

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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2 *Late Agnon and the Reimagining of Galician Jewry (14th Annual Band Lecture, UCLA, February 12, 2015)*

Alan Mintz

WHAT I WANT to do this afternoon is to begin by retelling an Agnon story. When I am finished retelling it, I will look with you at the last few paragraphs of that story and then talk generally about Buczacz, and why Agnon devoted so much of his energy to writing a cycle of stories about this town, what its importance is within literary studies and Agnon studies, and then conclude with another story on a very different theme.

The first story is a story called *Hamashal vehanimshal* [The Parable and its Lesson], which came out in book form through Stanford University Press, translated by the late James Diamond, with an essay by myself. The story unfolds in the 17th Century, a generation after the Chmielnicki massacres which took place in 1648. It takes place in Buczacz. The city of Buczacz was not destroyed in the massacres, but most citizens of Buczacz, in the story, have lost someone if not in their immediate family, then in their extended family during the massacres. Buczacz, in the aftermath, is forced to reconstruct itself as a small community.

The story begins on one Sabbath morning. The beadle, the shamash, is on the *bimah* in the synagogue and he hears somebody talking during the Torah reading. Now apparently this was something that was not done at that time. The shamash tries to stop this chatter, first by giving very small verbal signals to the talker, raising his eyebrow, clicking his tongue, brandishing a finger. Nothing works. It turns out that the young man who is talking is the son-in-law of the richest man in town who has recently been, in a sense, acquired as a trophy and brought to Buczacz. He is whispering into the ear of a friend of his, something about the Torah reading. In other words, this is not about the stock market—this is about the Torah reading. But even this was not done back then. So the shamash descends from the dais and goes to the congregation, takes this young man by the elbow and escorts him out of the synagogue.

This is an extraordinary scandal in Buczacz because he is embarrassing somebody in public, which is a statutory sin, and not just anybody, but the man who funds the operation of the community—his son-in-law. So the following night, after the Sabbath is over, Sunday night, a *beit din* [a Jewish court] is convened to bring him up on charges, and in his defense, he tells a story that lasts for about 40 pages. It's a monologue within the narrative of the story as a whole.

He says, “When I was a very young man, I was the assistant to Rabbi Moshe, the rabbi of the community at that time.” (He is referring back to the generation right after the Chmielnicki massacres) “We were all recovering from this trauma.” Rabbi Moshe had discovered only one relative from his whole extended family who had survived the massacre—it was a young girl named Zlata—and through serendipitous circumstances, he was able to find her, bring her into his home and raise her as his own daughter. Then he gave her in marriage to his most distinguished student, Aron. They were married, and then shortly after the marriage, Aron disappears. Nobody can find him. So this fifteen-year-old girl, the apple of Rav Moshe’s eye, is rendered an *agunah*, a chained woman who can’t remarry because you can’t remarry unless you can document the death of the husband. Rav Moshe is bereft.

