

The Sound of the Heavens Splitting Open: Agnon's Response to the Holocaust in "The Sign"

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In his short story, "The Sign,"¹ Shemuel Yosef Agnon tells of his first reflections upon hearing of the destruction of European Jewry. What is astounding and odd about this tender and moving tale is that the author indulges in lengthy and ostensibly irrelevant tangents:

1. A detailed description of the customs of the Shavuot holiday (Agnon learned of the annihilation of his hometown, Buczascz, Poland, on the eve of the festival).

2. A long digression about the history of Agnon's neighborhood, Talpiyot, once a remote suburb of Jerusalem.

3. Various observations dealing with the *piyutim* of Solomon Ibn Gabirol; the *nusach* with which the *chazan* of Agnon's town used to chant them; the *chazan* himself; and sundry other synagogal features of the ravaged Buczascz.

Similarly, the story is laced with numerous side-comments about the differences between Buczascz and Agnon's Jerusalem neighborhood. There are also intermittent theological or poetic musings that randomly adorn the story.

Above all, there prevails in "The Sign" a tone of restraint — at times seemingly forced and artificial — but, in truth, highly credible and artistic. No less than four times the author interjects how amazed he is at his own composure, how he has gone through all the motions of the holiday, sanctified the *kiddush* wine (without tears!), and spoken serenely with his wife and children

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about Buczascz and its people. This affected composure is transparently brittle and headed for a breakdown, in very much the same way that the delayed grief of a mourner can have negative consequences. Only at the end of the story (in Section 39!) do we encounter the much delayed climax of Ibn Gabirol's "revelation" before the narrator. At that point the author can no longer control himself. As he recapitulates for Ibn Gabirol the reasons for his sadness, Agnon writes that "[his] throat became tight, [his] voice choked up and [he] broke out in loud crying."

The credibility of Agnon's narrative technique of restraint, stalling, and avoidance — his sporadic digressions from subject to subject — not only touches us but holds our taut interest. I suggest that this is so because Agnon's pattern of narration recapitulates the primal response of an individual who, upon learning of a fatal accident, is unable to assimilate the fact that he too has not been killed. A person in such a situation may be stunned by the fact that he can continue to function, make *kiddush*, chat with people, and the like. Particularly in the case of a death among one's peers, one is likely to reflect on the differences between their circumstances and one's own. It is logical, therefore, that Agnon should recall the difficulties and dangers besetting him, his neighborhood, and the entire *Yishuv* in Palestine. All of this fits the profile of a survivor by the skin of his teeth, who reflects on the irony of God's mercy to him.

It is only natural, furthermore, that such reflections be accompanied by feelings of guilt and inadequacy as well as by an urgent will to live. The author's avowal at the outset of the story — as he recalls the terrible Arab riots of 1929 (TaRPaT) — that he had sworn to return and rebuild his home after it had been sacked, establishes the survivalist tone of the entire story. Agnon notes that the *gematriya* (or numerical equivalency) of the year of the riots, TaRPaT, is equal to that of the words *Netzach Yisrael* (eternal existence of the people of Israel). The author's literary voice is certainly choked with elegiac overtones, but an even more dominant chord is his will to strive for some new "genesis," revelation, renewal of the Torah covenant, and *tzidduk hadin* (acceptance of the tragedy).

The timing of Agnon's description of the history of the Talpiyot neighborhood, with all of its risks and changes of fortune, might also confirm the folk saying that a drowning person sees the events of his life flashing before his eyes. It seems natural that an individual saved from danger would, perforce, remember other incidents in his life during which he had narrowly escaped danger. It is equally convincing that Agnon should vividly consider the tragic irony in the fact that he, along with the other first settlers of

Talpiyot, were long thought to be flighty eccentrics who had "buried their investments in desert real estate." Now, just these unstable mavericks (Zionist pioneers, in general, and "desert" settlement investors, in particular) are alive, while the others are dead.

