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# The Divine in Modern Hebrew Literature

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to which, when it comes to describing God's nature, we are only allowed to use negative attributes:

know that the description of God, may He be cherished and exalted, by means of negations is the correct description—a description that is not affected by an indulgence in facile language and does not imply any deficiency with respect to God in general or in any particular mode . . . we have no way of describing Him unless it be through negations and not otherwise.<sup>13</sup>

The linguistic nature of Maimonides' negative theology is significant for our discussion. According to Maimonides scholar Ehud Benor, Maimonides' concern is language's ability to represent divine perfections. Benor claims that Maimonides seeks to show that negative theology alone can yield the representation of God that, as required, does not violate God's unknowability.<sup>14</sup> Benor stresses that this is a radical thesis which implies that God cannot be represented as infinitely greater and more perfect than we but only as absolutely incommensurable, wholly other.<sup>15</sup> God's wholly other nature as necessary being defines the context of negative theology to maintain that since we have no knowledge of what God is, we only know what God is not.<sup>16</sup> If humans possess neither a description nor an experience of God, how can thoughts and words relate to God at all?<sup>17</sup>

In the current chapter, I discuss several ways in which Agnon's work reflects this problem and the ways in which he tried to solve it. Perhaps influenced by his father, Sholom Mordechai Halevi Czaczkes, who served as his main teacher since he was ten years old, and who wrote a long essay on Maimonides,<sup>18</sup> Agnon seems to be constantly aware of the Maimonidean linguistic restrictions in regard to referencing and describing God.<sup>19</sup>

I show that Maimonides' negative theology is one of the solutions that Agnon employs in order to solve the theological as well as literary problem he faced when attempting to represent the divine. For Agnon, as for the great medieval Jewish philosopher, God's essence can be referred to only through negative attributes, i.e., by saying what he is not rather than what he is and by describing his actions rather than his essence.

I argue that Agnon relies on the Maimonidean solution in order to reconcile the theological prohibition with his literary agenda. I demonstrate my claim by addressing first those rare occasions where Agnon directly refers to God and show that in these cases he employs what we can designate as negative attributes in the Maimonidean sense. Then I demonstrate that through a literary mechanism rooted in the Rabbinic (and Biblical) concept of "measure for measure" (*mida ke-neged mida*),<sup>20</sup> Agnon renders God's actions while avoiding depicting his attributes. Finally, I show how questioning this very mechanism in particular in his later works serves Agnon as a subtle form of criticism of divine justice.

### "Silence is Praise to Thee"

In this part of the chapter I argue that when Agnon does attempt to depict God—or, more accurately, God's presence—he does so only indirectly, by referring to it through the symbolic use of *silence*. The famous Maimonidean assertion that "the most apt phrase concerning [the depiction of God] is the dictum occurring in Psalms, 'Silence is Praise to Thee' (Ps. 65:2)"<sup>21</sup> was transformed in Agnon's work into his frequent employment of a paradoxical line from the famous High Holidays liturgy, *U-netane tokef*:<sup>22</sup> "And a still sound of silence shall be heard" (*ve-kol demama daka yishama*). Allusions to and variations on this line appear in several of Agnon's works, and it seems as though he uses them to describe the experience of sensing the divine presence.

The biblical roots of this famous line can be found in 1 Kings, 19 when God is revealed to Elijah:

And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains, and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound.<sup>23</sup>

After the negation of the presence of God in the wind, the earthquake and the fire, God seems to appear in the silence. In his stories, Agnon does not refer to the negation of the other elements, associated according to some *midrashim* with God's revelation to Moses. Instead, he alludes to the presence of God by focusing on the very negation that derives from this phrase.

In his story "Twice as Much," ["Pi shnayim," 1940],<sup>24</sup> for example, the narrator's search for the divine in the midst of Yom Kippur results in an encounter with a presence that is depicted in terms of its absence: "And silence prevailed everywhere, like a silence that has emanated from silence. Silenced (*damum*), I walked on the roof of my home."<sup>25</sup> Employing the Kabbalistic and Neo-Platonic terminology of emanation (*ha'atzalah*), Agnon can write about the divine without mentioning it by name. Like God, silence is beyond words. His emphatic use of the verb "damum" (silenced), which is the present simple of "lidmom" (to be silent), right after the repeated word "demama" (silence), creates alliteration. By using this technique, Agnon linguistically illustrates the moment of divine emanation, the emanation of that which is beyond words. He solves the problem of representing divinity by using silence, the negation of all sounds and words, to suggest the presence of God in the world ("silence prevailed everywhere") and inside man ("silenced, I walked"). According to Benor, in Maimonides' negative theology, religious expression that seems most fitting for talking about God is silence, "which limits the domain of linguistic articulation to instruction for oneself or for others."<sup>26</sup> It seems that Agnon adopts this mode to refer to the very presence of divinity in the world of his story.

Throughout the story, this non-sound acquires more of the quality of a sound: "In the space of the world the same voice is shivering as before. It encircles the sky and surrounds the air. I wanted to walk after the voice so that it would not expire (ad she-lo yikhale)." <sup>27</sup> The "shivering voice" (kol meratet) is not a full sound, but only a fraction of one. <sup>28</sup> Even this fraction is about to end, and the narrator chases it throughout the story, never really able to reach it.

Agnon scholar Baruch Kurzweil takes the dominance of the word "*demama*" (silence) in this story to suggest a world with no God. <sup>29</sup> However, a close reading reveals that the word "*demama*" in Agnon's work is not associated with the absence of divinity, but rather with its very presence. The different uses of "*demama*" here, and in many of Agnon's other stories, point towards the fact that God's presence cannot be captured in human language.

Agnon uses this method in several of his other works. Another example can be found in his story "Yatom ve almanah" [An Orphan and a Widow, 1922]. <sup>30</sup> The story is about an orphan boy named Ya'akov, who experiences a sort of epiphany in the midst of a prayer on the anniversary of his father's death: "While his singing flowed in the air, he [the cantor] covered his face with his prayer shawl and placed his head on the ark, and a still, thin sound rose and emerged from there, and the Glory of God was revealed upon you." <sup>31</sup>

As these examples show (and I could offer more), the presence of God is frequently depicted in Agnon's work through the metaphor of silence. In the story "Ha-tizmoret" [The Orchestra], <sup>32</sup> Agnon uses sound in an even more sophisticated way. The story describes the narrator's visit to an orchestra hall on the eve of the Jewish New Year:

The hall was full. Men and women violinists, men and women drummers, trumpeters, and players of a variety of instruments all stood, dressed in black, and played incessantly. *The great conductor was not to be seen in the hall*, but the musicians played as if someone were standing over them and waving his baton. And all the men and women musicians were my friends and acquaintances, whom I knew from all the places I had ever lived. <sup>33</sup>

The fact that the players in this orchestra come from different points in history suggests that the "great conductor" is not a flesh-and-blood conductor, but the master of history. The role of this missing conductor is to make sure that there is some kind of order in the chaos of sounds. Surprisingly, despite his absence, the harmony of sounds is maintained. The divine is not present in the hall, but providence has its own mysterious ways of dictating order.

