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edited by Jacob Neusner

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AGNON, A STORY

for Arthur Cohen

Save for ←**אב**, two letters and an arrow pointing nowhere but to the left, painted in red on the brown brick wall, there was nothing to distinguish Agnon's villa from the row of other villas on Joseph Klausner Street. There was no nameplate on the door, no card on the mailbox, no announcement that Agnon, Israel's greatest writer, lived here. I had been told of a sign nailed to a tree, "We beg your silence—Agnon is creating," but I saw no sign. The villa stood at the head of the street, atop a hill that overlooked Jerusalem in the valley below—shabby, dissheveled, perhaps the ugliest villa of all, yet indistinguishable from its companions. There was, in fact, no way for me to know that I had actually arrived at Agnon's home.

A uniformed messenger, his grey cap perched precariously upon his too small head, pedalled his bike up the same steep path I had climbed. Twice his bicycle threatened to topple, to turn back over and down the hill; each time his foot clamped down upon the ground, sent a cloud of dust swirling around his legs and the wheel of the bike. He pulled a handkerchief out from his pocket, wiped the sweat from his forehead and patted his neck, careful not to stain his clean white shirt collar. Seeing me, he smiled apologetically, sighed aloud, and climbing back on his bicycle pedalled further up the hill.

He amused me, just as already I had been amused that Agnon lived on the street of Joseph Klausner, the great Polish Hebrew scholar who had decisively proven that what was good in Christianity was Jewish, and everything else simply the work of Paul. I thought it a bit odd that they had not named the street after Agnon himself; but then I assumed they were only waiting until his death. The messenger had parked his bicycle beside me and now at my side, was combing his greasy black hair as he tried to catch his reflection in the shiny visor of his cap. Finally satisfied with the appearance of his face, he hitched up his pants, cleaned his fingernails, and brushed off his

shoes. He smiled nervously and pushing his way through the metal gate, jumped up the three short steps and began to pound furiously on the wooden door, shaking the house with his official urgency. But there was no answer and if this was Agnon's house, Agnon was not at home. Taking a letter from his pocket, he bent down and slipped it under the door. He got back on his bicycle with a look of great relief.

"Who was the letter for?" I asked.

He looked at me, very puzzled that I should not know. "Agnon. Of course."

"He isn't there?"

"The Master is not at home," he recited formally. And tipping his hat at me, he rode back down the hill, weaving from one side to the other through the clouds of dust, all the while turning round and waving his hand in farewell until, finally, he was lost in the billows of the valley. Then I pushed through the gate, sat down on the steps, and waited for Agnon to come home.

I too had written Agnon a week earlier on a postcard:

I am a young writer, come from America to Israel to study in a yeshiva for a year. Because you and I are the only two religious writers in the world, I think we should meet. Write and tell me when.

I received no reply to my card but more significantly, he did not answer and tell me that I should not come. But come where? When I wrote him, I had not known Agnon's address, only that he lived in Jerusalem, and thus, had addressed the card simply: Shai Agnon, Jerusalem. It was possible before the Six-Day War, when Israel maintained its resemblance to one overgrown and quarrelsome family whose members would not dare to withhold each other's mail, to assume that a letter addressed in such a way would eventually reach its destination. And perhaps because of this fact, I felt myself a distant relative of Agnon—a conviction which no doubt spurred me on in my search through the streets and alleys of Jerusalem and, like my letter, eventually and inevitably to his door. Still it was no help in actually finding Agnon's villa, a task which despite its banality, yet remained foremost if we were ever to meet.

Finding the elusive, protean Agnon was not simple, though less difficult than I first imagined. I refused to tell anyone of my plan, except for my one Israeli roommate, Ginge, a large, patient, red-haired student who knew the entire Bible by heart and had helped me write the postcard; he had wanted to add a biblical phrase or two as a flourish but I had insisted on the simple, brief message: Agnon would be impressed by me alone. I possessed a vision of how we should meet and its significance. None of the stuff of universality,

only its particularity: The young writer from America meets the aged genius of Israeli literature—The old, religious writer discovers the young religious writer for whom alone he has been writing all his life—The encounter of a Leopold Bloom and a Stephan Daedalus who are not failures and mediocrities but both honest-to-God visionaries—A new Religious Literature is born, prophecy revived—The old writer adopts the young writer, spends his last years nursing his disciple to maturity and on his death bed, whispers to the crowd gathered around that a new star has arisen, than an even greater writer than himself has appeared. This was my mission.

I left the swaying corn stalks and sand dunes in the midst of which my yeshiva lay, south of Tel Aviv, and came to Jerusalem on the first day of Chol Hamoed, intent on finding Agnon and with no idea how to go about it. I looked first in the telephone book and city directory but his name was not listed. Then I remembered having seen two years earlier in a magazine a photograph of the writer above the caption, "Israel's Joyce or Isaiah?" It had been a tiny photograph, a portrait of his head—the face seemed too large for the frame, a long, fallow, drooping face, the thin hair brushed over the forehead, sharp blue eyes, an altogether unremarkable face for such a great writer. I began to walk the streets of Jerusalem looking for that face. I stood on street corners. I visited cafes and searched for the face at work, reading the newspaper over coffee, or talking with a friend. I asked whomever I met if they knew where Agnon lived or where I might find him. Nearly all knew he lived in Jerusalem, that he dwelt in their midst; but no one could tell me exactly where. "Yes," one old lady began, her head covered with a babuschka so that only one eye peered out at me. "I did know where Agnon lives—twenty five years ago. If you would have asked me then, even twenty years ago, I could have remembered." Agnon had not moved; everyone simply had forgotten. Now they remembered only that they had once known.