Matan Torah

What are we to make of Agnon's lengthy descriptions of Shavuot customs in Buczascz as well as in Talpiyot? First, as noted, Agnon hears the terrible news on the eve of this holiday. His grief and his effort to assimilate the horrific reality merge with his will to overcome and to go on. In the context of the Shavuot holiday, with all its sensory affirmations of spring and renewal, Agnon affirms — painfully and unsurely — the imperative to go on living. In a manner reminiscent of the psychological affirmation of another modern Jewish religious (i.e., believing, observant) writer, Aharon Zeitlin, Agnon wills to declare a new "*bereshit*" after the Holocaust for himself, personally, and certainly for the entire Jewish nation under Zionism, as well. More than once in this section Agnon notes that in ancient days God mercifully gave "strength" to the Israelites so that they could endure receiving the Torah. Here and now, as well, strength is required in the post-Holocaust era to greet a new day of "revelation" and of starting over.

Matan Torah,² therefore, has ideological significance within the story. But more than that, from a literary-artistic standpoint the rich allusions to Shavuot customs and homilies (such as decorating the rustic sanctuary with greenery and hiking outdoors "to commemorate the giving of the Torah, which was given outdoors") serve to subdue and understate the response of mourning. Thus Agnon achieves his celebrated narrative control, which rarely devolves into melodrama.

Quasi-Theological Musings

Already in the first section of "The Sign" Agnon declares that "it is better to live in Eretz Yisrael than to live in the Diaspora, because Eretz Yisrael has given us the strength to defend our lives; not as in the Diaspora, where we confronted the enemy as sheep to the slaughter." Additional comments interlaced throughout the story reinforce this view from a theological slant:

1. (Section 8) The author thinks of the fact that "tens of thousands of Jews were killed and slaughtered and burned and

1020 231
6417 199

5
19
73
622
689

buried alive." He bows his head toward the earth of Eretz Yisrael and utters the verse: "My soul lives because of you."

2. (Section 18) Agnon writes: "In Eretz Yisrael the Holy One Blessed Be He retains personal jurisdiction over the Land, whereas in the Diaspora it is as if He has entrusted providence to the angels, and these deputies commit the malfeasance of ignoring the evil deeds done by the gentiles against Jewry...."

3. (Section 33) The author hears a sermon comment from a sage of Buczascz (who left for Israel and died there six or seven generations ago, but is here seen in a hallucination): "God will give strength to His people; God will bless His people with peace." What is the application of this verse? It applies to the present generation [i.e., the generation of the Holocaust]. Before God will bless His people with peace, He will give His people strength — to such a degree that the gentiles will be afraid of them and refrain from starting wars against them out of respect for their might."

This motif of praising the advantages of Eretz Yisrael does not detract from the author's grief. Agnon's ideological-theological bias is not at all strident, as it alternates with an intensely sympathetic, elegiac tone. The elegy also conceals an aggrieved, if not sacrilegiously indignant, voice. One of the most moving of Agnon's quasi-theological musings is recorded in Section 26, where the narrator stares at the many memorial candles burning in the synagogue:

The memorial lamps shone simultaneously and with equal light, and there was no difference between a candle for the soul of a person who had lived a full life and a candle for a person who had been killed. In heaven they undoubtedly distinguish between one candle and another just as they distinguish between one soul and another. It was a great thought which the Eternal had to choose us from among all the nations and to give us Torah and life. Nevertheless, it is a bit difficult to see why He created, at the same time, the kinds of human beings who take away our lives because we keep His Torah.

The words "it is a bit difficult" ("*ketzat kasheh*") have the linguistic nuance of talmudic argumentation, and function in our context as a most poignant understatement. These words are saturated with agitation and an upsetting irony. Such theological understatement serves to chaff at the open wounds of the believing narrator, and he hastens to move, "through God's mercy," to another, less threatening, subject. Reading the words, "these thoughts moved themselves away from me," the reader is subtly

and artistically convinced that our author is plagued to the core by religious doubts.

The above passage also prepares the reader for the intensification of feeling — finally, after 25 sections of avoidance or suppression — about the author's annihilated city. His mind is flooded by haunting thoughts, and from this point the reader can no longer distinguish between the narrator's wakefulness and dream state, between reality and hallucination, and between the living and the dead.

The language of understatement also renders Agnon's response to the Holocaust in a non-melodramatic way, which is most effective in our age of media overkill. (Lanzmann's movie "Shoah" is understated and moving for the same reason.) Instead of telling us that he was crying, for example, Agnon writes that "[his] eyes were burning like those candles," and that instead of the flowers surrounding the candles in the synagogue he feels only "thorns" in his eyes.