We would expect that the absence of the great conductor would generate a cacophony of sounds, but instead, the narrator explains that something quite different happens: "Each man and woman was playing for himself. However, all the melodies joined to form a single song." <sup>34</sup>

Many of the stories of *Sefer ha-ma'asim*, the collection to which "The Orchestra" and "Twice as Much" belong, create a similar feeling of chaos. They are told in a dreamlike way, and their sense of unity and order is very loose. As Dan Laor

claims, *Sefer ha-ma'asim* represents a drastic shift in Agnon's writing, in that its stories consist of series of events with no clear causal relation between them. <sup>35</sup>

We should note that "The Orchestra" is the latest story of *Sefer ha-ma'asim*. The first six of the book's stories were written in 1932, and most of the rest during the early 1940s. "The Orchestra," written in 1946, may thus be read as the story that offers the most informed perspective on the events in Europe during those years. The fact that the great conductor is absent, but a certain order is kept in the hall/world, may suggest that Agnon is reflecting here on the question of God's presence/absence during the Holocaust, a question which he will return to in his later works.

### Theo-narration

We will return to this this topic of God's presence during the Holocaust shortly, but first I would like to get back to Agnon's reliance on the Maimonidean model and to connect it with what I propose to call his "theo-narration." In most of his work, Agnon does not depict God himself, and hardly ascribes any attributes to him. Nevertheless, he describes God's actions as the author of his story. Despite his apparent absence, God/the author plays a crucial role as the moving force of the plot.

In the opening of one of his first stories, "Agunot" (1908), we find a sort of manifesto that establishes the author as equivalent to God:

It is written in the scriptures that a thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves—strand on strand—a prayer shawl, all grace and all mercy, for the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in. <sup>36</sup>

Agnon uses mostly verbs here to depict God as the authority responsible for weaving the events of history. God's role is that of the author; He is responsible for connecting the events. The result of God's work is a complete work of art, made by weaving the various shreds into one whole. Not accidentally, the final result is described as a prayer shawl. <sup>37</sup>

However, the semi-manifesto continues by stating the following exception to this rule:

But there are times—alas!—when a hindrance creeps in, and snaps a thread in the loom. Then the prayer shawl is damaged; evil spirits hover above it, enter into it, and tear it to shreds. <sup>38</sup>

In Agnon's work, this exception is in fact the rule. In most of his works from this early period, the wholeness of the world as a work of art is "damaged" by some kind of sin. As Shaked states, the harmony in the world is "impeded generally because of an event in the lower world of the flesh." <sup>39</sup> Shaked suggests that Agnon's early works share a similar plot-structure that includes the main

character's predicament, which is viewed as the inexorable decree of fate, followed by a decision that he is then punished for. According to Shaked, "the protagonists' punishment appears to be a result of their decision; but in fact they are victims of the predicament."<sup>40</sup> However, as we shall see, in some of these stories the protagonist's action is what provokes God's reaction. In these stories, the unfolding of the sin, or the expectation of the punishment that it justifies, is what moves the plot forward. Since the events of the story are depicted in terms of a sin and its punishment, the process of reading involves the readers in an attempt to find out what sin provoked the consequence.

It is no wonder then that the exposition of "Agunot"—which would become Agnon's signature story, the one from which he would borrow his pen name—stresses the relation between sin and punishment (*sachar va onesh*). The work is presented as the creation of God, who moves the plot based on the characters' actions, and dispenses the reward or punishment that follows from these actions.

The rule of "measure for a measure" is used in Rabbinic literature as a hermeneutic principle of Biblical narration.<sup>41</sup> Agnon adopts this mechanism of causality intentionally, in order to question its merits, and by doing so to criticize God's ways while describing His actions rather than His traits. Many of Agnon's works produce a sense of frustration for the readers when the expected consistency of God is felt to be lacking. Their narratives are structured around a sin that eventually leads to punishment. Often, Agnon manipulates the order of events, so that the readers learn about the punishment before discovering the sin. The divine plan is mostly a reaction to the wrongdoing of man, even if initially the story presents God's action as completely arbitrary.

As an example, let us look at how the mechanism of measure for measure plays out in Agnon's first novella, *Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor* [*And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, 1912].<sup>42</sup> The basic storyline goes as follows: after living for a time in great fortune, a Jewish couple falls into poverty, and the husband, Menashe-Haim, leaves town and eventually becomes a beggar. Before he leaves, he receives a letter of recommendation from his town's rabbi, but in his hardship he sells the letter to another beggar. He spends the next few days at a fair, gets drunk, and falls asleep at an inn. There he is robbed of the money he received from the sale of the letter. The beggar who bought it dies, and the authorities find it on his body, which makes them believe that the deceased is Menashe-Haim. The news about Menashe-Haim's apparent death arrives at his hometown, and his wife gets an official Jewish court approval that releases her from the status of Aguna and allows her to remarry.<sup>43</sup> When Menashe-Haim finally returns from his journey, on the day of his wife's son's circumcision, he finds out that all he can do for the rest of his life is hide in the town's cemetery, so as to conceal the fact that she has unintentionally sinned (by marrying another man while her husband was still alive).

Surprisingly, the punishment of Menashe-Haim fits his sin perfectly well, if we assume the rule of measure for measure. In selling the recommendation letter, which had his own name on it, he is also selling his identity. His punishment is that someone else gets to live the life that was his, living with his wife and bringing up children with her. The sale is the sin of giving away one's identity,

and the punishment is, accordingly, losing this identity and being stripped of one's own name.

As Luis Landau has shown, this story is based on an old Hassidic tale that was circulated in Galicia in various written and oral versions, and which Agnon confirmed that he had read while he was still living in Buczacz.<sup>44</sup> In the earliest version, we find a very similar plot, but the man and his wife remain righteous throughout the story. The letter is stolen from the husband rather than sold by him, and he is depicted as a man who does no wrong. When the husband comes back to town, he shows up at a circumcision ceremony, and, not realizing that he is about to meet his wife, he enters her room. She dies when she sees him, and the rabbi of the town revives her. In a later version of the story, the husband himself sells the letter of recommendation.<sup>45</sup>

Agnon borrows the husband's sale of the letter from the second version. However, he diverges from this version by focusing on the psychological process that Menashe-Haim goes through in deciding to sell one of his very few possessions—the only one that connects him to his old life. It is not by chance that the money the beggar offers to Menashe-Haim for the recommendation letter is referred by the narrator as "the sin" ("and Menashe-Haim sees and his one eye turns toward the sin"),<sup>46</sup> using a line borrowed from the midrash: "And his one eye turns toward the sin."<sup>47</sup> In the midrash, this phrase refers to a man who is about to be involved with a "woman who is not his own";<sup>48</sup> one of this man's eyes is turned toward the sin, and the other looks around to make sure no one can see him. The midrash stresses that this man does not know that "somebody sits in heaven and watches him." Agnon's allusion is partly ironic, as we will find out later in the story that the sale is the reason that Menashe-Haim loses his wife to another man. On another level, it might reveal Menashe-Haim's recognition of the act as a sin. The fact that the phrase alludes to the presence of God is of course another method used by Agnon to remind his readers of divine providence. Menashe-Haim's downfall, then, is a divine punishment inflicted because of a sin he was well aware of committing. He makes the decision to accept the prohibited money consciously, and his choice is portrayed as a moment of belief that God is not there to see.<sup>49</sup>

In a manner typical of his fiction, Agnon intentionally blurs the expected symmetry between sin and punishment by pretending to abandon it altogether. In a clear allusion to the Biblical story of Job, he announces the protagonist's future agony early in the story, presenting it as a direct result of God's capricious will. In accordance with a common formula of traditional Hassidic tales, Menashe-Haim and his wife are described by the omniscient narrator as just and fortunate, though childless, people. Then the narrator states the following:

