters and the decorative motifs so that he can create an art object of his own. A *mizrah* is an illuminated plaque placed on the eastern wall of a home—*mizrah* simply means east—in order to orient the worshiper toward the direction of Jerusalem. Even though it has a religious purpose, a *mizrah* is not a holy object that requires the official calligraphy of a scribe, and thus the boy is free to try his hand at it.

He is suffused with pride in his accomplishment. It is a revealing detail for the retrospective narrator of the story to include. His delight discloses not a glimmer of regret about having abandoned his studies the minute the grown-ups leave him alone. Turning to the drawing may be a little naughty, but in the boy's mind, doing so is not a dereliction of his religious duty but a fulfillment of it on a different and perhaps higher level. The key feeling is proprietary joy. He has made something of his own that is an extension of the text, and he asserts that he would not believe someone who said there were drawings more beautiful than these. The acknowledgment, even the approbation, of others is important to him, and he is confident in his success in obtaining it. If the last sentence of the passage (. . . there was no one to



FIG. 1.2 Photograph of the frontispiece of tractate *Beitsah* from the 1861 Menkes edition of the Talmud. Photograph by Alan Mintz.

whom it would have occurred to say such a thing") is deflationary, it is only in the ironic retrospect of the adult narrator. When he had the experience as a child, his confidence was unchallenged.

The effort to establish the "I" and the willingness to pay the price for doing so are at the center of the next story of childhood, "My Bird" (Tsi-pori, 1926). The story is beguilingly charming in a way that demonstrates how Agnon's stories take on meaning by making struggle visible beneath a delightful surface. The boy, who bears the author's own name Shmuel Yosef, takes care of a bird that has been caught between the double windows of his house and becomes exhausted from struggling to free itself. Over several days, the boy parries his mother's concern that he is neglecting his religious duties, brags to his friends about his possession of the bird, and protects it from the house cat. Danger, though, comes from a different quarter. Just as he is about to set the bird free, it dies after flying too close to the flame of his mother's stove.

Although there are no explicit markers, it is clear enough that the bird is a metonym for the boy's soul. Like his soul, the bird is small, fragile, and delicate; its essence is freedom and flight, although it is now constrained. The connection is strengthened by the delight the boy takes in the bird as well as by his sense of ownership. As the title of the story makes clear, it is *his* bird to be admired by his younger sister and envied by his school friends. His devotion to the bird—it is not clear whether he is rehabilitating it or imprisoning it—makes demands on him. He cuts off a button from his jacket to thank the family's handyman for building a cage for the bird. He endures the ridicule of his friends, who resent his possession of such a tiny wonder. Most of all, he lies to his mother, who views the bird as a distraction from his studies and his prayers. Deception is one of the motifs of the story. The boys in school at first accuse the narrator of lying about the existence of the bird, and then they lied when asked about why they are running as a group to the boy's house.

The worst of it comes on the Sabbath eve when the mother is making pancakes filled with raisins and cheese for breakfast. Morning prayers must be said before eating, according to Jewish law; but the boy demands his portion before he has prayed:

"Mother, give me my breakfast." She says, "But you haven't prayed."
And I said, "So I'm to be suspected of eating before praying! Give me

my portion." My mother gave me two pancakes and some cake filled with raisins. I picked out the raisins and gave them to the bird. (235)

The lie turns out to be only half a lie because the gruff urgency is exerted on behalf of the bird; his own portion will be eaten, *comme il faut*, after he prays. Yet the break with the mother and the parental order she enforces are palpable. To protect his relationship to the bird and his right to delight in it the boy has been forced to confront the divergence between his ideal self, the obedient boy who performs the will of his parents and God, and the self that desires recognition and possession even at the cost of deceiving others.

This is also the self that identifies with the bird's ability to take flight—at least in the best of times. The bird's death during its final flight does not come from its perennial antagonist the cat, but from the realm of the mother and her oven. This is hardly an encouraging premonition about what the boy will have to do in the future to escape the same fate. For the meantime, the boy is crushed by the bird's death. In an effort to deny this painful reality, the boy's mind goes to the tales from the early prophets being studied in the *heder* that summer. He remembers the story in the fourth chapter of Second Kings in which Elisha resurrects the son of the Shunamite woman. In his pocket there is a coin that he had meant to give to charity but diverted to the needs of the bird. Now he puts the coin in the charity box and, with the magical thinking of a child, he hopes for a miracle.