The story's understated voice augments its credibility. As Agnon conjures up the people of his city, and "sees" each and every person in the place he used to occupy in the synagogue, the reader suspends his disbelief. In spite of the fact that the schooled Agnon reader is accustomed to the blurring of the boundaries between the worlds of the living and the dead in his stories, this tale is one of Agnon's most notable achievements. Through his creative act of will the author "tastes" a bit of the thrill of the messianic day of resurrection. As he communes with the dead Agnon adds with the most exquisitely delicate irony: "Were it not that I found it hard to speak, I would have asked them what Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have to say about everything that has befallen this generation."

Something in the nature of theological solace we hear immediately following this remark from an old man who is standing around looking alive just like all the other dead people of Buczascz. The old man smiles and says in Yiddish "*ariber geshpringen*, that is to say, we have 'jumped over' and left the world of sorrows." This comment, drawn from the homilies of Nahman of Bratzlav, suggests that the victims now abide in the world of eternal life, and its tone of quaint resignation offers the narrator some consolation.

With the heightening of Agnon's agonizing in this story, he begins to narrow his focus to reminiscences about his childhood thoughts concerning the liturgical poetry of Solomon Ibn Gabirol. These musings recreate the world of a sensitive child and his first grappling with that most difficult of questions, "Why do the righteous suffer?"

אמ"ק
לדין

The shock of hearing the terrible news about the Holocaust restores the author to the status of a defenseless and unsophisticated youngster; it elicits the primal response to evil and injustice. For that reason Agnon relates his primal childlike amazement at reading Gabirol's "*Shachar Avakeshcha*" and "*Sheviya Aniya*" ("At Dawn I Seek Thee" and "Wretched Captive Maiden [i.e., Zion] in a Foreign Land"). Agnon recalls that as a child it was "a bit difficult" for him (again the understated language pointing to much deeper doubts): Why did God require this righteous man, Ibn Gabirol, to search for Him each morning and why, after this searching, did Gabirol stand "terrified" before God? Also, why did God not help that "wretched captive maiden," the people of Israel, to go out of their captivity? Individual and collective or national sorrow are merged in the figure of the *paitan*, Ibn Gabirol.

Agnon's simultaneous portrait of the elderly *chazan* of Buczascz enhances this pietistic vignette by virtue of the *chazan*'s unique melodic setting for Gabirol's *piyutim* and by virtue of the tears he would shed in chanting them. Here as in another story in the same volume, "Forevermore," Agnon dwells on the tears of pious worshippers, on the fact that these tears have deleted some of the letters of the text upon which they have fallen for generations, and that this devotional intensity has cosmic import.

The Sound of the Heavens Splitting Open

While the adults of Buczascz were engaged in the practice of *Tikun Leil Shavu'ot* and studying throughout the night, the young boys of the town, Agnon tells us (Section 12), would occupy themselves with the following striking custom: "I would stand with my friends outdoors; and we would look up to the sky in order to figure out the moment when the heavens split open and every wish one makes — even if it be outside the bounds of nature — if one is worthy and figures out the moment, the Holy One Blessed Be He grants it immediately."

The miraculous appearance of Ibn Gabirol (Section 35) seems to fulfill Agnon's most profound wish. In the wake of his city's destruction, he seeks a catharsis and longs for an "intermediary." That which he cannot achieve in the company of his family, the ability to cry, he achieves when he is alone reading the *piyutim* of Ibn Gabirol, and in a hallucinatory scene, pours out his heart to the figure of Gabirol himself.

The *paitanim*, so frequently depicted in Agnon as the most "faithful intermediaries" between the people of Israel and God, here serve as the medium for achieving his emotional catharsis

and as an adequate artistic mode of coping with the tragic events. The figure "speaking" with the narrator through extrasensory means affords him a miraculous avenue for commemorating his city.

Ibn Gabirol employs a mnemonic device, or "sign to remember," he says — but really to give eternal memory to — the name of Buczascz. He writes an acrostic *piyut*, whose lines begin successively with the letters of the city's name. The writing of this extrasensory *piyut* — which is not preserved but remains in the category of *piyutim* that exist in heaven for all time (unless or until they are "needed" below) — is portrayed by Agnon as the most exalted act of God's grace.³

The memories of Agnon's childhood, his detailed history of the Jerusalem neighborhood of Talpiyot (with the flower-filled hut-sanctuary [*tzerif*] in which Gabirol's revelation occurs) and the fascinating panoply of Shavuot legendry against which the story is told — all contribute to the sublime solemnity of "The Sign."