Seemingly, a man like him could live in peace and tranquility, enjoying his days happily, he and his wife, and see the pleasantness of God after [the age of] one hundred and twenty, when the day of his death arrives. However, when the Lord wants to shake the ways of a man, his luck will run as fast as it can, and there are many messengers of the divine will, who will lower the poor to the dunghill.<sup>50</sup>

In an ironic paraphrase of Psalm 113:7 ("He raises up the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the dunghill"), Agnon suggests that God's decision to change the path of Menashe-Haim's life for the worse reveals that His nature is just the opposite of the way it is presented by the psalmist. Moreover, the rhyming of this revised verse suggests a playful, careless God, who toys with the fate of his creatures. Alluding to the story of Job, where Satan convinces God to allow him to test Job's devotion by making him suffer, Agnon presents God as similar to Satan, willing to inflict agony and suffering on the happy and righteous couple.<sup>51</sup> Here, though, there is no attempt to soften the intentions of God, as in the case of Job.<sup>52</sup>

Agnon thus builds the exposition in a way that reveals what seems to be a capricious God. However, the plot of his novella counters this impression, since the punishment is determined by what is presented as a sequence of bad choices, and even wrongdoings, on the part of Menashe-Haim. The structure of the narrative suggests that he is punished by a God who is much more consistent than one might have assumed from the introduction.

Indeed, as Ya'akov Bahat suggests, the disproportion between the sin and the punishment is striking here, and is central to humanity's questioning of divine justice. Bahat expresses the frustration that Agnon prompts in his readers:

This unexpected and unforeseen event, the sale of the letter by Menashe-Haim, leads to a meaningless and hurried (divine) response, which grows bigger through connections and sub-connections and a chain of new events, and suddenly we stand in front of an amazing disaster—and we guess and our heart tells us that there is a consistency here which is based on cause and effect, which we could not have foreseen in advance, and whose meaning we can't understand; but we feel some faraway consistency, which we have not yet reached—and all our values are under threat of collapse because of forces beyond our capacity to understand.<sup>53</sup>

The critic's frustration reveals the greatness of Agnon's literary achievement. What Bahat describes as the feeling of a "faraway" consistency is the result of the cunning way that Agnon renders God in this work. The consistency is there, but it needs to be carefully reconstructed from what the author first presents as an arbitrary system. This does not mean that Agnon justifies divine justice; it is simply his way of representing God's actions and reflecting on its nature.

### Measure for measure

In the aftermath of World War I Agnon began expressing a much more direct and explicit frustration with the almighty God than in his earlier work. This development first appears in its full scope in his famous novel *Orea'h natah lalun* [A Guest for the Night], which many scholars have viewed as a high point in his writing career.<sup>54</sup>

Agnon started working on (*A Guest for the Night*) in 1938, seven years after he visited his hometown of Buczacz (which he names here "Shabush") at the end of

his visit to Germany.<sup>55</sup> Criticism of and irony toward God, which were concealed in the structure of the narrative in his earlier fiction, come to the surface in this novel, in the dialogues between the Shabushian characters. The plot itself is no longer subordinated to the disappointing divinity that allowed the destruction of the world that was depicted in the earlier works. By contrast, in his earlier novel *Hakhnasat kalah* [The Bridal Canopy], Agnon was still depicting a world that, despite its decadence, followed the traditional mechanism of divine causality.<sup>56</sup> Reb Yudil Hassid, the protagonist of the earlier novel, is a great believer who, as Agnon scholar Gershon Shaked notes, always interprets suffering as the best way that God chooses for man.<sup>57</sup> In the later novel, however, Agnon's protagonists are less confident in providence. The divinity that was previously so powerful now has no role at the level of the plot, and the novel laments its absence. The narrator hears the stories of the people of the town, who describe their suffering during and after the war, and their stories reflect a sense of tormented defiance against a disappointing God.

In this sense, the novel can be read as a collection of Job-like stories, except that here there is no mention of any divine plan. While the omnipotent narrator in *Ve-hayah he-akov le-mishor* reveals a divine plan to destroy the couple's happiness, here Agnon tells the stories of suffering from a purely human perspective. This time, his flesh-and-blood narrator, can only hear these stories, and in them the problem of divine justice is articulated in the most straightforward way.

The town that the narrator finds is only a shadow of what it had been in the past: "Of the large houses of two, three or four stories, nothing was left except the site."<sup>58</sup> One of the most iconic figures of the novel, Daniel Bach, is in many ways similar to this shadowy town. A veteran of the war, he lost his home, his fortune, four of his children, and his right leg. This tormented figure becomes a symbol not only for the total destruction of the old world but also for the rejection of that world's divinity.

The narrator still voices the old world's trust in God, but Daniel Bach, and most of his generation among the people of the town, no longer shares his faith in God. Early in the story, the narrator lays out his belief in the fairness of the divine system of reward and punishment: "While we are studying His Torah and observing His commandments, not one of the other nations can hurt us. When we do not obey His Torah, even the smallest goy can hurt us."<sup>59</sup> The narrator indeed tries to reopen the town's old study hall, but he finally comes to understand that the only reason people visit the place is to find a warm corner to hide from the cold.

Several scholars have suggested that Agnon's narrator here is a kind of reformer. As Shaked puts it, "he comes to the town and demands faith."<sup>60</sup> The opening of the Bet-Midrash was supposed to renew the covenant with God.<sup>61</sup> Agnon voices the competing option of rejecting the religious lifestyle and denying divine justice through the character of Daniel Bach. The author's approach differs here from that of his earlier fiction, in that he does not maintain a balance between these opposing views. Instead he presents himself, or perhaps his old views, via the narrator, whom he depicts as naïve. Daniel Bach, on the other hand, though a simple man, is presented as much more convincing. He is depicted as a once-righteous

man who was "as strict in his observance of minor duties as of major ones," as his father testifies.<sup>62</sup> However, when his father reminds him of his pious past, his reply is: "Like the rest of Israel who do the mitzvot and do not think."<sup>63</sup> The father voices the old world's faith, or at least what is left of it. He laments his son's desertion of the religious world. Agnon uses the father and the son symbolically, to reflect the generational crisis of faith in God. When the father suggests that his son's suffering might be the result of a trial from God, Daniel responds with one of the most striking monologues in the work:

A man can bind himself on the altar and give up his life for the glory of God, and prolong it until his soul departs. But to be bound every day, every hour, every moment, on seven altars, to have one limb consumed today and another tomorrow—this a simple man cannot stand. I'm only a human being, flesh and blood, and when my flesh rots and my blood stinks, my lips cannot utter the praises of the Almighty. And if I do utter His praises, is it the glory of God if a lump of rotting flesh or a skinfold of stinking blood cries out, "Thou are righteous, no matter what befalls me, and I have been wicked," and even then He does not lift His hand from me and continues to afflict me?<sup>64</sup>

In the earlier works, the question of whether man's suffering is the result of a divine trial was raised as part of the structure of the work. Here, however, Agnon allows his characters to voice this debate and completely avoids representing this question in the plot itself. In other words, he does not give us a reason to believe, based on the plot itself, that we can justify God by assuming that Daniel Bach's torments are the result of a divine test. Obviously, this makes such an assumption much harder to defend, and the word of Shlomo Bach, who tries to both comfort his son and bring him back to keeping the Jewish law, are doomed to failure not only in convincing his son, but also in convincing the readers.

Agnon himself is clearly not interested in convincing his readers, and not even in making them wonder, as he was trying to do in the previous works. He presents these "excuses" as empty and overused while Daniel Bach's answer is powerfully shocking.