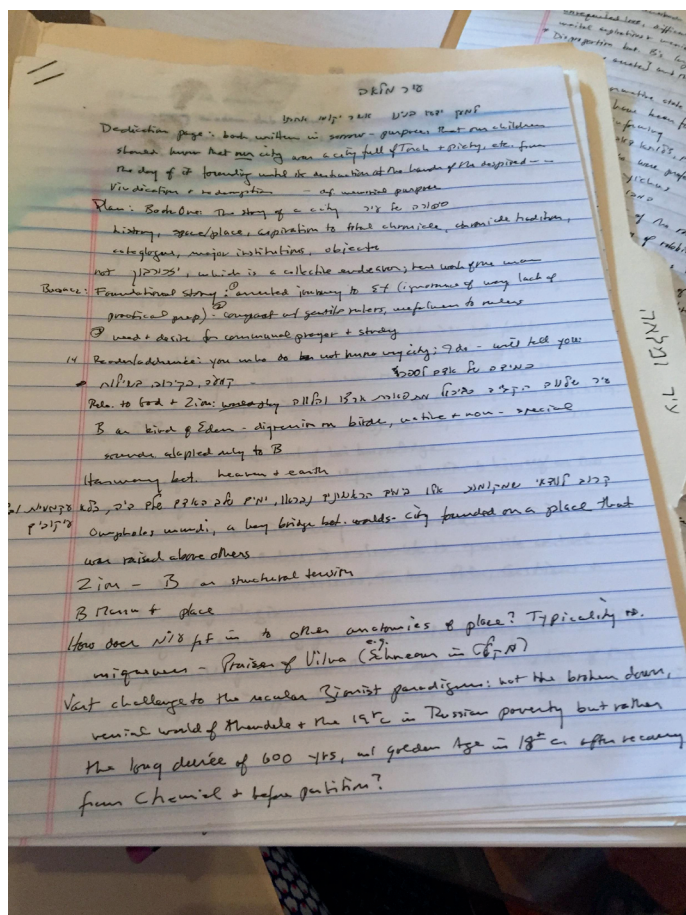


Figure 1: Alan Mintz’s Notes on ‘Ir umelo’ah. Credit: Beverly Bailis.

He consults with all the rabbis in the Polish/Lithuanian commonwealth, but there are no solutions. He reasons that if Aron were still alive, he would have somehow let Zlata know and release her. So Reb Moshe conceives of the idea of descending into the netherworld, into Gehinnom [hell], to look for Aron and to document the fact of his death. There so happens to be near Buczacz an entryway into Gehinnom that is very convenient. After Yom Kippur, before Sukkot, Rav Moshe and the *shamash* embark on a journey into Gehinnom. They enter, and soon enough they find Aron. (This is reminiscent of Dante's inferno, probably filtered through a translation by Emmanuel of Rome who wrote Hebrew poetry, a contemporary of Dante's). They find this young man, who is weeping and weeping, and he tells this story:

After the terrible massacres of the Chmilenicki era, this young very bright student could not reconcile the fact that God had allowed this to be done to his people. So he undertakes a search of Jewish philosophical literature to try to find answers to a problem of theodicy. Unsatisfied he learns Latin and he begins to borrow books from the local priest and to see if other religions have answers to this, and through this relationship with the local priest he is, in a sense, kidnapped, and dies of a broken heart. The reason why he can't leave the grave and inform Zlata of the fact that he is dead is because there is a cross over his grave and that prevents him from migrating among the living to inform her.

This is terribly sad. But it's not the main event that happens in the journey to Gehinnom. The main event is that while they are there, the *shamash* notices that there are different compartments of Gehinnom in which tortures are taking place. In two of them he sees that those who are being tortured are great scholars from all the periods, beginning from the period of the Tanna'im, the period of the Mishnah, through the Spanish age and the heads of academies, and he can't understand it. How could it be that these enormous scholars of extraordinary reputation are being tortured? And the tortures that they are undergoing are quite grotesque. In one of them, each of these scholars is bouncing around in outer space, 4000 cubits from each other, and each of them is trying to hawk their insights, their *hiddushim*, each of them is so important and though they are trying to speak nobody is hearing. When two of them get close to each other, and they begin to try to foist their insights on each other, the lips of the speaker begin to extend and envelop the whole body and the ears of the listener enfold the body of the listener. No communication is possible. Then they float off again.

The descriptions here are taken from the medieval ethical literature of Gehinnom. None of these are in the Talmud, but somehow in the early middle ages, the imagination of what happens in the afterlife really blossoms. We don't know exactly where it comes from, but it's very well established. Agnon took this template, and he inserted this new content of what they're being punished for. It is punishment for a kind of scholarly arrogance, the fact that they can't really

overcome the need to tell somebody something in the middle of the Torah reading. This was the same problem of the young man in the synagogue who thought that his particular idea on the weekly portion was so important that it had to supersede the word of God being read from the Torah.

The shamash asks Rabbi Moshe why these people are here and Rabbi Moshe explains that even though these people were extraordinary scholars, during the service on Shabbat mornings they could not restrain themselves and they had to hock their wares to others, and for that sin they were there in Gehinnom. The shamash is incredulous and he says I know this is something we are not supposed to do, but isn't this a little extreme, to be punished in this way? This is frightening to him because the disproportion between the sin and the punishment. So they go back to this world and life goes on as usual. The fact that the rabbi had identified Rabbi Aron in the netherworld is not a halachic solution. On that basis you cannot free Zlata from her *'aginut*, from her chained situation.