To some the question seemed startling, even shocking. I stopped one chasid as he hurried along, his hands clasped behind his back. "*Ribbono shel olom*" he moaned, raising his eyes to heaven, and fled down the street. At last, I met a beggar who, for half a lira, told me where one Agnon lived but it was the wrong Agnon, the seller of old scraps of leather and parchment. And finally, after three hours of this searching, I did suddenly see the writer—the tall, thin figure, stooping slightly, his jacket hanging loosely from wide, rounded shoulders, hands stuffed into the pockets. I froze. He was walking down Ben-Yehudah towards me. I did not know whether to stop him right there on the street, or to follow him to another, less crowded

spot, or perhaps to run the risk of losing him altogether if he was on his way to an appointment. Before I could decide, the figure began waving his hands at me. I did not understand—Agnon waving at me whom he had never met? Then he was upon me and I recognized Grosserman, a friend of my father and the vice-president of a bank, and realized not only that he was not Agnon but that all along, I had been imagining Agnon as Grosserman. Grabbing my shoulders, he swung me around. "*Ma yesh?* What's up? You look suspicious." Unthinking, I asked him if he knew where Agnon lived. "And what do you want with Agnon?" he asked. Now I regretted having asked him, began to make up a story about a friend who was writing a dissertation on Agnon. "*Be'emet?* In truth?" Grosserman interrupted me. "I know too much. The young writer seeks the old writer—it's too obvious. But beware of Agnon," he warned me. "He'll end up writing a story around you." Impatient, I asked him again where Agnon lived. "Ach . . . I know . . . In Talpiot. Take a bus to Talpiot and ask. Everyone will know Agnon's home." I did not bother to say goodbye to Grosserman. I jumped onto the first bus and off at the central bus station where I ran to the information booth.

"What bus does Agnon take?" I asked the small dark girl.

"Agnon . . . There is no Agnon Street."

"No—Agnon the writer."

"Agnon the writer? How do I know? What do you want from me?"

I tried again. "What bus goes to Talpiot?"

"The 6 or the 7."

"Which one?"

"Depends where you want to go."

"To Agnon."

She slumped back in her chair, and with one long sliding motion of her hand, swept me away. The 6 or the 7: I searched the bus station, found the 6 first, and climbed aboard.

"Where does Agnon get off?" I whispered to the bus driver.

He looked up at me strangely. "What?" I repeated the question. "You want to take this bus, or you don't want to?" I shrugged, moved down the center aisle, and asked the other passengers if they, by chance, knew where Agnon got off. No one knew. Many had never heard of Agnon. Others turned their heads away, annoyed and disinterested.

The bus pulled out, moved slowly through Jerusalem's center and out again, climbed hills, passed through strange streets and across unfamiliar sights. I began to feel lost, felt myself a foreigner, and then recalled that I was only in Jerusalem, that no one could ever

become fully lost in that city. But just when I was about to pull the bell and get off, the bus driver called out, "Hey, Agnon!" and waved me to the front. I ran, lurched forward, thrown by the jerk of the bus suddenly halted. He pulled my head down to his mouth and whispered hoarsely, "Here. Up that path. Ask." And left me alone on the side of the road.

I struggled up the path. Past large colonnaded homes the like of which I had never seen before, huge and forbidding Turkish mansions, gigantic windows piled high with hanging vines and climbing ivy, showcases shrouded in heavy brocade, ornate furniture, great antiques. Inhabitants moved within, slowly and oddly. I did not even think to stop and ask them. I just continued walking up the hill. I ceased to search for Agnon—as if in the end, he should find me.

Already the sky was beginning to darken—did night descend first upon the hills? Jerusalem in her valley beneath, her white roofs glistening in the light of the setting sun, shone red like a blood tangerine, a distant star magnified a million times its size. I let my eyes close and how long after I do not know, heard singing, the voices of young children, the sing-song rhyming of ten or twelve young children. I opened my eyes, they were dancing alongside me, skipping and holding hands. And smiling above them in my weariness, I felt old, suddenly very old.

"*Amerikai?*" one little, brown-haired, tanned and tussled boy asked me, pulling at my arm. I nodded, then asked them if they knew where Agnon lived.



"Agnon!" They all began to pull at me, at my arms, legs, and sides. I ran to keep up with them—they led me down sidestreets, on confusing, winding paths and finally, up the last steep hill. "Agnon," the little brown-haired boy whispered, pointing to the house. "Agnon is writing," he said in an almost reverential voice.

Before leaving, each child insisted on shaking my hand with great solemnity. They departed, running down the hill quietly. The uniformed messenger came, and left. I sat down on the doorstep and

waited, but Agnon did not return. As I waited, I wrote home to my parents and told them how I was waiting for Agnon on his step. (They would later write back and compliment me on the good company I was keeping.) And after a good hour of waiting, I gave up on Agnon returning, gathered myself up from the darkness, and went home to the room I had rented for the week.

II

Shortly before leaving for Israel, on a warm, sunny Chicago morning, I had sat with a friend on the steps of the theater at which we both worked. A month earlier, my friend had directed my first play and unable to move beyond that moment of glory, we had fallen into the habit of meeting every morning on those steps to sit, talk, and stare across the street. He was twice my age, old enough to be my father, but ignoring my youth, he treated me with no condescension as an equal and fellow artist. That morning, he had turned and abruptly told me, "If you stay in America, if you immerse yourself in America, stick to your guns and suck the marrow of America dry into your bones, you are good enough to become another—" and here he mentioned the name of one playwright whose popularity just then had attained the heights of a cult hero.

I did not give much thought to his compliment. I left Chicago not very concerned with becoming another celebrated playwright, not with America, nor with wicked, biting vacuity. I came to the yeshiva on the first day of Elul, the month of *teshuva*, of turning back to God, which precedes Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Elul, however, was equally the month in which we Americans were ripped from our past lives, uprooted from America, conquered and subdued into the life of the yeshiva. Emboldened youths who had dared to abandon our fathers and homelands, we felt ourselves transported back in our age twelve, fifteen years—until we imagined that our parents had abandoned us in the midst of this wilderness, a raging, fighting tumult of cries and prayers and frenzied study from which we were forever denied entrance. And there, under the pressure of that ordeal, I forgot rapidly that I had ever been, or wanted to be, a writer.

I was not a brilliant student of the Talmud. My mind, never trained to the rigor of logical complexity, was too clumsy to race through the swift, labyrinthine arguments of the Rabbis. My friends

penetrated them effortlessly; I stumbled, saw them in the distance ahead, vague, indistinct forms, my own eyes clouded with the dust of the path. I grew convinced that I was utterly incapable of seeing to the bottom of the argument, of distinguishing its essence from the external details. Often, I could not grasp the significance of a point obvious to everyone else. The rabbis of the yeshiva who gathered in the afternoon to quiz their students learned quickly to ignore me; my slowness and hesitation had no place within the controversies, among their contradictions and profundities.

If I was not to be an *illui*, a prodigy, I determined nevertheless to become a *masmid*, an exemplar of concentration. Like an athlete, I trained my mind and body to sit before the text for ten, twelve, finally fourteen hours a day. When I tired of *gemorrah* and commentaries, I learned *chumash*, *tanach*, ethics, philosophy—any religious text. Then also I first tried Agnon's *Yomim Noraim*; my Hebrew however was not good enough and I understood little of Agnon's intent, missing entirely the sly wit and hint of disbelief. I stopped reading all English, attempted to talk and think only in Hebrew. But before the text my mind strayed, the black letters unhinged themselves from the page, and I dreamt in English—but of the yeshiva and the passion which seemed to convey before it the yeshiva like the determined advancing of an invisible army.