This is the child's first encounter with the finality of death, and he is bereft. His sister silently understands his loss and sews a tiny set of shrouds for the bird. An improvised ceremony of burial provides a modicum of closure, but the bird continues to occupy his thoughts for many days to come. The true gravestone for the creature, the narrator tells us, is in his heart, and it consists of the memory of pain. *Tsipori*, "my bird," is the single word on a single line with which the story concludes (237). Standing there starkly by itself, the word embodies the resonating persistence of the loss. Subtly, the word puts a proprietary stamp upon the experience: my bird, my loss, my painful memory. There is no light between self and object. The delight in the bird's life and the grief over its death take their importance from their role in the formation of the tender "I" of the young boy.

The same insistence on ownership is noticeable in the title of the next story in the sequence: "The Beautiful Story of My Prayer Book." The boy is older here. He is not yet a bar mitzvah, but he already feels a tingling of

anticipation in the places on his forehead and arms where the black leather straps of the *tefillin* will be wrapped. The occasion for the story is a small siddur, a prayer book, which his father brings him as a gift upon his return from a trip to a commercial fair. The father's return takes place on Friday afternoon, the one time in the week, aside from Shabbat, when the boy is free from *heder*. The story consists of his rapturous thoughts as he turns to sections of the siddur and conjures up the feasts and holy days of the Jewish year. The premise is a clever device for accomplishing an ambitious goal: to render the inner spiritual life of a boy of about ten years old as he experiences Jewish time. Because the siddur contains prayers related to all of the year's holidays, Agnon can dispatch the mind of his young narrator to multiple points on the liturgical calendar, while he sits in one place and dips into the cherished gift brought to him by his father.

Now, Agnon's Hebrew readers, be they religious or secular, already know the lay of the land. The Jewish holidays are familiar to all, perhaps too familiar. The new territory Agnon is exploring is how sacred time registers on the emotional life of a boy, and we find out that it is different from the way adults experience it. The discovery is not startling or subversive but rather fresh and delightful. We cannot experience the joy at the root of these holidays because we have traveled too far into adulthood to believe in enchantment and because the Enlightenment has poisoned the well and conflated true religious experience with superstition and exilic degeneration. Agnon stakes his success in this story on making enchantment genuine and credible.

The boy is intoxicated by the instant access given him by the siddur to the entire cavalcade of the Jewish year. "I was like a man who had entered a garden of delights. Just as he picks one fruit and eats it and then picks another and eats, so I took my siddur in hand and read around in it" (237). The first holiday his fingers take him to is Hanukah. Because the Hanukah blessings and hymns are located at the end of the standard siddur, this is clearly a not-so-random destination to which his fingers are itching to take him. "Right away all the letters of the siddur began to glow before me like the candles on the menorah, and the whole page began to sing *Ma'oz Tsur*." It is as if the siddur has become a magic box or a zoetrope; touching the right buttons, projecting the right slides, makes the drama of the holiday come alive. He can smell the latkes, he can see his father distributing Hanukah gelt and his friends visiting to spin the dreidl. All is animated and vitally present. And then in a heartbeat, the scene shifts to Purim with all its holy

pandemonium, its costumes and masks, and its culinary treats. How is it possible, the boy wonders, to jump from Hanukah to Purim, skipping the many weeks and Torah portions that intervene? The answer is on the page before him. For in the standard siddur, the Purim blessings are printed immediately following the Hanukah blessings at the end of the volume, both being postbiblical holidays. The contiguity of the holidays in the text of the siddur is not the same as their occurrence in real calendar time. This is a saving difference, one that enables the younger owner of the siddur to summon up the delights of these holidays whenever he wishes rather than waiting for the slowly revolving circuit of the year to bring them around.

As the child narrator proceeds to conjure up the holidays, we realize that he is passing them through a filter. He is filtering *out* the fast days that commemorate national catastrophes as well as the Days of Awe (Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), with their focus on sin, contrition, and punishment. And when it comes to the major festivals, he is filtering *in* only those aspects that are entrancing and gratifying to him as a child. His "editing" of Passover is a good example. There is nothing about his mother's back-breaking labor in cleaning the house and converting it for the holiday, nor, for that matter, about the back-breaking labor of the Israelites under their Egyptian taskmasters. Instead, the boy is consumed by his father's angelic presence. "Every time I see him dressed in white he appears to me like an immortal angel who stands before the Holy One and recites hymns and praises" (239). When the father begins the seder with the Kiddush, the blessing over the wine, something miraculous takes place. As the leader of the seder, he thanks God for "having chosen us and raised us (*romamtanu*) from among all the nations." As the words are being recited, the boy has the sensation that "the whole world is being raised up and we are being raised above the world" (*ibid.*). The boy's astonishment comes less from the power of the holy moment than from its source. "I am amazed that on the strength of one word uttered by my father the whole world is elevated and we are elevated above it."