Coming back to the court in which the shamash is giving his testimony, we hear him say "What I did, though I understand it was a sin and I'll have to be punished for it, I was actually saving this young man and I was ready to incur this guilt myself in order to save him from something, you can't imagine how terrible it was." All of Buczacz exonerates him [the shamash]. They say, "we're sorry, we didn't know that this was such an important issue," and they reinstate him, and the whole community makes this a major responsibility to ensure there is no competition between the divine voice that is read by the Torah readers on Sabbath mornings and the voices of human beings. Buczacz makes this one of their standards.

Here we come to the end of the story. There is a 54-year gap. The events that the shamash narrates took place 54 years before the telling of the story. Buczacz has since become a mercantile center and every time they call someone up to the Torah now, they have to name all the full names of all the family members of everybody and the Torah reading has in a sense become somewhat corrupted. They commit themselves to return to the correct path, and they do this by writing down this incident in the *pinkas* of the community. The *pinkas* is a big ledger, a kind of minute book. The word "*pinkas*" is actually a Greek word that we have in the Mishnah, where births and deaths and taxes are written down, and if there is a fire or some anomalous event, that is written down too. But in the story we are looking at, the townspeople commit themselves to taking a fresh page of the *pinkas* and writing down the testimony of the shamash and this describes how it was written and what happened to it:

After he made his corrections, the scribe sat down and copied everything out in a handsome script, the letters written the way they were written in Buczacz at the time when Buczacz was Buczacz, each letter distinct unto itself and each one in its place on the line, like people standing for the silent devotion, where the tall ones stick up like a lamed and the short ones are small as a yod, and all

of them are directed to the same place. Had the *pinkas* not been consumed in the flames, we could have read the entire story just as it was set down in its true and original form, with the unique blend of wisdom and faith that marked all that our ancestors wrote and did and thought and said. But now that book is no more, and Buczacz is destroyed, and many thousands of Jews have been slain, the least of them the equal of the most eminent of the Gentiles, who watched the loathsome monsters destroy the world and did nothing. From our town there were those who were buried alive in graves they dug for themselves there were those who were never buried; and there were those upon whom the murderers poured kerosene and were immolated one by one, limb-by-limb. So now, since that *pinkas* went up in the flames, and Buczacz has been destroyed, and the deeds of the former generations have been forgotten in the recent suffering, I pondered the possibility that the *Gehinnom* of our time would make us forget the that the *shamash* saw, and the story about it, and all we can learn from that story. So I said to myself, Let me put it all down in a book and thus create a memorial to a holy community that sanctified its life in its death as its ancestors sanctified their lives with Torah, which is our life. (67–68)

What interests me about the end of the story is two things. One is the image of the *pinkas*. We have here a description of the original *pinkas*, the large ledger. The perfection of the calligraphy of the scribe and the perfection of the phraseology is described. And then the ledger is burnt, when Buczacz is destroyed by the Nazis and the Ukranian helpers at various times around 1942–1943. And so the story we're reading, the narrator tells us, is in fact not the story that is written in the *pinkas*. That story was destroyed. The narrator has taken it upon himself to retell, to reinscribe, the *pinkas* that was lost. In other words, the kinds of stories that this narrator is telling is in fact an attempt to replace or restore the *pinkas*. What's important here in this larger project is the fact that Agnon is thinking, "How am I going to write about the early years of Buczacz, not the modern memory of Buczacz, but the early years, the 17th, 18th century? I need a model which is not about artists writing literature, but something that is more based on communal memory, such as what can be found in a *pinkas*." So the *pinkas* here is, in a sense, re-appropriated, refurbished, as a model for writing.

The second point that interests me in the passage above is, as in all Agnon's stories, a kind of wicked gesture here at the end that might sound like this: Yes, that *pinkas* was perfect, the writing was perfect. It was extraordinary. But we don't have it anymore and I've rewritten it. So let me ask you now which version you would prefer to have. Would you prefer the official version, which is extremely straightforward, no digressions, to tricks, no artistry, no literature, but a few facts? Or would you prefer to have the replacement, which is the story that I wrote, which goes into the psychology, which uses the whole kitbag of modernist literary techniques?"

Now of course we would say it's terrible that the *pinkas* is burnt, but I think any modern reader would say, "I'll take the story." So the question of the replace-

ment of the story for the historical reality becomes one of the very self-conscious motifs of Agnon's project.