The shock is only strengthened following Daniel Bach's explanation for why he does not keep the daily mitzvah of putting on *tefillin* (phylacteries):

So careful was I to put on tefillin every day that if I did not manage to put them on I ate nothing the rest of the day. One night I was lying in the trenches, buried up to the neck and over in soft rotting earth. The guns fired without stopping; the piles of dirt erupted and slid into the trench, and the smell of burnt flesh rose all around me. I felt the fire had caught my flesh and I was being burned to death, and I was almost sure I would not come out alive: I would either be consumed by the fire or buried in the ashes. At that moment the sun appeared in the sky; the time had come for the morning prayer. I said to the angel of death: wait for me until I fulfill the commandment of tefillin. I put

out my hand to seek my tefillin. My hand touched a tefillin strap. I thought a bullet had struck the bag where the tefillin were kept and they had been scattered all around. But when I pulled the strap and touched the tefillin, I was struck by a stench. I saw that one strap was fastened to the arm of a dead man, for that trench was a mass grave, and that arm belonged to a Jewish soldier, who had been blown to pieces as he stood in prayer adorned with his tefillin.<sup>65</sup>

Daniel Bach's graphic description<sup>66</sup> is very different from Agnon's typical attempts to dim the reality of his stories and to leave the description of this reality vague. In this work, his famous silences are absent. The silence (*demamah*) that represented the divine presence in the previous works is now replaced by words.<sup>67</sup>

This silence is also broken by using the city's poet, Leibtche Bodenhaus—who as a man of words seems to mirror the views of the author himself.<sup>68</sup> Leibtche Bodenhaus addresses for example the question of man's capability of understanding the divine when he discusses this issue with the narrator, presenting it as philosophical question:

He [Spinoza] says, "but to understand"—and surely, however hard we try, we shall never understand. Let us take, for example, the verse, "God is angry every day"—is it possible to understand why he is so angry? And if we have sinned against Him, does He have to make our lives a misery and direct all His blows against us? And would it not be better if he treated us according to the philosophic principle, which means: to understand?<sup>69</sup>

Agnon articulates his own doubts through the poet, contrasting the philosopher's trust in knowledge with the incapability of man to know or understand God. It may not be too far-fetched to assume that the author, in his despair upon his return from his visit to his hometown, had similar thoughts to those he puts in the mouth of Bodenhaus: "When I sit in my room, at my table, and rhyme verse after verse, chapter after chapter, it seems to me that nothing in the world is right. And how can it be right if its Creator is angry with it?"<sup>70</sup> In *A Guest for the Night* Agnon voices his own anger at that angry God, making his defiance loud and clear.

Perhaps surprisingly, in his next major novel, *Temol shilshom* [Only Yesterday, 1945], the Biblical mechanism of reward and punishment is back in place. As with *A Guest for the Night* I will not discuss this monumental and extensively researched work at length; I would like simply to point out the way Agnon imitates the Biblical mechanism of causality by developing here a system of sin and punishment that ultimately reflects the Rabbinical principle of "measure for measure."

In his book on Agnon's work, mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Amos Oz suggests that the main question in the novel is whether the protagonist, Isaac Kumar, will be rewarded with a miracle.<sup>71</sup> His tragic fate at the end of the novel—he dies a miserable death after being bitten by a rabid dog—attests to the

unfulfillment of this hope. Indeed, even Agnon's narrator seems to wonder about divine justice at the end of the novel:

And now, good friends, as we observe the adventures of Isaac, we are shaken and stunned. This is Isaac who is no worse than any other person, why is he punished so harshly? Is it because he teased a dog? He meant it only as a joke. . . . Isaac should have stood on the soil and seen life on the earth and brought his father and his brothers and sisters up to the Land of Israel. . . . And you, Rock of Our Salvation, great in counsel and mighty in work, from the mouths of those who thirst for Your Salvation, You would have heard Your praise all the days.<sup>72</sup>

Many scholars have dealt with the question of what Isaac Kumar's sin might have been, much as the narrator himself does.<sup>73</sup> As in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, Agnon intentionally makes us wonder here about the protagonist's sin. It may not surprise us that, when Isaac Kumar thinks of what he believes to be his sin (his relationship with Sonia, whom he wrongly thinks is his friend's lover), the narrator mentions that "his sin came and stood before his eyes, and a great sadness embraced his heart, and like Menashe-Haim in his day, he pondered to himself, How easy it was not to do that. But what was done can't be taken back."<sup>74</sup>

Here too Agnon introduces different clues in regard to the nature of his protagonist's sin; at least one of these admits the possibility that the sin and its punishment might satisfy the rule of measure for measure. As stated previously, Isaac dies of rabies, which he contracted from a sick dog. This dog is none other than Balak, on whose back Isaac had written, a few months before, the words (in Hebrew) "crazy dog" (kelev meshuga).<sup>75</sup> This action makes Balak's life extremely miserable, since anyone who sees him either runs away in fear or kicks him away. According to the rabbinic tradition, the sin of "leshon ha-ra" ("evil tongue," meaning derogatory speech about another person) provokes the punishment of "nega" (medical affliction, or illness).<sup>76</sup> The Talmud suggests that even if someone uses defamatory speech against non-humans, such as trees or stones, he may still deserve this severe punishment.<sup>77</sup> Isaac Kumar's act of slander (writing "crazy" on the back of the dog) is rewarded, then, with the appropriate punishment. As in the famous biblical story (Numbers 12) in which Miriam is punished with leprosy for her derogatory speech about her sister-in-law, Zippora, Isaac Kumar is afflicted by God for his defamatory words.

In this respect, Agnon is alluding to, or perhaps even imitating, Biblical justice. Along the same lines, we should note the significance of the name Balak. This was the name of the king of Moab, who, according to the Biblical story, asked the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites. Though he refused to do this, Balaam did offer Balak advice. He suggested that the king send Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men to commit the sin of sleeping with non-Israelite women. This plot succeeded and resulted in the divine punishment of the Israelites in the form of a plague (Numbers 22–25). It is perhaps not by chance that both stories appear in the book of Numbers, which is structured around a series of sins and their divine

punishments.<sup>78</sup> Agnon uses a similar structure, perhaps suggesting with his Balak that Isaac's punishment symbolizes a divine collective punishment.

Agnon scholar Arnold Band suggests that the historical circumstances of the years in which Agnon worked on the novel (1943–1945) are crucial for our understanding of Isaac's fate. According to Band, the novel invokes the story of the binding of Isaac, but unlike the Biblical narrative, this story offers no moral lesson and demonstrates no divine grace. Agnon's Isaac is punished with a horrible death for minor sins, and thus his senseless binding echoes the historical situation of the Jewish world during those years, "a cosmos with no traditional Jewish reasoning, that has, apparently, no judge and no justice, a cosmos which is all but absurd."<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Agnon's narrative may, on the surface, attest to the absence of divine justice, but here again he sophisticatedly introduces an alternative narrative, which suggests that a systematic and consistent divinity has been present all along. The seeming absence of God is the result of a limited, human-centered view. The ways of Agnon's God, like the ways of the Biblical God, might seem mysterious and unjustifiably harsh from a man's perspective. It is ironic, and fully in accordance with the rule of measure for measure, that Isaac Kumar's punishment for sinning against a dog is a disease caused by a dog that results in symptoms that are similar to an animal's features and its Hebrew name (Kalevet) includes the word for dog (Kelev).