It is no coincidence that the site of all the boy's favorite rituals is the home and not the synagogue. Shavuot is the exception that confirms the rule. The *kloyz*, the Hasidic prayer house in which his father worships, is a poor affair, with holes in the wall, broken windows and peeling walls. But on Shavuot, in honor of the giving of the Torah on Sinai out of doors, the spaced is so transformed by an abundance of tree branches and plantings

that it resembles a forest rather than a synagogue. And again the boy experiences the enchantment of the world: "Especially beautiful is the holy ark surrounded by beautiful trees. When the wind blows and they tremble, do you think it is because they are cold? No, it is because they are whispering to each other and saying, 'Although we did not merit being used in the construction of the holy ark, in the future we will heat the stove on winter nights for students studying Torah'" (242).

There is so much joy and allure in the circuit of the Jewish year for this boy with a receptive imagination how could anything possibly be lacking? But there is something, and the boy gives away what's on his mind when, playing with his new gift, he opens up the siddur and chances upon the laws of *'eruv*, the wires and poles used to demarcate an area within which it is permitted to carry objects on the Sabbath. His mind goes to the birds that pause to sit on these wires before taking wing to trackless climes. "Master of the Universe," the boy then opines, "this little creature is free to take itself to wherever it wants, but if I even leave the house I'm immediately asked where I'm running to!" (ibid.). He owns up to a longing to escape his bonds and journey into the world, and the next prayer he "inadvertently" happens upon is *Tefilat Haderekh*, the traveler's prayer. He turns down the edge of the page so he can find it in a hurry when the time comes.

Agnon is having a good time playing with concepts of time and space. The boy has been happily absorbed in the sacred cycle of the liturgical year and its pleasures, when all of a sudden he begins thinking about leaving home. Where can he be thinking of going? He has no distinct destination in mind. For a boy so immersed in Jewish lore, "away" can only mean going off to study Torah at a great center of learning, or crossing the mythic Sambatyon River to find the lost tribes and arouse the thirty-six hidden righteous to implore Elijah to bring the Messiah, who, in turn, will end the Exile and return the Jews to Zion. So the journey away is in truth part of the ancient messianic desire to escape time and break out of the orbit of history into eternity.

But in the meantime, which is part of the long meantime that interposes itself between the present and the Redemption, the boy has his life to lead. The merchants have shuttered their shops, and the town is preparing for the Sabbath. When the boy brings the siddur with him to the *kloyz* for prayers, he exposes his precious new possession to the scrutiny of his schoolmates and friends, who know that his father will have brought a gift back from

his journey. At first the siddur is praised for its beauty and quality, and its possessor is puffed up with pride. But soon enough the pack of boys begins to tell scary stories about ghostly prayer books and to denigrate the boy's gift for having been printed in the Russian town of Petrikov rather than in Jerusalem. His pride deflated, he prays in his heart, "Master of the World, in Your great mercies erase the word that has caused me grief and shame and replace it with 'Jerusalem!'" (246). The magical aura of the siddur apparently does not extend to the fulfillment of personal wishes, and its exilic place of publication stubbornly refuses to disappear.

In the end, the boy withstands the test of his friends' raillery and recoups the proprietary joy he has taken in the siddur. The story concludes with a singular experience that is both ecstatic and cathartic. As the boy's heart begins to jump, the prayers in the siddur become animated and begin to jump up and down too, and he sees that they are all straining to ascend to the Land of Israel. The Passover Haggadah is also contained in the siddur, and when he reaches its concluding words, "Next year in Jerusalem!" he burst into tears of joy. "The tears drop down on the letters until the letters are swimming in tears, as if the siddur itself was weeping with me" (247). Jerusalem rebuilt is the ultimate destination in Jewish time and space, and the story ends with the consolation of imagined arrival.