This historical Buczacz, the real city, isn't important enough to merit a name on the map. It's a small Jewish community and I think this is an extraordinarily important point. Agnon decided to write this epic sequence of stories about a city, which was maybe in the third tier of Galician cities. I often think of this in comparison to the city I came from, Worcester, Massachusetts, where there were about 10,000 Jews. There were 10,000 Jews in Buczacz as well. If I decided to devote my life's work to the Jewry of Worcester, Massachusetts, you would think that was rather strange. What is Worcester that it should deserve to be memorialized in this way? What Agnon is doing is in a sense making Buczacz into James Joyce's Dublin. He is choosing the town that he came from, which was a significant city, but not a terribly important city, and making it representative of a whole civilization. It's a choice that is driven not by patriotism and nostalgia as much as by a modernist calculation, which is that if you want to get to a larger universal truth, you have to go through the extremely parochial and specific. So the only way you can understand the classic civilization of Polish Jewry is by looking at one locality, by drilling down and going into that in extraordinary depth. So I think that's the move for Buczacz—it was Buczacz because that is where Agnon came from, it was very important to him. But it was not so much that he wanted to write a version of a memorial volume as a gesture of piety toward his hometown, but rather as a strategic choice of how this extraordinary civilization could be best rendered artistically. It was only through the particularity of that place and not trying to do it as an anthology of legends or stories from all parts of Jewish communities in the area that Agnon wanted to work.

Why did Agnon turn his attention to this in the last years of his life? He had many extraordinary projects after WWII that he was following out: great anthologies, a new cycle of stories about his years in Germany. But now it looks to us like the great organizing project for him was a cycle of about 140 stories about Buczacz. They were published from 1955 until his death in 1970. The project was left unfinished at the time that he died and he left to his daughter Emunah Yaron a series of guidelines and files and books about which stories should go into what sections and she took it upon herself to put them together according to his directives and it was published in 1973. At that time, there was not much interest in these stories.

Think of 1973 as the year of the Yom Kippur War. Of the posthumous works of Agnon, the greatest interest was in the first one, the novel *Shira*, a novel of scandal, of the goings on of the European intelligentsia at the Hebrew University. It had been a long awaited novel. And the stories in *'Ir umelo'ah*, [A City in its Fullness], a volume of about 750 pages, 144 stories, the collected stories, many of them were published during his lifetime in literary supplements, and about half of them weren't (some interesting ones were held back). But at the time they were

published, and in 1973, the interest in Jewish life in Eastern Europe among the Israeli reading public was rather low.

So in the 50s and the 60s, while David Ben Gurion is building the state and all its apparatus, and ingathering the exiles, and defending the young state from a precarious security situation and establishing all that is necessary to create a state, Agnon is busy building a city in his imagination in Eastern Europe. He writes to the great critic at the time, Kurtzweil, “*boneh ani ‘ir*,” [I am building a city] in response to a query from Kurtzweil about what he was working on at the time. I think if you contrast in your mind the state building project of Ben Gurion and Agnon’s city building project, the reconstruction of an imaginary city, you can understand why there is little interest in it. At that time, stories about Eastern Europe were in a sense retrograde. If you read them in Hebrew literature, they were written in order to mount a critique on the corrupt nature of the old world of exile.

Now I think it looks very different to us. What we see in this collection of stories is something unprecedented in Jewish literature. This is a magisterial modern, modernist writer deciding to go back beyond modern memory to reconstruct through the medium of the modern story the lost world of Polish Jewry. What’s interesting about the collection of stories is that it ends in the early 19th century. In other words, there are books of Agnon and novels that also take place in Buczacz, such as *A Guest for the Night* and *A Simple Story* but they are much closer to the modern period. *Sippur pashut* is set in the years before WWI, and *A Guest for the Night* is in the aftermath of WWI. But here Agnon has decided to go back way before the possibility of a connection of a live memory to father, grandfather and so forth.

What’s extraordinary about this is that he undertakes to bring this world back to life, but he tries to do it through the medium of modernist art. In other words, not to leave the kitbag of modernist literary techniques with his more surrealist stories, but rather to take the whole kit and caboodle and to bring that world back to life through the vehicle of modern literature. I don’t know of any precedent. I think of Bashevis Singer’s *Satan in Goray*, his first novel, as something that is perhaps something like that but I can’t think of anything else.