Band associates the disproportion between the sin and its punishment with the absence of divine justice from the world of the novel, and presents it as Agnon's response to the Holocaust.<sup>80</sup> However, as we have seen, this very disproportion might in fact reveal the presence of God in the work. Again, this is not to suggest that Agnon justifies God; in fact, quite the opposite seems to be the case. Representing God's action through the system of reward and punishment allows him to refer to God and even *criticize his harsh ways*, without ascribing any direct attributes to him.

### When "Israel was Loved by God"

More than a decade later, perhaps with a better historical perspective on the Holocaust, Agnon would indeed write a story in which he associates the divine system of reward and punishment, or better yet its collapse, with the Holocaust and its aftermath. In his story "Be-sha'a ahat" [In One Hour]<sup>81</sup> from the collection *Ir u-meloa* [A City and Its Fullness written between 1953 and 1960, and published posthumously in 1973], Agnon exposes the mechanism of reward and punishment precisely in order to point at the presence of God in the pre-destruction world.<sup>82</sup> He uses the readers' familiarity with this system to manipulate their expectations and to voice his criticism of or disappointment with God.

Instead of structuring the narrative around a certain sin that would lead to punishment, Agnon makes the focus of "In One Hour" a mitzvah, a good deed, that leads to reward. Interestingly, the good deed involves saving a doomed marriage. While Agnon's earlier stories often feature hopeless marriages, the marriage in this story is divinely blessed. The story is told as an idyllic tale of a Buczacian

couple, modest and dedicated to God and the Torah. The couple's only surviving son, Menahem, is depicted as a righteous boy, very wise and learned in the Torah, a kind of genius. The storyteller notes that "all the sons that were born [to the couple] after him died, and what was taken from them, God paid back to them double in Menahem, their son."<sup>83</sup> This early hint at divine justice is not accidental. The work is filled with various reminders about the presence and justice of God; it describes an ideal situation, where God ensures that there will be rewards for good and righteous people. However, this world, as we will learn at the end of the story, no longer exists.<sup>84</sup>

The remarkable feeling of balance and tranquility that abounds in the world of this story—for instance in its beautiful description of nature and wildlife—derives from the fact that it includes a just and merciful God. The only shadow in the life of Menahem and his parents is the fact that he is already 15 and not yet married. But soon the mother's prayers for a bride for her son are answered in a miraculous way, which is immediately attributed to the fact that God has heard her prayers:

And that plea that she read at that hour was a request for the marriage of her son, since Sarah was praying before Him, blessed be He, that He in his mercy would bring her son his match. And now come and see His mercy and kindness, blessed be He. She didn't have the time to finish her prayer, and the Almighty had already brought her son his match, and they were already sitting and preparing the wedding.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, the father and the son do find a bride in the course of a casual trip. She is a poor woman whose original groom had refused to marry minutes before the wedding ceremony was scheduled to begin, because she could not offer proof that there was money for her dowry. Menahem's father suggests that his son should perform a mitzvah and marry the bride instead. This decision to save the bride is depicted as a moment of revelation for the father and the son: it is a righteous deed and a reward at the same time. The prayers of the mother are rewarded by the act of God, and the father and the son feel that God has allowed them to perform a great mitzvah, and therefore understand that the marriage will be blessed. Indeed, the bride is revealed to be magically beautiful, and this is interpreted as a sign that the marriage is part of God's will, that God is the one who sent the bride to his beloved Menahem.

In a complete reversal of the earlier works, the tale concludes with a happy ending. The world of the story is depicted as a balanced and harmonious place, and the wedding itself is the peak of this happiness, celebrated by the entire town. The marriage serves as a sort of a promise of a happily-ever-after future, which is a reward for the town's good deeds and trust in God. This ideal tale of a balanced world, where divine justice is present and where causality is in the hands of a kind and loving God, is a beautiful recollection of a world that was lost. However, one might suspect that this beautiful tale is told only to lament the abrupt

disappearance of this reality from our world. Indeed, the story ends with the following conclusion:

They all came to the place of the canopy until the entire town was there . . . and who is good like the people of Buczacz, and how good is the deed of someone who marries a woman for the sake of God? And he who marries a woman for the sake of heaven will have children that are great Torah scholars. All the sons and sons of sons of Menahem, son of Avraham David, all are sons of the Torah who would have followed the words of the Torah, and would have been known in the remarkable gates of the *Halakhah*; however, the enemy came and killed them all. They perished, but His mercy, blessed be He, didn't perish, since every good deed brings fruits and the fruit of the fruits. And if God will reward me in life and will give me strength and tranquility of soul, I will tell what good deeds the good people of Israel were doing in the time that God, blessed be He, was good for Israel and Israel was loved by God.<sup>86</sup>

The utopian world of the story, symbolized by the wedding—which is supposed to mark its continuity—is doomed to destruction. This is the destruction not only of the city and its people but of the entire history of the Jewish people. Menahem's parents are named Avraham (David) and Sarah—an allusion to the nation's first parents. The name of Menahem, son of David, is a clear allusion to the Messiah (Menahem ben David). The names symbolize the past and the future of the Jewish people, both of which were lost in the Holocaust, along with any hope of redemption.

Agnon creates a striking contrast between the presence of divine justice and this impending destruction. The end of the story may serve as an accusation against God for abandoning his beloved people—for not keeping the promise of the wedding, of redemption. God's mercy is still in the world, but ironically, the people who need it are no longer there: they were all murdered in the Holocaust. What seemed to be a work meant to glorify God is thus ultimately revealed as a story that exposes God's great abandonment of his people. The ideal tale of a balanced and just world is no more than an elegy for a world and a town that have vanished under God's watch.

Furthermore, I believe that the story is more than just a critique of theodicy. It also contains a meta-poetic statement. The narrator declares that his role is to tell the good deeds of the people of Israel when God was still with them, which means that the world after the destruction cannot be represented in such a manner. After all, its main mechanism no longer exists. He states, alluding to Lamentations 3:22 (and the benediction of *modim* in the daily *Shmone esre* prayer), "They perished, but His mercy, blessed be He, didn't perish." This points at the fact that since the people (and not God) are no longer part of this world, the presence of God is no longer relevant. Divine justice had a crucial role in the world of Agnon's work, as long as this world existed. Exposing the mechanism of reward and punishment by breaking it, Agnon can comment on both his role as an author and God's role in his work.



### “I Don’t Want to Say Much”

A careful reading of *A City and Its Fullness* reveals the extent of Agnon’s critique of divine justice, which presents disturbing questions about providence. In the way of a conclusion, I would like to discuss one last novella from the book, in order to demonstrate my claim that Agnon uses the mechanism of reward and punishment to reflect on God’s ways while avoiding attributing him human qualities. The novella *Ha-mashal ve-hanimshal* [The Parable and Its Lesson] is structured around a sequence of sins committed by Aharon, a wise young Torah scholar, who later goes astray and becomes a heretic.<sup>87</sup> Aharon’s first sin was no more than sharing an idea about an interpretation of the Torah with a friend. However, he did this during the public reading of the Torah. The caretaker of the town’s synagogue tells this story after he suddenly expels another young Torah scholar from synagogue on account of the same sin. The synagogue caretaker repeatedly frames the act of talking during prayer or the reading of the Torah as an act of competition with God himself, “as if the words of mere mortal were superior to those of the living God.”<sup>88</sup>