Let us now pause and take stock of what we have learned so far about Agnon the child from these three autobiographical stories. First, the boy's development is presented through his relations with objects rather than persons. Whether it's the set of Talmud or the bird or the siddur, he is alone with it, and the parents are in the background. Two of the objects belong to the textual tradition and one is a creature of nature, and it is from these two realms that the child's self-formed. The next story in the sequence, "Two Pairs," deals with another important object, *tefillin*, the black leather boxes and straps donned after a boy becomes a bar mitzvah. Second, the stories present the child unapologetically as a robust narcissist. It is *his* bird and *his* siddur. He appropriates the bookshelf with the Talmud at the top as the yardstick of his growth. He asserts that no one could deny that the drawings he made are beautiful. He is a child who is confident about his place in the world. To explain the pride he has in his siddur, he states, "A person naturally cherishes what is his own." The adultified sagacity of this utterance illustrates the third point: Although the world of the stories is focalized through the sensibility of a child, it does not always sound like

it is a child who is doing the telling. There is an implicit and unelaborated relationship between an adult narrator who is "staging" the telling of the story and the voice and viewpoint of the child, whose "I" is both the subject and the object of the action. Finally, there is the vital connection between the inner world of the child and the symbols and experiences of Judaism. That connection is intimate and interlocking and stands in contrast to the general picture in Hebrew literature of zealotry and superstition filling the empty vessel of the child's mind with dread. In Agnon's construction of childhood, the child is possessed of a unique receptiveness to the wonder of creation, and this openness is nurtured by the tangible rituals of Judaism rather than being crushed by them. It's the very tangibility of these ceremonies—their concreteness, their appeal to the senses, their base in family ties—that make them fitted to the emotional intelligence of the child. It is as if Agnon is implying that before the modern age the great richness of Jewish religious culture could be experienced by all Jews. But now it is only children who have access to this potent plenitude.

This bounteous feast, this garden of delights—what will be its fate when the child is no longer a child? This is the subject of "The Kerchief," one of Agnon's greatest stories and the consummation of his treatment of childhood. It is the story that comes next in the sequence both in terms of when it appeared and the stage of development it depicts. It is quintessentially a bar mitzvah story. The climax of the tale takes place on the day on which Agnon's child stand-in turns thirteen and is called up to the Torah for the first time. The story is divided into thirteen sections, and it was printed as a special presentation gift to mark the bar mitzvah of 13-year-old Gidon Schocken, the son of Agnon's patron, Salman Schocken.

In "The Kerchief," Agnon finally brings the parents into the picture and constructs an ambitious analogy between the family and the sacred history of the Jewish people. The analogy is founded on the resonances of the word *bayit*, the Hebrew term for house and home. In its homeliest sense, *bayit* stands for the immediate family circle; in its grandest sense, *bayit* stands for the Jerusalem temple (*beit hamikdash*). In the child's mind at the beginning of the story, the two are the same. The father's absence during a prolonged business trip casts a pall upon the family akin to the mourning and trepidation that mark the days leading up to the Fast of Av, which commemorates the destructions of the Temple. In the father's absence, the boy sleeps in his bed and dreams about the Messiah. When the father returns home safe

and bearing gifts, it is as if the Messiah has come. This (con)fusion in the boy's mind between family home and national home and between father and Messiah is precisely what "The Kerchief" sets itself to undo.

It is not that the two realms are not related or that it is perfectly natural for a child to conflate them. Agnon insists on prizing them apart because not to do so encourages denial and irresponsibility, which in turn lead away from Redemption rather than toward it. Renouncing messianic fantasies and accepting responsibility for acting in the world become the new definition Agnon proposes for arriving at the age of mitzvot and entering Jewish adulthood. The autobiographical narrator successfully negotiates this passage by the end of the story, but how he gets there is clear. There is a certain sleight of hand in the narration of the events. For most of the story, the boy seems young, perhaps the age of the narrator in "The Beautiful Story of My Prayer Book." He is beside himself with joy over his father's return and the gifts he brings; he happily mistakes the ends of his mother's silk kerchief grazing his cheek for the wings of angels; he wants to stand on the Sabbath table and shout out "The earth is the Lord's and fullness thereof!" Then quite abruptly at the end of the story, the boy goes to the synagogue to celebrate becoming a bar mitzvah, and on the way home he has an encounter with a beggar that demonstrates his coming of age.