I came to hold the yeshiva, the routine of learning, of eating only in order to learn, of sleeping only in order to learn, the mingled voices and cries of learning, the tumult that rose from the *beit midrash* like the lifting of a great cloud of incense in awe that was half terror and half desire.

It was as if you should see an endless line of tall, adult men, standing one behind the other, all pulling terribly at an invisible rope in a game of tug-of-war against an invisible adversary. You should think them mad, hopelessly lost—if not for the sight of their muscles all pulling together, the tension of their sinews, the straining of their veins, the hardness, the unanimity with which they pulled together, the utter seriousness with which they fought to conquer their adversary.

And our adversary also pulled. He also demanded our unbroken, untried strength and suffering. We did not suffer in a conventional sense. We were not wan, pale, and sickly youths, bent and hunchbacked from sitting over the text. When we repented of our sins, we did not fast twice a week, roll our unclothed bodies through ice and snow, nor flagellate ourselves. We did not think to confess before the entire yeshiva and humiliate ourselves publicly, as had been the custom in certain European yeshivot. There was no

flesh-denying asceticism, nothing colorful about our undifferentiated devotion to the Law; but we did nevertheless suffer.

Instructed to perceive every moment of the day as a *bechina*, a test in which our character was put to trial, we engaged in relentless self-examination. We could not stop thinking. We learned, and learned. Until one sentence always contradicted another and we were compelled, in order to preserve our sanity, to piece back together the text in a new fashion. But in our attempting to grasp the *svarah*, the argument which underlay the law, and the *chidush*, the "new" and "special" law which had to be inferred from the text because of a superfluous word or because one case and its law might be deduced from another and therefore could not be understood in its apparent sense, we suffered most terribly. The idea of a *chidush* was more than literary fastidiousness on our part, more than a neurotic obsession to prove that the Rabbis, who had composed and compiled the *mishna* and *gemorrah* under the unerring, never careless Muse of divine guidance, had never uttered an unnecessary word. The true *chidush* was the exceptional point, the hidden clue, which mediated and imparted to the law its conceptual framework and profundity. And in our persistence to reveal this secret, in the sitting over the text until we collapsed in exhaustion in the pushing and breaking of our minds—in this maniacal desperation, when the discovery of the *chidush* had become the ultimate *bechina* (For what else had He created us, if not to understand His Law?), our yearning for holiness approached the threshold of physical pain.

This striving I called the passion of the yeshiva. I do not know why I first chose the specific word *passion*. I know only that any of the other possibilities—fervor, ardor, enthusiasm, or zeal—did not suggest the suffering which also was present; and that there was no word in Hebrew either to describe what I sensed—except, possibly, *kin'ah*, the envy and jealousy on behalf of the Lord which so moved Pinchas that he ran forward, sword in hand, and slew the idol-worshipping adulterer. Yet *passion* was curiously foreign to the yeshiva, beyond its language: I doubt if anyone there would have understood me. Surely they would never have called the rhythm of their daily routine passionate. Perhaps it was only the yearning of my own imagination. This idea of passion nevertheless entered deeply within me, stirred some pristine response and became, finally, an element of my imagination, the *alpha* upon which I endeavored to build a vision of a religious literature.

Yet at those very moments when I was wholly convinced that I had finally succeeded in rooting myself within the yeshiva, I would remember the theater and as if through some minor, thoughtless

error, feel myself committing an immense abomination against the Lord. I recalled the theater, my frenzied, maniacal fascination with the idea of a play, and recognized there also a passion, not entirely dissimilar from the passion of the yeshiva. But then I reminded myself that it was not a passion for Torah and in the service of God. I knew nothing of Dionysus, of the goat-dance, and pagan ritual. Yet intuitively, without reason, I equated the theater with the service of idolatry. I meditated upon the theater though I meant, in fact, the imagination: the theater was merely the metaphor and object for my guilt. The imagination itself was the fount of idolatry at which I had worshipped in my youth, the antithesis to the passion of the yeshiva, the unholy *omega*.



For those transgressions of the imagination, I repented on Yom Kippur. *My God and Master*, I prayed in the *tephilat zakah*, the first of the confessions through which I would arouse my shame and become the clay shards into which my sins had broken me—*My God, You gave me feet with which to rush to Your service but I have hastened towards madness and folly. You gave me a mouth in order to speak Torah but I have only uttered silliness and contempt. You gave me eyes with which to learn Torah but I have only looked upon nakedness and lewdness.*

Then I added: *My God, You gave me a mind, imagination, vision but I have only worshipped the theater, created, directed, and acted out its idolatries.*

Overzealous to repent, I had been the first student to arrive at the *beit midrash*, a huge, cavernous hall, its walls looming above, arching and magisterial like the shell of an abandoned, half-completed Gothic cathedral. Other students gradually wandered in. I heard the rising murmur of their prayer. My eyes opened. Whiteness had filled the yeshiva, the whiteness of *taleisim* which enveloped the entire bodies of men who had withdrawn into themselves, as if in retreat from the community, to repent in darkness within the whiteness of sins also

committed in darkness. I opened my eyes to this starkness of white everywhere, and it jolted me from the privacy of my own repentance.

On the *bima* before the *aron kodesh*, the Rosh Yeshiva stood, covered in his white *talis* and facing the yeshiva, rocking back and forth on his heels, his eyes closed, his lips muttering the prayer, his thumbs tucked into the *gartel* that girded his black frock coat. The voice of the *chazan* rose, modulated like a bird seeking her nest from branch to branch, rested here, then alighted again. And beneath his voice, the yeshiva emitted a low humming and beneath its voice, the Rosh Yeshiva hoarsely echoed the words of the *chazan*.

But I was not of them. I became a spectator, and the yeshiva—the cries which came forth from out of the *taleisim*, the beating of the heart in confession, the desperate, furious attempt to arouse some sincerity, to cram within the set liturgy what was within the heart, the clapping of hands and the pounding on the wooden stands as if to awaken God—this whole rocking, careening movement became to me a spectacle.