In what follows, Aharon begins to question God’s ways more thoroughly. The episode in the synagogue marked an attempt, perhaps not even conscious, to question God’s words and to put himself and his words before God. Now his questions become bolder, as he asks, “What God has done to this people, what lay behind this terrible anger?” Eventually, he moves beyond questioning: “He reached the dire conclusion that the God of Israel had disengaged Himself from Israel, Heaven forbid, and had become, Heaven forbid, an enemy.”<sup>89</sup>

We can see that these thoughts of Aharon’s are not that different from the narrator’s words at the very end of “In One Hour,” as if Agnon is using Aharon here to voice his own defiant sentiment. However, the story becomes more complicated, as the synagogue caretaker explains that Aharon later vanished and left his wife, who was the only surviving member of the rabbi’s family (the others were murdered in the 1648 Khmel’nitski pogroms). Due to the disappearance of her husband the wife became Aguna and could not remarry until her husband was proved to be dead. In order to save her from this tragic fate, the rabbi and the synagogue caretaker go down to hell to find Aharon, to confirm that he is indeed dead. Agnon’s description of this trip into hell alludes to Dante’s hell; in a sense, it is a journey into Agnon’s divine justice system. The caretaker’s report of what he saw there is meant to shake human pretensions of being able to understand divine justice and predict its workings.

The journey to hell confirms Aharon’s questioning of God’s just ways, since people that were considered just and righteous in their lives are punished there as sinners. At the same time, Agnon maintains the “measure for measure” system that is found throughout his work, albeit in a somewhat humorous or perhaps cynical manner. It turns out, for instance, that there is a whole section of hell set aside for those who talked during the reading of the Torah or during prayer. Their punishment is that, however much they try to talk, no one can hear what they say.<sup>90</sup> The visit to hell shows therefore that the rule of measure for measure applies even there. Alan Mintz points out in his essay about the story that “some of the

greatest sages of history are suffering the torture of hell because of what seemed to be merely an excess of zeal is destabilizing discovery that produces troubling questions about the proportionality of human conduct and divine punishment.”<sup>91</sup> Mintz goes on to suggest that the Khmel’nitski massacres of 1648 continue to influence the life in Buczacz even years later and that the theological wound that they opened is embodied in Aaron’s suffering for eternity in Hell “because he could not understand how God could let His people be viciously slaughtered.”<sup>92</sup> But Agnon seems to go beyond commenting on the life in Buczacz at the end of the 1930s. The hell that he describes is eternal and ubiquitous and so is the divine justice.

Agnon’s interest in questions of divine justice found its way into the narrative structure of his fiction. He uses the Biblical and Talmudic principle of measure for measure as the main mechanism of causality in his works. This mechanism allows him to represent God’s presence in the world, while still adhering to the Maimonidean principle of referring to God only through his actions.

In many of the works discussed in this chapter, the protagonist seems to be disproportionately punished for what might look like a minor sin. This disproportion allows Agnon to illuminate the presence of God in the world and to criticize his ways. As we have seen, he expresses more direct frustration with God in his later works. In his late novella, *Kisuy ha-dam* [The Covering of the Blood],<sup>93</sup> written almost a decade after the stories of *A City and Its Fullness*, Agnon even allows himself to utter the following accusation, in a description of the misery of his protagonist:

And so he got used to it and forgot that there is a merciful God who raises up the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, who lost his mind for a short hour and (therefore) wastes his days in torments.<sup>94</sup>

One might recall that Agnon used the same sentence from the Psalms (“He who raises up the poor from the dust”) in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*; here, however, the explanation for his protagonist’s suffering is much different from the one in the earlier work. It is the result not of his own sin, but of a sin committed by God.<sup>95</sup> This sardonic statement about God’s role in the Holocaust is one of the rare cases in which Agnon attributes human qualities to God. According to Shaked, the plot of the story suggests an ironic view of “both the Master of the Universe and the chosen people.”<sup>96</sup> However, later in the story the narrator returns to his typically controlled and disciplined storytelling, while at the same time reflecting on providence with irony:

But I am not complaining about anything. . . . Since—out of complete confidence in the divine intellect (ha-sekkel ha-elohi), which is above the brain of his creatures—I say that everything is done well and in the right time. And I don’t want to say much, since I can see the question that appears on the tip of your tongue: if so, what is the logic (sekkel) in killing a third of the nation of Israel in the hand of a “abominable creep” (Shikutz Meshumam)?<sup>97</sup> Well what is the logic in killing all of Israel’s haters? But if I with my small intellect can’t understand the big intellect, does it mean that I am a fool?<sup>98</sup>

Like his narrator, Agnon “doesn’t want to say much” about God and the nature of divine justice,<sup>99</sup> but, as I hope to have demonstrated in this chapter, this is exactly what he does throughout most of his work.

## Notes

- 1 For new perspectives on this issue, see: Dalia Hoshen, *Sipur (eyna) sugiya ba-gmara* [A Story Is (Not) a Talmudic Problem] (Jerusalem: Reuven Mass, 2007); Elhanan Shilo, *Ha-kabalah be-yetzirat S.Y. Agnon* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2011); and Yaniv Hagbi, *Language, Absence, Play: Judaism and Superstructuralism in the Poetics of S. Y. Agnon* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).
- 2 Hoshen, *Sipur (eyna) sugia bagmara*, 17–32. Ziva Shamir goes as far as to argue that Agnon’s work should be seen as part of a secular revolution in Hebrew literature. See: *Shay Olamot* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-me’uchad, 2011). Hillel Weiss argues against this claim in his article “Ha-im ha-totsa’a hi teko?” [Is the Result a Tie?], *Ayin Gimel* 1 (2011): 138–152.
- 3 Translated by Barbara Harshav as *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 4 See: Amos Oz, *Shtikat ha-shamayim: Agnon mishtomem al Elohim* [The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993). Another book that has recently been published on the topic is Tsahi Weiss’ *Mot ha-shekhinah be-sipurey S. Y. Agnon* [The Death of the Shekhinah in the Stories of S. Y. Agnon] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009). Both books focus on three or four works, and do not include a broader discussion of the changes and developments within Agnon’s oeuvre.
- 5 Oz, *Shtikat ha-shamayim*, 11.
- 6 Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 1.
- 7 See also: Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al Sipurey S. Y. Agnon* [Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1963), 328–352 and Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 23–39.
- 8 See, for example: Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey S. Y. Agnon*, 242.
- 9 Warren Zev Harvey, “The Question of the Incorporeality of God in Maimonides, RABaD and Spinoza,” in *Mehkarim Be-hagut Yehudit* [Studies in Jewish Thought], ed. Moshe Idel and Sara Heller Vilensky (Magnes: Jerusalem, 1989), 68.
- 10 Tamar Rudavsky, *Maimonides* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 36.
- 11 Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, 40.
- 12 Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), Part I, Chapter 54, 119.
- 13 Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, Chapter 58, 134.
- 14 Ehud Z. Benor, “Meaning and Reference in Maimonides’ Negative Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 88 (1995): 349. On Maimonides’ religious language, see also: Arthur Hyman, “Maimonides on Religious Language,” in *Perspectives of Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel L. Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library, 1991), 175–191; and Daniel Davies, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 55–68.
- 15 It seems like Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of the Ultimate Other was influenced by this idea, albeit shifting the transcendental qualities from God to the Other. See: *Alterity and Transcendence*, trans. Michael B. Smith (London: The Athlone Press, 1999).
- 16 Benor, “Meaning and Reference,” 344.
- 17 Benor, “Meaning and Reference,” 347.
- 18 *Encyclopedia le-halutzey ha-yishuv ve-bonav* [Encyclopedia of the Founders and Builders of Israel], ed. David Tidhar (Sifriyat Rishonim, 1958), 3:1463. <https://www.tourolib.org/>