The process whereby the boy arrives at this maturity is not Agnon's point, nor could it be within the compass of a short story. In fact, he wants to keep the two stages of development apart so that we can feel more poignantly what it means to renounce childhood. The earlier stories in the sequence already have established the synergy between the boy's sensitive inner life and the rich nourishment provided by symbols and experiences of Judaism. "The Kerchief" now expands the picture to include the family. This includes the boy's relationship to his father, the focus in the first half of the story, as well as the relationship between father and mother, the focus in the second.

The boy's fantasies about the Messiah illustrate the powerful analogy between his golden childhood and the divine favor enjoyed by the Jewish people while the Temple still stood. Agnon presents two versions of what happens on the nights the boy sleeps in his father's bed while he is away. Both center on the talmudic legend that represents the Messiah, disguised as a miserable beggar, as tarrying at the gates of Rome, the locus of impurity and the antithesis to Jerusalem. In the first version, the boy, not yet asleep, has a reverie about the coming of the Messiah, which is all wish fulfillment: all

the Jews will go up to the Land of Israel, his father will not travel away from home, and he himself will be liberated from *heder* and free to play before the Lord in the courtyard of the Temple. He prides himself in the fact that while others might despise the beggars surrounding the Messiah for their poverty, *he* would give them honor because the Messiah is among them. But on another night, the reverie turns into nightmare when his eyes close and sleep allows the unconscious to emerge. A great bird appears, and the boy ties himself to its wings with the fringes of the *tsitsit* and commands it to take him to Father. Instead, the bird flies him to Rome and lowers him into the company of poor men surrounding a beggar binding his wounds.

I turned my eyes away from him in order not to see his suffering. When I turned my eyes away, there grew a great mountain with all kinds of thorns and thistles upon it and evil beasts grazing there, and impure birds and ugly creeping things crawling about it. (57–58)⁶

Now Father appears and saves him by wrapping him up in his tallit and bringing him to safety. The boy wakes in the morning to find that the father's return from the fair has been hastened by a day.

As a child, the boy is entitled to a childlike conception of the Messiah as a kind of superhero, who throws off his beggarly tatters and fulfills every wish. Yet while his waking mind declares his readiness to stare at suffering without blinking, his unconscious betrays his inability to admit the existence of misery and impurity. "I turned my eyes away from him in order not to see his suffering." Again, he is only a boy, and he should hardly be expected to come to terms with the existence of evil in the world. But the moral agenda has been laid down. If he wants to come of age, this is the reckoning that awaits him. Theologically, his magical Messiah will have to be exchanged for a sober conception of Redemption, one that understands that the coming of the Messiah depends upon the recognition of evil and the readiness of each individual to take steps against it. That is where the story will take us. On the fateful day of the bar mitzvah the boy will succeed in making the leap by sacrificing something very precious to him.

The achievement of that moment can be grasped only if we appreciate the value of what has been given up. The boy, Agnon's juvenile self, cannot grasp it in the throes of experiencing it. That its significance can only be understood in retrospect is one of the key points made by all the autobiographical stories. Throughout the discussion of these stories, I've avoided

referring to the boy as the narrator even though they are written in the first person. True, we see the world through the enchanted eyes of a child, but at the same time we know that it is the adult the child has grown into who, many years later, is reconstructing the child's viewpoint and choreographing his experience. The simultaneity of these two planes of perception, boy and man, is perhaps characteristic of all "literary" stories of childhood. Yet in "The Kerchief" Agnon endows this duality with a particular eeriness, because when the boy mentions his father or mother, beginning with the first line of the story, he appends the Hebrew epithet used by children when speaking of their deceased parents: "of blessed memory" (*zikhrono leverakhah*) for the father and "peace be with her" (*'alehah hashalom*) for the mother. The loss of his parents is far in the boy's future, yet he speaks as if his orphanhood were already an accomplished fact.

How to explain this strange effect? A passage toward the middle of the story gives something of an answer. Father has just that moment walked in the door, back from his travels. Enormous in his son's eyes, he bends down, picks him up and kisses him.