Yet even when I was not within the spectacle, I witnessed and judged: as if it were a play, a grand epic performance of the wrestling with God and at the same time, more than a play because it was real. Observing it, I observed myself aroused to repentance. Like an actor who has slipped out of his everyday self into a role, and assumed a new self, I too passed within the waves of repentance. During the *aleinu*, when the entire yeshiva fell upon their knees and prostrated themselves on the ground, I also fell and flattened my chest against the damp cement. Already faint from hunger, blood rushed to my face, sent a flow of nausea up my throat: since childhood, I had been taught that a Jew never bows, never prostrates himself. But we were not bowing to a pagan idol. We had fallen before the passion, before that other intangible reality of repentance to which we had already given ourselves up. And at that moment, my head swimming with sweat and in vague exhilaration, as if I had just committed the worst of sins and escaped unscathed, I conceived of the religious theater—the enactment of the yeshiva upon the stage and before an audience.

The idea of the religious theater came upon me like an epiphany. Later, I called it the Revelation of Yom Kippur. Bitter irony: it was no revelation, only a naive synthesis of the passion and the theater. I intended really to eliminate revelation, the inexplicable moment of transcendence, in favor of the inexorability of *psychomacheia*. The religious theater was, in fact, only my own evocation of that same undifferentiated passion to which we had bowed. Its personae, like

personified figures of allegory, would sin only in order to outrage God; and the chaos which should then fall upon them would threaten audience and actor alike until both, in one great upheaval of their hearts, would return to God's Law. There was no need for imagination. The religious theater was intended to penetrate the illusion of acting. Its actors would actually repent upon the stage and carry their audience, like me, with them. But what the yeshiva had taken a month to do, the chaos of the religious theater—thunder, lightning, fire, and ice—would accomplish in less than two hours.

I was ready to guarantee repentance to any member of the audience. My theater would succeed where hundreds of ethical tracts had failed: give man his faith, take it away, and then restore it to him. I was not concerned that this theater was intended exclusively for those who like myself had endured *teshuva* and could not escape its memory. For within the yeshiva, as we finished the last prayers of the Yom Kippur service, I totally forgot that anyone else existed.

Nor did I remember until after the fast had ended and I had eaten. I sat down, wrote out my *First Manifesto of the Religious Theater* and suddenly realized that there was no one in the yeshiva who would appreciate the theater and no one in the theater who would understand the religious. As I wrote out the final sentence—"Let men come forward who will die for the Religious Theater unless they wish for bloodshed in the streets."—my entire vision seemed no more than an exercise in fatuity. The religious theater was, in fact, intended solely for myself.

It was then that I remembered Agnon. I had read those few pages of *Yomim Noraim*, I knew that he too was a writer, religious, and, therefore, like myself, a religious writer. It seemed perfectly obvious to me that Agnon must long ago have come to terms with that same passion I had just discovered and that he would as well applaud my religious theater. It was no matter that I had never read any of his stories or novels and, in fact, knew nothing about him. I was lonely; and was it not enough that we were both religious writers?

III

It is curious how little I remember of my actual visit with Agnon. I recall the boat trip to Israel, Elul, the revelation of Yom Kippur, even my search for Agnon through the streets and alleys of Jerusalem—all more vividly and with far greater exactitude than our

meeting itself. There are to be sure details and impressions that yet cling to my memory: the glistening new bottle of wine, a golden ribbon tied around its neck, that Agnon specially opened in my honor; and the *gemorrah* which he had been learning when I interrupted him, whose title *Avodah Zarah* I could faintly make out in the ridges where the gilt had worn off the black cover. But about the visit itself, about our conversation during the two and a half hours that we spent together, and about the man himself—the object of my yearning and the proper focus for this narrative—I remember precious little: fragments and phrases, an anecdote or two, nothing if one considers the length of time, the overwhelming significance, and the centrality which the incident has embodied in my life. Or perhaps, I recall less than I would wish to imagine.

I returned to Agnon's villa on the day following my first visit, took the same bus, got off at the same stop, walked up the same path and pushing through the metal gate, climbed the three, short steps and knocked gently on the door where the mailman had previously pounded. There was shuffling and scraping inside. The latch was pulled, the door opened a crack, and the face of a short, square man peered out. This was not Agnon, probably a relative, and I asked to speak to Adon Agnon. "I am Agnon." And before I had introduced myself, he spoke, "You are—" and told me my name.

I do not know how Agnon knew me. I was so bewildered and astounded by his seeming omniscience that when he beckoned me within, wheeled himself around, and shuffled his way back down the dark hall, I followed him as if hypnotized. I followed Agnon, his grey shirt shining in the dark like a cat's eye, though there seemed no reason why this figure whose face I could neither recall nor convince myself of belonging to the Agnon I had sought, should be leading me through his house. He walked, as I remember, like an old man—taking his own time in short, deliberate steps, his back hunched over and inclined slightly forward, his right hand extended before him as if he held in his fingers a key to the room we should enter. But he held no key. The darkness of the hall yielded gradually to an overwhelming brightness. We entered the *succah*, the wooden shack which, despite its smallness, abruptly revealed an endlessly expansive space, an infinite freedom. And there, having seated himself, he leaned over the table, pointed his finger at me, and whispered hoarsely, "I loved you from the very first moment."

Literally, that is what Agnon said: *ahavti otcha miregah harishon*. He meant, as I now understand him, I liked you from the very first moment. For modern colloquial Hebrew, which Agnon did speak, is ambiguous in its use of the root *ahav*, and makes no distinction

between the intensity of emotional attraction: one loves/likes. Biblical Hebrew, whose purity I solely expected from Agnon, exclusively maintains the connotation of *love*, be it *eros*, *philia*, or *agape*. Having searched through countless biblical concordances, I am certain that Agnon was not directly quoting scripture and hence, could not have been alluding to an obscure interpretation offered by one medieval commentator or another. There was, rather, a quality of sloppiness about his use of the word, a kind of adolescent gushiness—at its worst, a hint of sneaking contempt. It seemed even more implausible that he should love me *from the very first moment*—and expect me to believe him. Yet the old man spoke in dead seriousness, as if he were actually quoting a biblical phrase and it was only fitting to address me in that way, appearing wholly unaware of any ambiguity in his choice of language. And as if to underline his innocence, he repeated, "I loved you from the very first moment," and I, at a loss for anything else to say, echoed him, "*Ahavti otcha gam kein miregah harishon*."

