

BUILDING A CITY: WRITINGS
ON AGNON'S BUCZACZ
IN MEMORY OF ALAN MINTZ

Edited by Sheila E. Jelen, Jeffrey Saks,
and Wendy Zierler

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1 *Agnon on the Individual and the Community*

Alan Mintz

THE AWARD OF the Nobel Prize in Literature to S.Y. Agnon in October evoked very interesting critical reaction. The statement of the award made clear that Agnon was being recognized as the greatest living Hebrew author, and it implied that his achievement, with no disparagement intended, was located largely in a Jewish sphere. Reacting against this parochial limitation, American Jewish critics hastened to assert that Agnon's importance stood on his universality. He stages, they claim, the inner conflicts of modern man in an East European setting. To permit this controversy to create a tension between the universal and parochial interpretations of Agnon's work is a travesty and a waste of literary critical effort.

A recent reading of Agnon's important novella, *Bilvav yamim* (*In the Heart of Seas*), has shown the controversy to be misdirected and the tension to be artificial. On one hand, it is only common sense that a work has permanent worth only if it can be phrased in universal terms. On the other, a universal can be relevant only when it can be transposed into the parochial contexts in which we all live. In the case of *Bilvav yamim*, the author says something of paramount importance about the relationship between the individual and the community. This insight can have meaning, however, only after we liberate the characters from their particular predicaments and apply the knowledge to our own urgent, albeit parochial, problems.

The question of the relationship between the individual and the community is now so pressing because the last forty years have witnessed its almost complete disintegration in the American Jewish community. Until now, because Judaism has been misunderstood, and there have been few around to properly explain it, bright people growing up in the Jewish community have become disassociated from it. They have acknowledged Jewishness but rejected Judaism, and have reserved a special key on their typewriters for this syndrome: *Alienation*. Members of the generation coming of age now, however, find their connections with the organized community just as tenuous but for different reasons. They think they are on the verge of discovering the contemporary value of Judaism, but at the same time they are repulsed by the vulgarity and hostility to criticism and creativity that Judaism's organized forms display.

Let us look at the book. *Bilvav yamim* is the story of a group of Polish Jews who leave their *shtetl* and by wagon and boat finally make their way to Jerusalem. Although their occupations are different, they all make very real sacrifices in order "to go up." One leaves his ritual slaughtering knife behind, another his classroom,

another his butcher shop; another his properties, and still another a wife divorced because she refused to accompany her husband. They are ordinary people who naturally are attached to their families and their *shtetl*. To give up this security and start on a dangerous extended journey is a serious undertaking requiring an equally serious sacrifice. The travel on land is smooth but the voyage on the sea and the lack of sustenance in Jerusalem immerse the Faithful in struggles and hardships.

If Agnon limited himself - to their story, his book would be less a novel and more a chronicle. Opposite the Faithful, however, he introduces an entirely fresh character: Hananya. Hananya is a Jew who has been wandering from town to town all his life carrying his belongings in a kerchief. He comes to the *shtetl* and asks to accompany them to the Holy Land. Since he is the tenth man and thus completes a *minyan*, they are happy to accept him. Through the story, we come to know him for his altruism and good deeds, and when the ship leaves for Palestine, he is detained on land, finding a woman whose husband's death was unknown to her but witnessed by him. He is not governed by the conventions of society, and is able to appreciate the righteousness and honesty of bandits who capture him.

Hananya is a very different character from the Faithful. They are householders and are making a serious material sacrifice by engaging in a communal effort which requires leaving a secure life and attempting such a journey. Hananya, on the other hand, has been going from place to place trying to go up to *Eretz Yisrael* all his life. They decide to give up their way of life; he never has to decide because he was always going up. Such is his nature. The contrast is drawn even more sharply, for they have difficulty in understanding Hananya, not to mention appreciating him. Because he is different, he is relegated to a lower status among them. He spends most of his time driving the woman's wagon and collecting wood and cooking. When the Faithful spend Shabbat in the town of Vaas, he is not called to the Torah with the rest of them. But Hananya shines above them as a totally free individual who exudes love and values men for their qualities, not their positions in society. He seems to exist on a different level of reality, one free from the mundane prejudices and inhibitions of the communal Faithful.

Agnon establishes this tension between the individual and the community, but, a consummate artist, he makes no explicit value judgment. We may, however, find one implicit by examining the structure of the book. In the beginning, Hananya accompanies them on land; in the middle, he is absent from the story; at the end, he is with them in Jerusalem. Parallel to this pattern, in the beginning, the Faithful are very successful in their journey on land; in the middle, after embarking without Hananya, they come close to drowning in a storm at sea; at the end, they are together with him in the Holy Land. The interlocking structure makes clear that with him they succeed and without him they almost die. When the Faithful set sail without him, they find that they are unable to pray together because their *minyan* crumbles in his absence. Based on the artistic identity of structural form and content, we can say that without the inclusion of the free individual the effort of the community cannot

succeed. If we think, moreover, that the individual seems to exist on a different plane of reality from the community, as in *Bilvav yamim*, we learn that these two levels must unite in order that the community can go up.

Agnon, however, limits the extent of this union by use of a symbolic device. The kerchief, in which Hananya' wraps all he owns, comes to represent his individuality. When he is stripped naked by the border guards at the beginning of the story, they leave him only his kerchief to cover himself with. The Faithful make fun of it because it is shabby and old, and offer him better bags for his belongings. But Hananya declines their offers and poignantly responds:

“אין...אני רשאי לזלזל בה”
 “But I am not permitted to cheapen it so.”

When the ship has sailed without him and he has no other means of travel, Hananya spreads his kerchief over the water, sits on it and skims the seas to *Eretz Yisrael*. The kerchief is a very delicate and beautiful metaphor for that which the individual cannot hand over to the community and still retain his uniqueness. That is the boundary, and the individual need contribute only on the condition that he can keep what has made him so.

Agnon's prescription is instructive but problematical. It bids the individual, especially the person who is free and creative, realize a responsibility to contribute to and participate in the community, for otherwise it cannot progress. But, at the same time, Agnon does not conceal the fact that such a person is unappreciated, disparaged and lured away from his principles. Clearly, the community-individual relationship is not one of self-help but rather requires unselfishness on the part of the individual. In the story, Hananya had love, freedom and singleness of purpose to offer the Faithful. Similarly, today there are people finishing school who have a vital and creative vision of Judaism to offer to the organized community. Whether they will try to contribute, whether the community will receive them, and whether they will have the courage to persevere in the face of disregard, all constitute questions not yet answered.

ALAN MINTZ (1948–2017) was Chana Kekst Professor of Jewish Literature at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America and co-founder and co-editor of *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, a publication that helped to establish the field of Jewish literary studies. Among his many books were *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (1984), *Banished From Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (1989), *Sanctuary in the Wilderness: A Critical Introduction to American Hebrew Poetry* (2011), and *Ancestral Tales: Reading the Buczacz Stories of S.Y. Agnon* (2017).