It’s also worth thinking about this collection as Agnon’s response to the Holocaust. When I was a younger scholar I wrote a book called *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* and I looked at Agnon, looking for stories that relate explicitly to the Holocaust. There were a few here and there, but I didn’t really find the Holocaust, and I concluded in my short sightedness at the time that Agnon’s was a vast literary enterprise that had been formed before the war and couldn’t be recalibrated or turned around to relate to the Holocaust. I was terribly wrong. Agnon’s response to the Holocaust was his dedication to a different form of Holocaust literature. We think of Holocaust literature as a literature that is about death and atrocity or about the effects on the second generation, and

so forth. For Agnon, the response to the Holocaust was to go back, way back, and to try, with his tools, his kind of modernist storytelling, to revivify that world. It will be helpful to us when we think about Holocaust literature to widen the scope of that term and to not make the representation of atrocity the sole criterion of what we think of as Holocaust literature.

If you've ever taken a literature class you know that stories don't just happen, but they are told, by people, by a narrator, and every story has a narrator, whether the narrator is named and present, or implicit. Everything is told from some point of view. In the main canon of Agnon's stories, he often makes a persona of himself as a kind of narrator: a middle aged sort of religious persona, an autobiographical persona, a device that Arnold Band has called "a dramatized ego." It's a wonderful technique because it takes the egotism of the self and ironizes it, casts it in ironic terms. Agnon is always in a sense making fun of himself and using that persona as a way of viewing reality. When you go back to the 18th century you can't do that. You can't have the fictional convention of someone alive now being a witness then. So you need a narrator who belongs to that period. So what Agnon does in these stories is to invent a new kind of narrator who is a man of Buczacz, somebody of that time and place whose attitudes are aligned with the attitudes of the rabbinic elite of the time whose religious and theological beliefs are the beliefs of the serious rabbinic scholars of that time and he makes this entity (it's not a person, but a device) the narrator of those stories. So the narrator is somebody who is not in the 20th century but who belongs to the period in the stories. He is narrating events not from an ironic distance but as somebody who believes it as well, is someone who is part of that cognitive orbit. So we have a complex system here, where the narrator who is narrating to a kind of implied audience within the time of other listeners and readers who believe in the kind of things that people choose to believe in these centuries; but at the same time you have the implied author who is Agnon living in Jerusalem in Talpiot in the 50s and 60s, publishing in *Ha'aretz*, and communicating to a kind of authorial audience who are the literate readers of the literary supplements in Israel at that time. So the interplay of an implied audience of a narrator belonging to that period and a contemporary author communicating with a contemporary audience, makes these narratives very interesting. And I think this is one of the great things that Agnon has done, is to invent a narrator, and that narrator takes his authority from something of the voice of the *pinkas*, of the ledger, of that kind of communal voice, and it maintains some of the crotchetiness and the digressions that we find in Agnon in general. It was a big renunciation for Agnon because he had to give up the autobiographical persona and create something that was more impersonal in which he could not, in a sense, perform his ego the way he could in the other stories.

The final point I want to move toward in getting to our last story is the question of historical truth, or historicity. What did Agnon base his stories on? Are these stories true? Can they be used as sources for East European Jewish history? It's a very

fraught and difficult area. My senior colleague at JTS, Avraham Holtz, has devoted his life to tracking down the sources and realia and references in some of Agnon's major work, and in the end, it's an interesting mixture. Agnon is extremely aware of all the political changes and all the sociological differences in each period he's writing about. He is, for example, writing about the Polish period, the post partition period. But his stories tell events that are invented by the faculty of the imagination, perhaps based on kernels of local legends at the time but basically the production of an extraordinary imagination. So my question is, what is the effect of Agnon's invention? What is he doing when he takes the armature of historical events and augments it? That augmentation, that supplement of the imagination, what direction is it going in? What's its purpose? Is it to entertain, to spin a yarn? Why not, if you are going to write about history, just write about history?