There was a phantastical air about our meeting, the logic of a dream. I knock thrice on the door of a broken-down, shabby, and dissheveled house. An old, square man appears, announces that he is the one whom I seek, invokes my name, leads me through a long, narrow, and dark passage into a whorling, blinding intensity of light, and repeats twice: I love/like you. If he loves me, I am his, overwhelmed in joy, about to reveal the passion of the religious theater. If he likes me, he is merely being polite, in fact has rejected me. For while I cannot mediate the choice (how I must translate Agnon), I sense nevertheless that the two meanings represent opposites, that Agnon's feelings towards me lay somewhere between, among, in, and around them, but utterly beyond the bulkiness of certainty for which I strove.

Consistently, he eluded all my certainty. Ironically, or so it seemed to me then, Agnon himself began wildly to apologize for not having answered my card. He had received at least eighty letters that week—requests for interviews, advice, money, dissertations, a batch of love letters, none of which he had read or answered. If he read and answered one, he would have to do the same with all; there would be no time left to write. And besides the letters, there was the plague of visitors who insisted on interrupting his work. That very afternoon two elderly women, friends of his family from Europe, were coming to visit him; it was a custom between them; they had come every year on the second day of Chol Hamoed Succot for the past twenty-eight years; he had no way out of it. And others. One girl who had sent him her dissertation came in a rage to demand it

back after a year. And still others. "Interruptions! Visitors!" he raged, throwing his fists into the air. "How am I to write? In snatches! Between interruptions! And what if there is not time? They will take me out of this world, these interruptions!"

And my card? He had read my card—precisely because it was a postcard and there was no need to remove it from an envelope. And thus also, he expected my visit and remembered my name, if only to astound and bewilder me. This was not, of course, the explanation he presented: "I did not write you because you never could have read my handwriting. It is undecipherable, only my wife can read it, and you would have had to bring it to her to read." Once having come, I had made all that unnecessary. He knew that I should come, he was even happier than me that I had chosen to visit him. And again he apologized and explained how moved he was to meet me, how we should meet again and again and become close friends until finally, in a voice that was exquisitely polite, he repeated for the third time that he had loved me from the very first moment.



Agnon was old. Not bent, cracked, crippled, wasted away by years, not kind with that civility bred by despair, by the knowledge that one might as well be kind because it was not very important whether one was kind or mean after all. Rather, his oldness seemed to consist of an annoying flatness about his face, an intolerable flatness that made the front appear as the surface of a two-dimensional plane, so thin as to be intangible, and which reminded me only of the faces painted by medieval artists, flat as the level of the earth off of whose edge they feared constantly they would slip, fall, and vanish. Agnon's skin was old, the texture of ancient parchment, sanded and pulled taut. His eyes were old, sharp and piercing. The mouth was old because it also had been stretched and strung tight, the color had seeped out, and left the teeth jagged and stripped of all which might have mollified the bite. But at the same time, the flatness of his face resembled an opaque glass, whose depth it was impossible to discern and which furthermore resisted all

illumination within. Agnon, even inside the brightness of the *succah*, sat forever hidden by a shadow. He was old but even his age, any one specific quality or mannerism upon which I might have pinpointed and defined his age, remained also enshadowed. He was not your typical old man, hobbling forth and gabbing insanely. Agnon lurked in his corner of the *succah*, wily and silent and sly.

And I was young, brash, arrogant, distantly aware of the possibility of oldness but nevertheless uncaring, youthful and fresh like the *succah* in which we sat. Agnon had not bothered to decorate it with the pictures and fruits customarily hung from the rafters. In its bareness, it appeared neglected and shabby. But the *schach*, the branches and leaves that composed the covering of the roof, were heavy with sap, green and bursting, and the light of the sun as if bearing its own weight, streamed and flowed within, pushed and rustled the fir so that it swung pregnant above us, hardly resembling the shacks the Israelites built as they wandered desolate through the wilderness, more like the hut the farmer rasies in his field to celebrate the harvest.

I was young, consumed by the passion of the religious theater, by the secret I had carried away from the yeshiva, through Jerusalem and up the hill to Agnon's villa twice. I had climbed that hill wearily, tired by the pounding heat of the afternoon sun, and walked up the path already familiar to me, even to the point of boredom. Several times during my climb, I had paused and stopped, hesitant and doubtful over my intentions. Gradually, the vague forms of the *beit shin* and arrow, painted in red on the brown brick, emerged in the distance above. I recognized them, enigmatic, the mysterious and portentous signs, almost a kind of hieroglyph and cuneiform with which Agnon had marked his dwelling; and fixing my eyes upon the shapes as if they were a kind of hook, I hoisted myself up the remaining incline. I turned, looked back down at Jerusalem sprawling in the valley, and remembered that there was no one else in the entire world except Agnon to whom I might reveal my secret. Again the passion grew large, he answered my knocking on the door, escorted me through his house to the *succah*. And there he had dulled my passion, blunted the force before which I had already yielded, and disarmed me. I no longer knew how to speak with him; whether to begin with the revelation of Yom Kippur, with the yeshiva during Elul, or with my past in America. The passion receded infinitely into the distance; appeared childish, then infantile, a bubble of idiosyncracies which I had no business disclosing to anyone. And I did not even know Agnon—how bother him with all these facts and details? He sat there in his corner, drumming his

fingers on the tabletop, watching for my beginning. He had removed his wristwatch, had placed it on the table and, watching the minutes and seconds sweep by, was daydreaming: already the two old ladies in their black shawls and long flowered dresses were climbing the hill; they stopped together, patted their foreheads with pale green handkerchiefs, exclaimed to each other how high was the hill on which Agnon dwelt and how steep! They were approaching and Agnon was growing older. He was five times my age, old enough to be my grandfather, too old, old enough to be my father thrice. And I discovered that I had nothing, after all, to reveal to him.

But it was the old man himself who, emerging from his silence, rescued me. "So, my young man, what do you write?"

Startled, I hesitated. Plays, songs, stories. I described to Agnon my one masterpiece, the play which had been produced in Chicago. But here in Israel, inside Agnon's *succah*, it suddenly became trivial, inconsequential, unintentionally silly. I talked on, stuttered out the words and hearing my clanging, brazen American accent, grew embarrassed.

He interrupted me. "Tell me, who is your favorite writer, who has influenced you?"

Everyone that I had ever read had influenced me but at the moment, I forgot the name of every writer, threw my hands up in the air like an idiot, and realized that Agnon had expected me only to choose him. And Agnon was the single writer whom, except for those few pages of *Yomim Noraim*, I had never read! The fact was brutal, absurdly comic; but inspired by the daring dishonesty of the moment I lied and told Agnon that he was by far my favorite writer, the single writer I emulated, the sole author with whom I intensely identified, not only because of my boundless admiration for his work but because we were both religious writers—yes, because we two alone wrote out of a common language. Agnon smiled endlessly, acknowledged my compliment with a bow of his great, flat head, was so pleased and happy he began to cough uncontrollably.