I look about me now to try and find something to which to compare my father when he stood together with his tender children on his return from afar, and I can think of many comparisons, each one finer than the next; yet I can find nothing pleasant enough. But I hope that the love haloing my father, of blessed memory, may wrap us around every single time we come to embrace our little children, and that joy which possessed us then will be possessed by our children all their lives. (59)

Reading through "The Kerchief," one might easily take this passage in stride as another sweet sentiment about childhood. But even as an experienced reader of this story, every time I come upon these lines I'm jolted, and I feel as if a scab has been pulled off a wound. Throughout these stories, Agnon has labored to place us within the perceptual world of the child with its awestruck and wonderfully literal view of Jewish experience and to sustain that illusion. Here, however, Agnon suddenly pulls the curtain aside and shatters the illusion. When he writes, "I look about me now," the "now" is the present time of the writing, some thirty years or more after the events themselves. I see Agnon sitting at his desk in Jerusalem—the story appeared in 1932—at work on a story about his childhood when all of a sudden his

forward progress is blocked. He looks up and reflects on the obstacle that has confounded him, and we hear the voice of the adult speaking.

Something is happening to him. The process of writing about his childhood and giving it artistic shape has unexpectedly triggered a visceral memory of the grace and protection he felt in his father's love. As a writer, he is used to reaching for the metaphors appropriate for his purposes. But in the case of an experience so powerful and vivid there are no words. This is not an admission of frustration or failure but a recognition of the modesty of language, wielded even but such a one as he, in the presence of what is truly ineffable.

It is his response to this potent recollection that is most revealing. He turns from the memory of the plenitude of his father's love for him to his own situation as a father. Agnon married Esther Marx in Germany in 1920; his daughter was born there in 1921 and his son in 1922. If we assume that Agnon, now settled in Jerusalem, wrote "The Kerchief" in the year or two before it appeared, then his children were about the same age as his autobiographical persona in the story. The memory of what he felt upon his father's return home so long ago provokes a fervent wish concerning his relationship with his own children. If we look closely we see that two related but different wishes are being uttered in this passage. One concerns the speaker's capacity and the other concerns its effect on his children. Agnon, as the adult narrator and implied author, first wishes that he could extend to his children the same *hesed* ("unconditional love") he experienced when his father embraced him. He then wishes that the transaction be successful and that his children be the beneficiaries of the same *simḥah* ("joy") he received from his father's embrace. *hesed* is the quality he hopes to be given, and *simḥah* is the experience he hopes to transmit.

Now, some readers might take these wishes for granted as prayerful aspirations. I hear them more equivocally, even darkly. If these wishes were indeed prayers, as we might expect from the persona of a religious writer, they would be addressed to God and they would begin with some version of the conventional pious formula, "May it be Thy will oh Lord our God that . . ." Yet the term used here is the very peculiar Hebrew word *halevai*, which is not exactly "I hope" and closer to "Oh that it were!" Grammarians call this an utterance in the "optative mood," which expresses a desire for a situation to come into being that does not presently exist. It is this wistfulness I hear in these wishes. Agnon suspects, even knows, that it is not in his

character to be the parent his father was. His absorption in his own genius makes it difficult for him to make room for the lives of others; he further knows that, whereas he was raised in a world of faith, his own children have been born into a different age, and the fact that they cannot be held close by the Tradition affects the joy that can be given them. *Hesed* and *simḥah* are not, by their nature, qualities that can be granted upon request. And to request that they be present "every single time" and "all their lives" betrays an unspoken desperation. I hear in Agnon's *halevai* a sigh of resignation.

The narrator refocuses the story after this brief but remarkable interruption. Having described the love between the father and his children, he turns his attention to the bond between husband and wife. In terms of Agnon's childhood stories this is new territory, and it is signaled by the eponymous kerchief of the story's title. The father has brought back gifts from his journey for all the members of the family; they include a siddur for the narrator, presumably the same siddur that figures in the story discussed above. For the mother he has brought a silk brocaded kerchief adorned with flowers and blossoms. Precise attention is accorded to this beautiful object. The mother puts on the kerchief on Sabbaths only within the home; for the synagogue she wears a hat with feathers. The exception is Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, when she wears it both at home and at synagogue. In the child's mind, the kerchief is part of his enchanted world. When he sees the ends of the kerchief quivering as the mother stands before the Sabbath table as her husband recites the ode to the Woman of Valor, the boy knows that it is the effect of "the Sabbath angels moving their wings and making a wind" (62). The kerchief remains miraculously unstained despite years of wear and the splatter of cherries falling from cakes. The kerchief is a luminous symbol of the holiness of the family, its harmony and unfading durability. By adding the love between the parents to the father-child axis, the family becomes a triangle that is not only holy but stable and enduring.