The second story I want to discuss is called "Hashutafim" [The Partners]. This story is set in the middle of the 18th century and it is against the background of the fact that most cities in Galicia were privately owned by great Polish noble families. These nobles were otherwise known as magnates. A magnate could own a city and many dozens of towns around it and there were certain major families, the Potocki family, or the Rozowels, who would own hundreds of cities and hundreds of towns as well as vast tracts of forests and natural resources. One fact about the Polish/Lithuanian commonwealth is that there was no kingship, no central government. These lords were a law unto themselves. They had total control and were extremely wealthy and they owned the cities. The Jews lived in them by virtue of charters that had been granted to them. They had been originally brought to the areas of what was southeastern Poland at the time to be a managerial class and to mediate between the Ruthenian peasants and the Polish nobility. The Polish nobility wasn't interested in running shops and managing taverns. They didn't do labor, so the Jews did that for them. The scale of difference between a man like Count Potocki, who we are going to meet in a moment, and the Jews, was extraordinary.

The story is about a man who operated a tavern as his fathers did. Taverns were a very important way for Polish landowners to make use of their surplus grain. There weren't barges, there weren't trains, so if you had grain what were you going to do with it? What you were going to do with it was convert it into alcohol, and through a monopoly sell it to the peasants. It was the Jews who would do the selling because it was the Jews who remained sober, so this was a major occupational formation for the Jews. The Jews leased these taverns where the proprietary drink was the alcohol made from the grain of the Polish noble. This became an area of great debate and criticism where the Jews were accused of narcotizing the Ruthenian peasants and making the land not productive.

"Hashutafim" is about a man named Naḥum Moshe who is kicked out because he can't come up with enough of profit for the local Polish noble. He is

wandering in the woods. He doesn't have a way to make a living. He comes upon a Ukranian peasant who once had been a client of his in the tavern and whom he had been good to. He is a charcoal maker and the man's children have grown up and left home so he offers to teach the Jew the art of charcoal making. The Jew learns from him, and he moves to a village that is quite a distance from Buczacz in order to make a living at this new trade. He makes charcoal, in which you cut down trees, and you put them through controlled burns. Two or three days a week he gets up in the middle of the night and he makes a very long trek to Buczacz. The reason he goes there is that he wants to pray with other Jews in the synagogue, be a part of the minyan. He gets up around midnight and takes a long trip through the trackless forest to get there. And he does this out of devotion and a burning desire to be part of the community.

One morning, very early, in the middle of the night when Naḥum Moshe is on his way, he comes across a body that is slumped at the foot of a tree. He recognizes the body and sees that it is none other than Count Potocki himself. Apparently Count Potocki had been part of a hunting party the day before, he had become separated from the hunting party when he had chased an arrow that he had shot at a deer. Isolated in this trackless forest he couldn't be found. And there he was, asleep and in danger of dying of hypothermia. So Naḥum Moshe picks him up and puts him over his shoulder, together with his bag of charcoal and his tallis and tefillin that he is bringing to go into town, and takes him another hour back to his village, puts him on the bed that is made of rocks and straw in the one room that he and his wife occupy and they bring him back to life. This is the moment that I wanted to share with you and then I'll tell you the rest of the story.

Approximately 1800 Jews lived on Count Potocki's estates. Among them were leaseholders of farmland and taverns, grain merchants and businessmen who handled financial transactions, not to mention shopkeepers and artisans. But when it came to the customs of the Jews, he had not the least notion, and their prayers he had never heard, except for parodies of them by the banquet jesters who were a constant presence at his table. Now that fate had placed him in the home of a Jew who was preparing himself for prayer, he lay there with eyes wide open, waiting to see a Jew at prayer. But fatigue and the brandy overcame him and he fell asleep. (207)

Naḥum Moshe gets the wagon, and begins the journey, but of course a wagon can't get through the forest, so they have to abandon it, and the Jew has to carry Count Potocki. It takes a whole day to get back to Buczacz. All of the count's retainers are combing the area so there is nobody at the palace. Naḥum Moshe brings the count to the palace, puts him on a chair of some sort, and he leaves because he is incredibly uncomfortable being anywhere near the centralized Polish authority.