The title of the present article is taken from the striking line in the story (Section 37) which follows Gabirol's revelation. There the author is dumbstruck by his vision of the *paitan*. He hesitates to believe and suspects that he has become intoxicated by the aroma of the flowers in the *tzerif*-synagogue and by the general hallucinatory atmosphere of the all-night vigil of *Tikun Leil Shavu'ot*. He then continues with the most subtle elegance: "A restful silence was all around the earth beneath and the heavens above. There was not to be heard [either] the wishful promptings of the heart on earth or the sound of the heaven's splitting open (*kol hashamayim behibake'am*)."

The reader is drawn to wonder at this miracle together with the author. At this instant of wondrous suspension of disbelief, there is no doubt that the heavens have indeed split open, and in this magical moment Agnon has had his wish granted.

Agnon never states this fact explicitly, but that is the literary magic of his ability to create a mystical-hallucinatory moment. His childhood longing for the moment of wish-fulfillment becomes merged with his post-Holocaust need for the solace which only a child can be granted at the hands of his mother, his trusted elders, his rabbi, or in this instance, his *chazan*. In this moment of supreme vulnerability, Agnon has found the "faithful intermediary" to eternalize the name of his annihilated city, if not through liturgical mysticism then certainly through the art of this tale.

NOTES

¹ "Hasiman" ("The Sign") was first published in the eighth volume of Agnon's collected works, *Ha'esh Veha'etzim*, 1962. A fine English translation by Arthur Green appeared in *Response* magazine, 1973. Most of the translations in this article are my own.

² See Agnon's collection of midrashim on this subject, *Atem Re'item*, 1959.

³ The first story of the collection *Ha'esh Veha'etzim*, in which "The Sign" appears, also deals with a similar theme about a *piyut* being consigned to heaven. The complexities of that story and of the theme, generally, are brilliantly analyzed by Aryeh Wineman in his study "Paytan and Paradox" in *HUCA*, 1978).

A Reform Responsum

TOMBSTONE WITH CHRISTIAN MARKINGS

Question: The Christian spouse has placed a tombstone with crosses upon it on the tomb of her Jewish husband, who is buried in the Jewish cemetery. Should this tombstone be permitted to stand in the Jewish cemetery? (Rabbi K. White, Lincoln, Nebraska)

Answer: We should begin by looking briefly at the historical background of tombstones.

Some biblical graves were marked, as Jacob placed a pillar on the tomb of his beloved wife, Rachel (Gen. 35:20). Similarly, we find various biblical and post-biblical kings marking their graves (II Kings 23:17; Mac. 13:27). Tombstones were, of course, also used to warn priests (*kohanim*) so that they would not become ritually unclean (*Tos.*, *Oholot* 17:4).

Tombstones were also mentioned in the talmudic period, but nothing indicated that their erection was a universal custom (M. *Shek.* 2:5; *Hor.* 13b; *Er.* 55b).

Some of the medieval authorities considered a tombstone as customary on every grave (Solomon ben Adret, *Responsa*, #375). He also felt its erection was an obligation to be met by the family (*Responsa*, Part 7, #57).

Joseph Caro followed this thought (*Shulchan Aruch*, *Even Ha'ezer* 89:1; *Yoreh De'a* 348:2) and states that a husband is duty-bound to provide a stone along with burial for his wife.

The commentaries continue that emphasis.

It is clear, therefore, that the grave must be marked.

We must now ask whether it is permissible to use a stone with a Christian symbol in a Jewish cemetery.

There is, of course, no discussion of this in the traditional literature, for such a stone would have been unthinkable in the past, and the question would therefore not have arisen.

We can, however, be guided by it in a lengthy discussion of Moses Schick of the 19th century (*Responsa*, *Yoreh De'a*, #171) which dealt with inscriptions of the date from the Christian calendar on the tombstone. He was outraged and felt that this violated the commandment of Deuteronomy 18:20, "The name of other gods shall not be mentioned." Others, however, believed that this system of dating had become completely secular and, therefore,