Finally after catching himself and clearing his throat, he began, "Yes, when I was young, when I too was your age, I also wished to meet those writers whom I especially admired and who, I believed, had alone influenced my writing. Especially the Rambam. Of course he had been dead for hundreds of years and it would have been very difficult for me to speak with him. But then I do not think I would have dared to go anyhow. I was too shy. And lonely. And in my loneliness I wrote my first poems and stories. Because I was too shy to tell them, even to my closest friends. But also because of the loneliness, I learned how to write and fashion out the words."

He paused, and remembered. "I possessed certain silly ideas about my writing as a child. When I wrote my little stories I believed that I was imitating God, imitating the holy act of creation. Every time I crossed out a word or sentence, every time I crumpled up and threw away the paper on which I had just written a story, I was emulating and imitating the Master of the Universe who destroyed numerous worlds before He created this one, saw that it was good, and then created Man to serve and acknowledge His boundless goodness according to the precepts of His law. I grew, however, out of my childish dreams. I am nothing, a poor Jew. And God—only He is Eternal and Ineffable."

Agnon had wandered into a homily, of the same kind for which his stories, as I have since learned, are so remarkable. But here he stopped abruptly and looking down before him, began to sweep his hands across the table as if to wipe it clean of crumbs. The movement of his hands, however, was palsied and when he attempted to sweep them across in one clean motion, he succeeded only in jabbing at the wooden top and causing the table to rock back and forth on its uneven legs. I could not understand why he had ceased talking. Utterly charmed and fascinated by his speech, I had completely forgotten the passion of the religious theater. Agnon had led me effortlessly to the very door of the Holy of Holies and then abandoned me upon its threshold, bitter and disappointed.

I looked up and found the old man, his right eye screwed up strangely, staring at my hands. "So you have come to learn the trade of a writer," he whispered and reaching across, tapped the back of my hand. "But it is good you have come, I am overjoyed. When I was young, I was too shy and abashed to go to those writers whom I admired. The Rambam, the other *rishonim*, the compilers of the *Mishnah* and *Midrash*—even if I could have met them, I was too shy. I was afraid they would think I had come also to rob them of their secrets and of their greatness. Yes, but you are not shy, you are different. And so I learned to write, alone, by myself." And here he tapped my hand again. "But I loved you from the very first moment."

But I had not come to learn Agnon's secrets. I protested, did not understand, found myself against my will growing ashamed before the old man, began to explain. But he would not let me. Again he interrupted and stopped me. "One more story—there is one more story I wish to tell you and then I will let you talk."

He told me one more story, a tale of his youth, of the time when he had just left the *shtetl* in which he had grown up, and gone to Warsaw to live as a writer. There, one day, he had met a painter of

his own age who, like Agnon, had just left a similar *shtetl* for Warsaw and who since, like Agnon again, went on to gain great fame. The two met, from their common backgrounds and interests quickly became close friends, and decided that they should meet in a cafe every day for an hour to talk, to tell each other their experiences and impressions and, God willing, to learn from one another. Life after all for two green youths fresh from the *shtetl* and into the big world was not easy, and especially hard for two young, intense, and lonely creators. So they met, their friendship deepened, the one hour stretched into several, and another day, emboldened by the heat of their friendship and the brilliance of conversation, they each agreed to honor the other and buy a glass of brandy instead of coffee. And the brandy was so pleasant, so agreeable to their mood, so sweet to their talk that from that day, they gave up coffee for brandy forever. The more heated their friendship and the fiercer their talk, the more brandy they drank—first two glasses, another day three, then four, five, six, and so on. They became pleasantly jovial, then tipsy, finally dead drunk—who knew how to drink? Until finally, they sat and drank and were drunk together from early morning to late night six days every week. Only on the Sabbath, from Friday evening till Saturday night, did they abstain.

They must have been a strange, maddening sight—the two yeshiva boys, their yarmulkes capsized on the back of their heads, their *tzitzith* flying out from their shirts as they rocked and tipped the table and chairs, argued, laughed wildly, sang *lieder*, danced jigs home in the moonlight to their wretched tenement rooms, and chased shadows of strange, perfumed females in mysterious, exotic Warsaw. Until one day, in a rare moment of sobriety, Agnon suddenly realized that he no longer was writing, that for weeks he had done nothing but drink brandy, sing, and dance. He stopped visiting the cafe, severed all ties with his friend, never saw him again. Both youths went their separate ways and became great artists. Thus Agnon finished the story of his youth. "And now, your story," he told me.

I did not understand the tale; the end particularly seemed pointless and flat. For this he had brought me to the threshold of the Holy of Holies?

There is only one other man who ever resembled Agnon in my mind, a friend of my grandfather, Kashiansky, who came together with him from Galitzia to America where first he opened a small general store in a small town and later became immensely successful in the junk business. He was a big, fat man who would lean back in his chair and tell me, "Look, a dumb nothing of a Galitzianer, and I

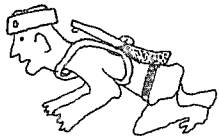
twisted my way up in America with only my *sechel*." He had one peculiarity: he never answered a question. If someone asked him a question, he always began to tell him a story, but never an answer. For this, my grandfather and his other friends nicknamed him "Nisht-teretz (No-answer)" Kashiansky. And for some reason, perhaps because he never responded to any of my questions, I always felt that Kashiansky was secretly laughing at me.

Like Kashiansky, Agnon also was from Galitzia and a businessman; but unlike my grandfather's friend, Agnon traded exclusively in words, with only one other client, God, and in a single, primitive mode of trade, barter. God gave, lent, bequeathed to Agnon a word which he, Agnon, was then expected to use and through its use, to render back to God some service of repayment. On the surface, a very civilized and quiet business, it was really a mad scramble with constant tricks and deals. Sometimes Agnon gave God back two words for his one, at other times none, sometimes he gave Him back the same word, or turned it into another word that appeared the same but was actually its opposite. And God, in turn, sometimes promised Agnon a word and then refused to give it, or gave another word in its stead. They were tough partners, both drove hard bargains—Agnon repeatedly demanding more words and God growing more reluctant and suspicious. And both God and Agnon were old and in their age, very sly and clever. They did not, in truth, like each other much, there was mutual suspicion and bitter competition. But then, there was no one else in that line of business, Agnon had a virtual monopoly on it, and they had to get along.