It is just this wondrous object that is lost at the climactic moment of the story. And the fault is wholly the boy's: "But for me she would have kept the kerchief all her life long and would have left it as an heirloom" (64). To explain how this happened, the story leaps ahead from childhood to the day of the boy's bar mitzvah. In one of the several symbolic transfers central to the story, the mother ties the kerchief around his neck. When he returns from the synagogue, the kerchief is gone. The explanation for the

loss concerns the appearance of a new beggar in town, and it circles back to the boy's fantasies about the Messiah as he lay in his father's bed.

Many beggars pass through Buczacz, and the town boasts networks of hospitality to assist them. This particular beggar is an exception. He is in tatters and sick with running sores, and his appearance is so frightening to children and grown-ups alike that he is pelted with stones and driven from the marketplace. He is even chased out of the synagogue and denied Sabbath hospitality. The boy observes all this and is confounded because he knows the people of his town to be righteous and charitable. In order to hold on to that belief he is forced to take recourse in magical thinking. "The ministers of Satan," he is forced to conclude, "used to accompany that beggar and pull a veil over Jewish eyes so that they should not perceive his dire needs" (*ibid.*).

Now we the readers are tempted into our own magical thinking. We recall the figure of the Messiah among the poor at the gates of Rome from the boy's nights in his father's bed, and from Hasidic stories and folktales we recall that Elijah, the Messiah's herald, disguises himself as a beggar and tests the readiness of the righteous. So we think, Aha!, Agnon is rewriting one of those wonder tales in which the Redemption would have come if only the holy figure could have been recognized behind the loathsome appearance.

But it is we who have fallen into a trap. The point of the story is that the repulsive beggar is nothing more than a repulsive beggar and not the Messiah in disguise. The great test that is put to the narrator on the day of his supposed maturity is whether he can put away magical thinking, recognize the beggar for what he is, and reach out to him instead of looking away. Agnon is not thumbing his nose at the notion of the Messiah and calling it juvenile. He is making a deeper theological point. The Messiah represents the Redemption, and the only way the Redemption can be hastened is not by miracles but by small acts of kindness that contribute to a process of repairing the world.

The boy does not look away, and, indeed, looking and being seen is the essence of the encounter. The narrator returns home from the synagogue "dressed like a bridegroom" and pleased with himself that he was now putting on tefillin. When he meets the beggar his appearance is as gruesome as ever. "He looked at me as well. The sores on his face seemed like eyes of fire." The boy's heart stops, his knees begin shaking, and his eyes grow dim. "But I took my heart in my hand, nodded to the beggar, and greeted him,

and he returned the greeting." Still agitated, his throat choked by tears, he feels a sensation of sweetness taking possession of his limbs. He reopens his eyes and beholds the beggar. "I took off the kerchief and gave it to the beggar. He took it and wound it around his sores" (65-66).

The encounter with the beggar is a classic test in which a child must overcome an obstacle in order to arrive at adulthood. The Jewish version of this passage is of course the bar mitzvah, and "The Kerchief" is in every respect a bar mitzvah story from the circumstances of its writing as a presentation gift to Gidon Schocken to its composition in thirteen chapters to the climatic event that takes place on the day the boy first dons tefillin and is called up to the Torah. Yet the representation of the bar mitzvah in this story is astonishingly different from the gala party and choreographed synagogue ceremony we know as the bar mitzvah in recent times. Part of the difference is due to time and place. In traditional circles in Eastern Europe before the war (this story takes place around 1900), when a boy turned thirteen, he simply went with his father to the synagogue on a Monday or Thursday—when the Torah is read—put on tefillin for the first time and was called to the Torah. The father might bring a bottle of brandy and raisin cake to share with the other worshippers after the early-morning service, and that was that. How the bar mitzvah grew to become what it is in America and Israel today is its own story. The modesty and minimalism of the ceremony in Agnon's telling are therefore not the essence of the radical revisionism. In conventional religious terms, becoming a "bar mitzvah," means literally becoming a "son of the commandment" and incurring all the obligations of an adult Jew. Agnon has minimized these legal and ritual dimensions and replaced them with an inward, moral-psychological understanding of the passage to adulthood. The boy can arrive only if he gives up his magical thinking, acknowledges the existence of suffering in the world and takes steps toward alleviating it.