- 19 Acknowledging his father’s crucial role in his education, Agnon wrote: “from him I have received most of my little knowledge (רוב תורת המועט) and he also inspired me to write poetry”. In a letter from 1927, *Me-atzmi le-atzmi* [From Myself to Myself] (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), 7–8. On Agnon’s early education, see: Dan Laor, *Hayey Agnon: Biographia* [The Life of Agnon: A Biography] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 21–22.
- 20 See *Babylonian Talmud*, Tractate Sanhedrin, 90a.
- 21 Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Part I, Chapter 59, 139.
- 22 An early Palestinian liturgical poem, most likely composed by the sixth-century liturgical poet (*paytan*), Yanai, which appears in the prayers of the High Holidays. The poem was later attributed to Rabbi Amnon of Mainz. For more about the *piyyut* and its traditional attribution to Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, see: Avraham Frenkel, “Demuto ha-historit shel Rabbi Amnon mi-Magenza” [The Historical Figure of Rabbi Amnon from Magenza and his piyyut “ve-netane tokef” in Italy, Germany and France], *Zion* 67 (2002): 125–138. On the role of Rabbi Amnon from Magenza in Agnon’s work, see: Michal Arbel, “Ha-mofet shel Rabbi Amnon mi-Magenz” [The Miracle of Rabbi Amnon from Magenza: The Development of a Cultural Icon in Agnon’s Work], in *Ma’ase Sipur: Essays on Jewish Prose-Fiction*, ed. Avidov Lipsker and Rella Kushlavsky (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2009), 2:325–359.
- 23 1 Kings 19, 11–12.
- 24 First appeared in *Moznayim* 9, nos. 4–5 (1940): 389–399. The title “Twice as Much” may be an allusion to another story related to Elijah which appears in 2 Kings, chapter 2. Replying to Elijah’s inquiry concerning what he can do for him before he leaves, Elijah says: “I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me.” (2 Kings 2, 9–10). It may also allude to the conclusion of the book of Job, where God “gave Job twice as much as he had before” (42:10).
- 25 S. Y. Agnon, “Pi shenayim,” in *Samukh ve-nir’e* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1967), 129.
- 26 Agnon, *Samukh ve-nir’e*, 345.
- 27 Agnon, *Samukh ve-nir’e*, 137.
- 28 The word “meratet”—“מרתת”—can also be translated as “fearing”; however, it seems that Agnon tends to use it as “shivering” or “trembling.” Compare for example its use in *Sipur pashut* [A Simple Story]: “Hirshel stood in front of Blumah; his legs started to collapse and his mouth began to tremble,” trans. Hillel Halkin (New York: Schocken, 1993), 28.
- 29 Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey S. Y. Agnon*, 242–243.
- 30 First appeared in *Rimon* 3 (1922): 38–39. This story is a revised version of an earlier story, titled “Ya’akov’s Dream,” which Agnon wrote in his youth, while he was still living in Buczacz.
- 31 “Ve-kol demamah dakah boke’a ve-ole misham, kevod H’ aliech nigla.” “Yatom ve-almanah,” in: Agnon, *Elu ve-elu* [These and Those] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), 167. For more about the story, see, for example: Michal Arbel, *Katuv al oro shel ha-kelev* [Written on the Dog’s Skin] (Be’er Sheva: Keter, 2006).
- 32 Published in *Ha’aretz*, September 25, 1946.
- 33 Agnon, “The Orchestra,” trans. Judah Stampfer, in *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1970), 199.
- 34 Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 199.
- 35 Laor, *Hayey Agnon*, 258.
- 36 Agnon, “Agunot,” trans. Baruch Hochman, in *A Book that was Lost and Other Stories*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (New York: Schocken, 1995), 35, with my own minor modifications.
- 37 Gershon Shaked suggests that Agnon’s introduction to “Agunot” is structured in a form of a pseudo-midrash that is assembled from authentic materials. See: Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 34.
- 38 Agnon, *A Book that was Lost and Other Stories*, trans. Baruch Hochman, 35.
- 39 Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 35.

- 40 Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 93.
- 41 See: Yehonatan Ya'akovs, *Mida ke-neged mida ba-sipur ha-mikra'i* [Measure for Measure in the Biblical Story] (Jerusalem: Tvunot, 2006).
- 42 This work, composed in Neve-Zedek late in 1911, was originally published in nine sections in *Ha-po'el ha-tza'ir*. In 1912 it was republished as a book, sponsored by the famous prose writer Yosef Hayim Brenner. This was Agnon's first work published as a book; he was 24 at the time. For English translation, see: *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, trans. Michael Kremer (New Milford: Toby Press, 2017).
- 43 "Aguna," which literally means "chained," is the Halachic term for a woman who cannot be released from her status as a married woman due to the unknown fate of her husband.
- 44 Luis Landau, "Mekorot ve-psevdo mekorot be *Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*" [Sources and Pseudo Sources in *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*], in *Al Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor: Essays on Agnon's Novelah*, ed. Hillel Weiss (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1993), 147. According to Landau, Avraham Ya'ari was probably the first to point out the similarity between Agnon's story and the earlier versions of the tale, including a Yiddish story titled "Der yored."
- 45 Landau, *Al Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*, 147–149.
- 46 Agnon, *Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*, 96.
- 47 *Midrash otiyot de-Rabbi Akiva* (the letter Zayin), 405, 24.
- 48 *Midrash Otiyot de-Rabbi Akiva*, 405, 26.
- 49 I disagree here with Hillel Weiss, who argues that until later in the story, Menashe Haim is not conscious of any wrongdoing. See Weiss, *Al Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*, 86. Also, Shaked's assertion that the main causes of the characters' downfall generally come from outside of them (Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 117), does not seem to be accurate if we take into account this allusion to the midrash.
- 50 Agnon, *Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*, 62.
- 51 For a comparison with the biblical story of Job, see: Weiss, *Al Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*, 85–87.
- 52 See also: Ariel Hirschfeld, *Likro et S. Y. Agnon* [Reading S. Y. Agnon] (Tel Aviv: Ahuzat Bayit, 2011), 181.
- 53 Ya'akov Bahat, "Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor," in Weiss, *Al Ve-haya he-akov le-mishor*, 59.
- 54 See, for example: Kurzweil, *Masot al Sipurey S. Y. Agnon*, 67; and Shimon Halkin, "On *A Guest for the Night*," in *Le-Agnon Shay* [For S. Y. Agnon], ed. Dov Sadan and Ephrayim Aurbach (Jerusalem: Ha-sokhnut ha-Yehudit, 1966), 91. Shimon Halkin found in *A Guest for the Night* a crucial turning point in Agnon's understanding of the crisis of the life of the nation ("On *A Guest for the Night*," 91–92). According to Shaked the contrast in form between the literary tradition and the revolution reaches its pick in this novel. See: Shaked, *A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 146.
- 55 The novel appeared in 1939. For a discussion of this visit, see: Dan Laor, "Masa veshivro" [A Journey and its Collapse-Poland, Summer 1930, in *Hikrey Agnon* [Agnon Studies], ed. Hillel Barzel and Hillel Weiss (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1994), 261–282.
- 56 The novel takes place during the years 1820–1821. Its chapters first appeared during the years 1919–1920 in the Hebrew periodical *Miklat*. During the 1920s, Agnon published revised versions of its chapters as short stories in various literary journals. In 1931 the stories appeared as a novel. Although the novel was published after World War I, unlike *A Guest for the Night* it depicts the pre-war Jewish world.
- 57 Gershon Shaked, "Ha-ma'amin ha-gadol: Eiyunim be-hakhnasat kalah" [The Great Believer: Reading *The Bride Canopy*], in *S. Y. Agnon: Mehkarim ve-te'udot* [S. Y. Agnon: Studies and Documents], ed. Gershon Shaked and Refael Weiser (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1978), 118–153. As early as 1932, Dov Sadan suggested that Yudid Hasid's strong belief should perhaps be viewed critically, as a kind of naiveté (*Davar*, April 8, 1932).