And who was I, a brash, overconfident American youth, to barge in and force myself on them? But slowly, I came to understand that Agnon also was laughing at me. The emboldened honesty of my youth was insulted, grievously injured by Agnon's wheelings and dealings with God. And with this story he was mocking me, mocking and contemning my youth, the passion of the religious theater, and the repentance which should be thrust upon the state so bluntly it would resemble only sheer force. He was mocking me, ever so subtly, and I yearned to rise to his challenge and confront him with the religious theater. "Nu, so what is your story?" he asked again.

I began to tell Agnon in my broken, crippled Hebrew. I searched for words, caught up phrases that I vaguely remembered, grabbed at words, mistook others, hemmed, stumbled, hawed. In the slowness of my speech and the stuttering hesitation, I could not say what I wished. I cried, it was futile—the thoughts ran past in my mind like the flowing waters of a clear and bright stream, but in Hebrew, in my Hebrew, they were muddied, muddled, torpid, misshapen clay and

refuse. I grew angry at myself. My hands waved blindly, madly: what I could not express coherently through my speech, my hands tried to tell. They pounded the table to accentuate words—but the wrong words, the wrong phrases. Language, all my language, forced into Hebrew, eluded and escaped me. In utter exasperation I finally gave up, roared out in English all that had been restrained by the foreign language. And my voice changed, turned deep, eloquent. I shouted at Agnon—he sat before me like the empty vessel into which I poured the burning lava of my youth—I yelled and screamed at him line after line of brilliance, all the mastery I had ever gathered together, described to him the religious theater, the yeshiva, the revelation of Yom Kippur, the turning of the theater into one glorious celebration of returning to God—all more clearly and profoundly than I had ever imagined it before. I jumped up, ran around the table, pounded on its top, performed like a consummate actor before Agnon.



He sat there silently. I finished, collapsed into my chair. Agnon glanced at his watch: the two elderly women were very close now, were climbing up the last of the hill. He looked at me and smiled meekly. "I am sorry but I do not understand any English."

I had not realized that I had spoken to Agnon in English. It was a very sudden shock and I laughed, nervous, embarrassed and confused. He rose, however, and took me by the arm. "It is time and you must go." Through the window of the *succah*, he waved to the two old ladies who were walking up the path. "But I am overjoyed that you came. You must return, and we will talk over what we did not have time to discuss now. Yes, you must come back." And when he escorted me to the door, he added, "There is no hurry. You will never write anything important until you are forty."

I walked down the path to the bus stop, hardly thinking of the meeting. Only once did I turn back—the *beit shin* and arrow were still visible and I suddenly realized what they stood for: *beit shimush*, an outhouse. The arrow pointed to an outhouse which no longer stood there, though the letters and arrow had remained behind. It was a kind of obscene joke, a very bad, obscene joke.

IV

I have never understood Agnon, nor our meeting.

Upon my return to the yeshiva, I mentioned the incident to a few friends and became an instant celebrity. The story of the visit proved an incomparable treasure-house of anecdotes and soon gained the proportions of a legend in which I, not Agnon, played the role of hero. For the meeting itself appeared less remarkable than my having managed to find Agnon in the first place, and after I had been requested to tell the tale several times, I perfected my delivery of it—learned at exactly which points my audience laughed, when the suspense held and broke, where to pause dramatically—until I had developed a routine that would have been the envy of any accomplished comedian. When asked what we had discussed, I invariably replied, "Art." It came out gradually that I too was a writer. No one was quite certain what to make of me, because I was the first writer most of the yeshiva boys had ever met. Having no other basis for judgement, they imagined that I was a writer just like Agnon—an impression which led finally to my acquiring the nickname "Agnon" by which henceforth I was exclusively called. The story eventually reached even the Rosh Yeshiva and one morning he called me into his office and bluntly told me that as long as I wished to remain in the yeshiva, I was never to have anything to do with the theater.

I had nothing to do with the theater but neither could I get it out of my mind. Whatever I learned formed itself in my head into the theater: when I studied *chumash*, *tanach*, even *gemorrah*, I cast each episode into drama—vignettes of Abraham sacrificing Isaac, of cows falling tragically into pits and the intricate legal transactions that ensued. I searched, although in vain, for laws governing the proper conduct of a religious writer. When I learned Jewish philosophy and ethics, I made it my major concern to figure out where I, as a writer, stood upon the hierarchy of holiness.

Nor could I get Agnon out of my mind. The vision of the old man shuffling through darkness, the memory of the palsied hand reaching across to touch my own, haunted me. The further our meeting receded into the past and the more celebrated I became for the exploit, the less I remembered of what actually had passed between us. Until at times I recalled nothing. In the midst of this amnesia I concluded that, in fact, I must have gone to Agnon to have him reveal to me his secret and that he had told me—but in a single phrase which, forever beyond my reach, I could never grasp. Yet the more

elusive Agnon's secret became, the more desperate my persistence to retrieve it increased. The configuration of the single phrase would suddenly float above the crowded text of the *gemorrah* I was learning, but vanish before I could make out its letters. I began to dream regularly of our meeting but each time I awakened at the moment at which Agnon was about to speak. Or if he did speak, my awakening dispersed his words so abruptly that they vanished beyond the face of all dreams.

Meanwhile, Agnon won the Nobel Prize. He woke up one morning and while praying, felt a strange tingling up his spine. Fifteen minutes after he had completed his prayers, as he was sitting down to write, the Swedish ambassador knocked on the wooden door.

Even before I could leave the yeshiva and offer him my congratulations, Agnon departed for Sweden. I eagerly followed the newspaper accounts of his travels. There, in Sweden, he was reaching over the great dais to toast the King and Queen, his black yarmulke atop his head like the midnight hemisphere, chanting in his gently melodic voice, "Because of the Babylonian Exile in which my forefathers were driven from the Holy Land, I was born in Galitzia." Then in Europe and America, on his celebrated world tour, he read from his works, spoke, shook hands, as students and other admirers raved, Bravo! Viva Agnon! He was everywhere, except at home where I awaited his return and the time when I might ask him again to repeat to me his secret. And while I waited, I attempted to locate where Agnon, as well as myself, stood upon the hierarchy of holiness.

While I was not entirely certain what God wanted from the old writer, I knew all too well what the yeshiva and its rabbis expected of me. They also wished me to write—but *sifrei chidushim*, my own interpretations of the Law, a commentary upon a commentary upon a third commentary. They wanted me to reconcile the Rambam with the Ramban, to work out anew what was forbidden and permissible before the Law, to conquer the *yetzer harah*—my every impulse, egotistical and selfish, which prevented and distracted me from submitting myself to His Law.