The count in the story is a man who is very grateful—very autocratic, but very grateful—and he wants to know how to reward this Jew and he has a chamberlain who advises him on the Jewish affairs of the area. Potocki says, “I want to give him some money.” The chamberlain says, “He doesn’t want any money.” “So what does he want?” He wants to live in town so that he can go to the synagogue on a daily basis. “So let him live in town.” Apparently there were no apartments available in the town, there was a great fire recently, so all the living quarters have been taken up. So the count himself comes up with an idea. He had recently built a magnificent city hall, which still exists and at the time was much greater than the city of Buczacz itself within the world of Ukraine. He said, “We built a gigantic basement in this city hall.” They had built a big basement because in the 17th century there were many Tartar incursions into the area where the Tartars would come in from the east and take off nobles and ransom them. So they built this with secret tunnels for escape. Potocki said, “There have been no tartar invasions for a long time. I am going to give the basement to him for perpetuity.” That’s very good, but how is he going to make a living? He is going to make a living by being given the yeast concession for the town. The yeast concession is usually given to the rabbi’s wife, to the rebbetzin, because the rabbis don’t usually get much of a salary and the wife can be given the yeast concession as supplemental income. It turns out that the current rabbi’s wife is ill. She can’t do it, so the yeast concession is available.

So it’s done. Naḥum Moshe has a place to live, and he has a livelihood and he and his family occupy this abandoned basement. He makes a gesture toward his co-religionists, the small merchants—the city hall is right in the center of town, right by the marketplace, and the small merchants who don’t have stores but who set up stalls everyday have to lug their merchandise back to the workers’ quarters which is quite a distance from the center of town. So he allows them every night to store their merchandise in the basement and to pick it up in the morning. He produces excellent yeast and the family is very happy.

This goes on for a century or so where descendants of his family enjoy this perpetual leasehold of the basement of this Polish city hall. The descendants of Count Potocki, on the other hand, are beside themselves. They are very embarrassed by this. They make offers of all sorts of money to the descendants of Naḥum Moshe, but they have this guaranteed forever. Finally it comes to an end when the Austrians take over and all these agreements are nullified. The story picks up again at the end of the 19th century when the last descendant has moved out of the basement because his wife had contracted some kind of illness from living in a basement. She’s died and one of his daughters gets swept off in a bad marriage and becomes an agunah, an abandoned wife, but the other daughter becomes a ward of the narrator’s mother, of the Agnon figure’s mother. They help her make a very good marriage to a man named Ringelblum. Their child is Emmanuel

Ringelblum, the great social scientist who created the *Oyneg Shabbos* archive in the Warsaw Ghetto. This is where the story more or less ends, spanning about a century and a half, bringing us up to one of the distinguished descendants of Buczacz, Emmanuel Ringelblum. (Simeon Wiesenthal is also from Buczacz, as well as Freud's grandparents.) This last moment brings us to the Holocaust. The Holocaust in these stories is not foremost in the awareness of the narrator, but it's on the horizon of this awareness. He knows about it but it's not part of his world, it's more like a magical realist premise.

I want to conclude by asking the question: Where did Agnon get this? The story may have grown from the germ of the fact that there was a family living in the basement of the city hall. This is a very anomalous situation, and so he is in a sense retrofitting a story of origins for how this family could have gotten there. What's very interesting to me is the passage we read earlier—the imagining of this relationship between this humble charcoal maker and the great Count Potocki, of this very intimate body contact where the Jew saves Count Potocki, carries him, has a physical relationship with him, brings him to his house. Count Potocki sees a Jew in his natural regalia, with the black boxes and the straps and so forth, something that even though he controls the lives of thousands of Jews he knew nothing about. His only experience of these lives is through the jesters who made fun of it. He doesn't really see it because he falls asleep, but what Agnon has done is to stage a kind of intimate encounter that perhaps could not have existed in real life, but also, he staged an event in which the Jew, in a sense, saves the great Polish nobleman.

So what is Agnon's intervention in this story? I see it as an attempt to turn the tables and to create a moment in which the nobility of spirit of this humble man with this *idée fixe* of praying with the community prevails in this moment of opportunity that is given to him. So what is being done is the ordinary relations between the noble Poles and the managerial Jews who are much smaller in the social scale—the balance is recalibrated and even reversed. This is accomplished through the force of Agnon's imagination by creating this incident, which I'm sure he made up out of whole cloth. So the intervention is a kind of *tikkun* or repair of what the historical record actually was. Jews worked very hard for the Poles. They did their jobs. They deserved much better than they had. And Agnon's restoring of this moment in Polish Jewish history through the imagination—the imagination does not feel constrained to represent things just as they were, but rather, to use the imagination is accorded freedom to rewrite things in a way as they should have been. So it's the creation of what we might call "alternative reality" or "alternate history," which is not denial, but rather an exercise in freedom in trying to repair a tear that can be restored through the ministry of the imagination.