Magical thinking is only the primitive face of the deep experience of the enchantment of the world. Agnon's childhood stories calibrate a precise resonance between a child's capacity for wonder and amazement and the mythic world of Jewish observance. The legends are alive for the child; the ritual objects and even the holy texts are present to him in their sensuous concreteness. The Hebrew letters on the page dance for him; the holidays—but only the joyous ones!—pop up from the siddur and dramatize themselves with hologram-like vividness. The key the father uses to unlock

his traveling case to retrieve the children's gifts smiles at the boy, and the Sabbath angels rustle his mother's kerchief. Satan makes the beggar invisible to the townspeople. This is the Edenic world the boy has to take leave of in order to move forward. It is a necessary sacrifice, but Agnon insists that this was not a world of folly or error. To the contrary, the boy's sensitivities were fully engaged in absorbing—on his wavelength, as it were—the best of what Judaism had to offer him at that age. It has to be left behind as such, but these experiences have penetrated deeply. They have left their deposit and fashioned him. Yet the enchanted world of childhood has to be left behind because it necessarily ignores the existence of evil, suffering and the flawed nature of human life.

The kerchief has to be given up as well. This beautiful, delicate object was given in love from husband to wife and then from mother to son. Its voluntarily forfeiture defines the boy's coming of age. Like Chinese lacquer, Agnon has applied layer upon layer of meaning until the kerchief becomes a radiant symbol of family holiness. What, then, does it mean to give it away? Here things get complicated. It is clear that a significant renunciation is being made, but the nature and degree of the renunciation are less clear. I see in the boy's encounter with the beggar a parallel to another test: the Akedah, the binding of Isaac narrative in Genesis 22. Abraham passes the ordeal imposed on him by God by displaying his readiness to sacrifice his son without, in the end, having to carry it out. In Agnon's story, the boy is ready to give up the familial love that has held him so tightly, and he divests himself of the material symbol of that love. But that does not mean that he is bereft. Still buoyed by the sweetness that had flooded his limbs, he returns home to his mother and suddenly realizes what he had done with the precious kerchief she had given him. The story concludes thus:

Ere I had asked her to forgive me she was gazing at me with love and affection. I gazed back at her, and my heart was filled with that same gladness as I had felt on that Sabbath when my mother had set the kerchief about her head for the first time.

The end of the story of the kerchief of my mother, peace be with her. (66)

Is this sacrifice without payment? Does the narrator pass the test without giving up something real? The story's laconic ending does not give us much to go on. But one thing is clear: His action has not alienated his mother's

love, and the concluding words, "my mother, peace be with her," gesture toward a bond that has persisted into his adulthood long after her death.

At the conclusion of "The Kerchief," I see Agnon as a lad, no longer a boy, who is beginning the process of separating from his parents and from a childlike experience of Judaism. He is taking the love and trust given to him by his parents and internalizing these affirmations toward the day when he will be sure of his own decisions, even if it means disobeying their wishes. In the case of the commandments, he has given up a need for their enchanted, mythical aura and stored them as fundamentals of his being. He continues as a student devoted to his studies in the *beit midrash*, but those studies, now unsupervised, will lead him in a widening gyre of intellectual curiosity, and at a point not too far away he will abandon the *beit midrash* for the forest.

NOTES

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1. We would like to thank Jeffrey Saks for suggesting corrections to this essay and helping to fill in incomplete notes.

2. Alan created this map with his coeditor Jeffrey Saks and the graphic designer Elad Lifshitz of the Dov Abramson Studio, in Jerusalem. It appeared as the endpapers of *A City in Its Fullness* (Toby Press, 2016).

3. Dan Laor, *S. Y. Agnon: A Biography* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 19.

4. *Me'atsmi el 'atsmi* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), 7.

5. For the full English translation of the stories "My Grandfather's Talmud," "My Bird," and "The Beautiful Story of My

Prayerbook," see *A Dwelling Place of My People: Sixteen Stories of the Chassidim* by Samuel Joseph Agnon, trans. J. Weinberg and H. Russell (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983). While Alan consulted the translations in this book, he reworked much of the language of these translations into more modern and colloquial English. All page numbers for citations from these stories correspond to the original Hebrew stories in Agnon, S. Y., *Eilu veilu* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1966).

6. All citations of "The Kerchief" are taken from I. M. Lask's translation that appears in *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* by S. Y. Agnon, edited and introduced by Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb-Hoffman (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).