And Agnon? Had Agnon written a commentary upon the Law? Was that man parading through Europe as the greatest master of modern Hebrew literature a commentator in disguise?

It was then, while Agnon was making his world tour, that I ceased to dream of the secret which Agnon had never revealed to me. I dreamt instead of the old man receiving the Nobel Prize, of the bearded King of Sweden dropping the gold medal on its long, thin silver chain around his creased neck; I stood behind him, hardly

visible. The next night I dreamt again of the Prize ceremony; but in the place of Agnon, it was I standing on the platform and around my neck, before a vast hall of clapping hands, the King placed the gold medallion. That morning, as I walked to the *beit midrash* to meet a friend with whom I studied ethics, the very best student in the yeshiva, an Israeli whom everyone acknowledged as an obvious genius, walked up behind me and asked, "Well, Agnon, when are you going to win the Nobel Prize?"

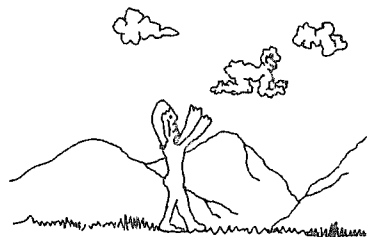
The Rabbis tell us (so I learned that morning), God has declared that His presence cannot abide the *baal gaavah*, the proud and arrogant man. *Cannot?* and why not? Does His presence not abide all the vanity under the sun, senseless wars, the deaths of innocent children, every conceivable and inconceivable evil and cruelty? And He cannot abide the *baal gaavah* alone? But the Rabbis also tell us that the *baal gaavah* is himself the *oved avodah zarah—cultor deorum fictorum* and the idolater. His pride and arrogance are themselves the *tzelem* and *eidolon*, the image and the idol that he worships. And I thought: could there ever be a greater idolater than myself? Was I not the greatest *baal gaavah* of all—pride, arrogance, and egotism not content with the illusion of their own reality but daring even to usurp God's creation? Were my plays anything other than worlds populated by idols of my own making? Was not the imagination my own *yetzer harah*? To give myself up to its careless, possessed enthusiasm, could I do other than write the forbidden?

There seemed finally no doubt that God would ruthlessly destroy and erase me, like Amalek, from all memory. But Agnon? Why had not God already destroyed Agnon and erased his name from this universe?

There could be only one possible answer: Agnon was a prophet. Even if God had never spoken to him, Agnon himself had reconciled and indeed identified his imagination—the *yetzer harah* and idol—with the Law. At one moment, he must have concluded that he was the absolutely righteous man. He knew therefore that whatever he spoke or wrote was righteous. He no longer feared his own word, but more: he became, through the indestructible determination of his belief, the *navi emet*, the true prophet.

It was no less clear to me that Agnon himself had known long ago what I had just learned. High atop a podium somewhere in Europe, before an audience awaiting breathlessly his hoarse, rasping whisper, he must have remembered that he came to them as the prophet of God; and I shuddered to think what must have passed through the mind of that poor Jew.

If he was a prophet? For there was no way to know absolutely that Agnon had truly arrived at the level of holiness where he might have identified his imagination and the Law. Although his word might resemble the divine, I could not know that he was not the *navi sheker*, a false prophet, the confidence man *par excellence*. The serpent, after all, had also spoken to Eve in the manner of a god.



Too impatient to wait until I had become the righteous man, too impatient even to await Agnon's return, I began to write, alone. I no longer wrote mere plays. I fashioned gods of silver and gods of gold, the likenesses of all which crawls upon the earth, flies in the heavens above, and swims in the waters beneath. I created those three-dimensional representations of the human form from which we are prohibited—and began my first religious play.

This play—it shall go nameless—was to be the first production of the religious theater, acted out, directed by, and produced for the religious. It was my deepest conviction that the play could not be appreciated by anyone himself not religious. When, however, I finished the first, rough draft, I gave it immediately to an irreligious friend who, without my knowledge, passed it on to a director and several actors; days later, they wrote and requested the right to produce it. I refused, firm in my idealism; they insisted. I explained to them that they could not possibly understand it because they were irreligious; they claimed they did. I revealed to them my dream

of a religious theater; they laughed and asked me if I wished to wait a hundred years to see it produced. I begged them not to perform it; they were adamant. And finally, I capitulated to my own vanity, stipulating only that my name and age not be revealed—the former because I desired to remain in the yeshiva and the latter because I feared lest the play be called childish.

Thus began the first, bastard production of the religious theater. Before the play opened, I decided to invite Agnon to its premiere. For the third time, I climbed the same path and hill. Nothing had changed since my last visit. The letters and arrow were as red as ever, the villa shabby and unkempt. I knocked on the door. A young woman answered and introducing myself, I asked to speak with Agnon. She disappeared within the house to call him. After a long wait, the old man limped to the door on a cane, older, so sick and frail I was afraid he would fall and crumble before me. "It is impossible for me to talk," he said. Looking at him, I agreed and began to apologize for having bothered him. But before I had finished, he disappeared back down the dark hall. I waited, then realized that he was not about to return, and went home myself. Later I wrote him, explained the production and, requesting him not to reveal my name or age, enclosed two tickets.

He never came.

The play closed after three performances. My age was, in one way or another, revealed, and the play was subsequently called childish. Because it was performed in Jerusalem and in English, the Tel Aviv critics complained that they had to travel two hours to see a work which they called exilic, a potpourri of nothings, a public desecration, pseudo-poetry, pseudo-philosophy, and pseudo-art. I was called an idiot youth and the least talented member of my generation. Anonymously, I attended the closing performance at whose end I talked, still not revealing my identity, with one critic who had in print accused the play of being a boring and extended banality. I agreed with him. But if he saw the play as a political manifesto of some kind, crude and awkward in its heavy-handedness, I envisioned its subtlety as only manifest revelation. He could not see, despite all my insisting on the point, what the play had to do with the religious. No one from that audience, to be sure, repented.

I remained in the yeshiva for a second year, struggled onward in my learning, and continued to write surreptitiously. The Rosh Yeshiva never found out about the play; in fact, he never spoke another word to me. At the end of my second year, before returning to America, I decided to pay a final call on my old friend. He answered the door himself, appearing much healthier and younger. I

RESPONSE

A CONTEMPORARY JEWISH REVIEW

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