- 58 S. Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (New York: Schocken, 1968), 2.
- 59 Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 29, with my own minor modifications.
- 60 See: Gershon Shaked, *Omanut ha-sipur shel Shay Agnon* [The Art of Storytelling of S. Y. Agnon] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1973), 244. See also: Reuven Shoham, "Ha-mesaper ha-bilti meheyman be-Orea'ch nata lalun" [The Unreliable Narrator in *A Guest for the Night*], in *Hikrey Agnon* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1994), 287.
- 61 Reuven Shoham compares the narrator here to Bialik's in "Al saf beit ha-midrash." In both cases, the unreliable narrator promises to redeem his people, but his promise is revealed as empty. The narrator here, according to Shoham, presents himself as a man of God who helps light the fire in the Bet-Midrash. However, "any connection between this fire and God is accidental." See: Shoham, *Hikrey Agnon*, 295.
- 62 Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 34.
- 63 Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 34.
- 64 Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 34, with my own minor modifications.
- 65 Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 36.
- 66 Daniel Bach echoes the figure of Elisha Ben Avoya, the eminent Talmudic scholar who became a heretic. The Talmud brings different explanations for Elisha Ben Avoya's heresy, but what is common to them all is some encounter with unjust suffering. Elisha Ben sees, for example, the tongue of Rabbi Hutzpit—who was one of "ten martyrs," rabbis who were famously executed by the Romans after they were caught keeping mitzvot, which the Romans had forbidden—thrown in the garbage. Elisha Ben Avoya then famously said: "Will a mouth that produced pearls be licking the ground?" Agnon hints at the figure of Elisha Ben Avoya, but ironically makes Daniel Bach experience the torments himself.
- 67 Agnon's imagery here is similar to that of Uri Zvi Greenberg's horrific war poetry. For a discussion of the literary responses to World War I in Hebrew, see Glenda Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008).
- 68 For example, Agnon and the poet use similar language to describe their inspiration. When Agnon refers to his own stories in his later collection *Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* [The Fire and the Woods] he speaks of them as something "that God in his kindness gave me" (ahser hanani elokay ba-hem). See: Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962), 272. The poet in *A Guest for the Night* explains how "God above bestows his mercy upon me, . . . gives me inspiration, and sends me rhymes for every single verse in the Torah," Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 409.
- 69 Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 407.
- 70 Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 408.
- 71 Oz, *Shtikat ha-shamayim*, 86.
- 72 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbarah Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 639.
- 73 See, for example: Arnold Band, "Ha-het ve-onsho be-Temol Shilshom" [The Sin and Its Punishment in *Only Yesterday*], *Molad* 24 (1967): 75–81; Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey S. Y. Agnon*, 95–115; Dov Sadan, *Beyt din le-heshbon* [A Court House for Criticism: Essays on Authors and Books] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1963), 224; Eddy Zemah, *Kria' tamah ba-sifrut ha-ivrit shel ha-mea' ha-esrim* [Fine Letters: Hebrew Literature of the 20th Century] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1990), 25–39; and Michal Arbel, "Ha-hazanit hatzuvah, Miriam Devorah ve-hazanim aherim be-sipurey Agnon Ha-hazanim ve-Le-fi ha-tza'ar ha-sakhar ve'" [The Sad Woman Cantor, Miriam Devora and other Cantors in Two of Agnon's Stories], *Ayin Gimel* 2 (2012): 108–130.
- 74 Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 280. Kurzweil connects the fate of Menashe Haim and Yitzhak Kumar and argues that their horrible fate is a result of the lack of "unseemliness" (ee-ha'ta'ma) between man and god (Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurey S. Y. Agnon*), 32.
- 75 Agnon, *Tmol Shilshom*, 275.
- 76 The origin of the prohibition of "leshon ha-ra" is in Leviticus 18:16.

- 77 See: *Tosefta*, Tractate Erkin, 2:7.
- 78 A similar case of slander that provokes illness as a punishment can be found in Numbers 13, where God punishes the spies for their defamatory report on the Land of Israel.
- 79 Arnold Band, "Ha-het ve-onsho be-Temol Shilshom," in *Shay Agnon ba-bikoret ha-Ivrit* [S. Y. Agnon: Critical Essays on His Writings] (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 1992), 303–304 (First appeared in *Molad* (1967), see note 73).
- 80 Benjamin Harshav suggests in his introduction to Barbara Harshav's translation of *Only Yesterday* that God is absent from the novel altogether. See *Only Yesterday*, viii.
- 81 First published in *Haaretz*, September 1955.
- 82 For a discussion of the changes in the ways in which Agnon depicts his hometown of Buczacz before and after the Holocaust, see: Sidra De-Koven Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 78–94.
- 83 S. Y. Agnon, "Be-sha'a ahah," in *Ir Umeloa* [A City and Its Fulness] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973), 560. The story has recently appeared in translation under the title "In A Single Moment," in *S. Y. Agnon, A City and Its Fulness*, trans. Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks (New Milford: Toby Press, 2016).
- 84 It is important to note that this idyllic description of the town and its people stands in a sharp contrast to many of the stories in *Ir umeloa*, in which the situations, events, and characters have a dark and tragic nature.
- 85 Agnon, "Be-sha'a ahah," 583.
- 86 Agnon, "Be-sha'a ahah," 588.
- 87 The story first appeared in *Haaretz* in 1958. For an illuminating discussion of this novella, see: Alan Mintz's "Essay on The Parable and its Lesson," in *The Parable and Its Lesson: A Novella*, trans. James S. Diamond (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 79–155.
- 88 Agnon, *The Parable and Its Lesson*, 2.
- 89 Agnon, *The Parable and Its Lesson*, 23.
- 90 Agnon, "Be-sha'a ahah," 415.
- 91 Mintz, "Essay on The Parable and Its Lesson," 95.
- 92 *The Parable and Its Lesson*, 95. Mintz argues that the strange, discontinuous and unresolved elements in the story can be explained by the pressure exerted by the trauma narrative of its narrators.
- 93 The novella was written in 1964 but not published until after the death of the author, as part of the anthology *Lifnim min ha-homah* [Within the Wall] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1975).
- 94 Agnon, "Kisuy ha-dam," in Agnon, *Lifnim min ha-homah*, 75.
- 95 One can also understand this as a reference to the protagonist's loss of mind, but it seems as if Agnon intentionally leaves it vague and open to both interpretations.
- 96 Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 234. Shaked even notes that there is an "unusual link in this story between reward and punishment, created by the parallel between the protagonist bleeding and the slaughtering of the Jews" (*A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 233). He notes that a similar reward and punishment is created between the ways of the Jews of the Land of Israel and their fate. (*A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 238).
- 97 A reference to Hitler.
- 98 Agnon, "Kisuy ha-dam," 96.
- 99 One may even wonder whether it is not for this reason that he did not publish the story; perhaps he indeed felt that he went too far in what he says here about God and His justice.