



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Dreams and Human Destiny in Ad hena

Author(s): NITZA BEN-DOV

Source: *Prooftexts*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Special Issue on S. Y. Agnon (JANUARY 1987), pp. 53-63

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689169>

Accessed: 30-01-2017 20:20 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Prooftexts

NITZA BEN-DOV

Dreams and Human Destiny in *Ad hena*

IT IS NO COINCIDENCE that the psychological dimension of Agnon's works has received such scant attention. Agnon was a great historian and consummate storyteller who documented the existence, and preserved the memory, of a Jewish world that was forever destroyed. Agnon's unique portrayal of that world is indeed engrossing, and it is little wonder that historians, sociologists, literary critics, and belletrists alike focused their attention on the historical treasures and anecdotal gems embedded therein. Although a number of early critics did appreciate and allude to Agnon's psychological acuity, it is only recently that critics have begun to plumb the depths of that psychology, a tricky affair since Agnon often camouflaged it beneath an ideological or nationalistic façade.

To illustrate this point, I wish to discuss a dream that concludes the seventh chapter of the novella *Ad hena* (*Thus Far*).¹ The protagonist's dream is clearly borrowed from a well-known Biblical episode: Jephthah's battle against the Ammonites and his ill-fated vow to the Lord (Judges 11:30–31). Taken together, both the immediate stimulus triggering the hero's dream in *Ad hena*—the ravages of the First World War in Europe—and Jephthah's battle and tragic vow, are a testament to the victimization of the innocent in times of war, particularly of the Jewish innocent. Here we will attempt to prove that the cultural-religious premise of the dream and the tangential historical stimulus testify not only to the author's hatred and denunciation of war as a mass psychosis but also to his belief that the individual is ultimately responsible for his fate—be it in times of war or peace. The dream of the protagonist-narrator in *Ad hena* (who is Shmuel Yosef, a *porte-parole* for Agnon)

PROOFTEXTS 7 (1987): 53–63 © 1987 by The Johns Hopkins University Press

expresses Agnon's existential view, which posits that the individual is self-determined and responsible for his actions. In keeping with that view, an individual becomes what he does, i.e., it is not blind, cruel fate but personal motives and psychological drives that are crucial in determining an individual's actions, and which dictate the outcome of adverse events.

In relating his experiences in war-torn Germany, the narrator, Shmuel, opens with a description of his room in Berlin, in a pension of a widow, Mrs. Trutzmiller. Her husband, killed in the Franco-Prussian War, left her with three daughters and a son. The son, too, went off to war and did not return. When a letter from a place called Grimma² arrives from the wife of Shmuel's former mentor, Dr. Levy, in which Mrs. Levy asks Shmuel to help her dispose of her late husband's library, Shmuel agrees to help and leaves Berlin. His decision is also partly based on a vague desire to move and find himself better living quarters. Before setting out for Grimma, the maid at the pension approaches Shmuel and asks him to see Mrs. Trutzmiller in her room. There, in the presence of her three daughters, Mrs. Trutzmiller confesses that she wished to see her tenant owing to a dream she once had. "In my dream," says the brokenhearted widow who weeps every night over the loss of her only son, "I saw my son returning home to his mother. And who was it that brought him back? It was with you, Sir, that he returned" (AH, 11).

The first chapter ends with Mrs. Trutzmiller's brief exposition of her dream and the narrator's farewell and good wishes. The dream is subsequently forgotten as bizarre personal events overtake the hero, who crisscrosses Germany on a number of fruitless errands. Yet at the beginning of the seventh chapter, it becomes clear that the hero, unwittingly and altogether fortuitously, transforms the mother's dream into reality. Shmuel, disappointed in his travels and frustrated at every turn, returns to his room in Berlin for lack of a better place to stay. A soldier, who was wounded in the head and who exhibits severe symptoms of shock (amnesia, aphasia, withdrawal), accompanies Shmuel on the Berlin-bound train filled with maimed soldiers. Upon arriving in Berlin, this pitiful golem of a man, a mindless automaton and victim of a cruel war, suddenly breaks his silence, seizes Shmuel's baggage, and insists on taking it to the boarding house. The golem, as it turns out, is Mrs. Trutzmiller's long lost son.

On the surface, all's well that ends well. And in truth, on the simplest linear level, the first seven chapters of *Ad hena* seem unified by the principle of this dream come true. The linearity of the first seven chapters so impressed one critic that he viewed the realization of the widow's dream as a sign of divine dispensation, "a concatenation of seemingly random events that can only be understood as evidence of

divine providence."³ But if we are to view the entire plot of *Ad hena* in this simplistic manner, we must shunt aside a host of significant events in Shmuel's life, which occur both before and after this dramatic turning point. In truth, Shmuel's actions in the first seven chapters cannot be reduced to a mere function of the widow's dream, whereby Shmuel serves as the executor, or tool, of Providence. His actions are part of a wider scheme in which the episode of the son's return is but a fleeting interval. To substantiate this view, we will concentrate on the events that occur on the very night the protagonist, through no effort of his own, transforms the widow's dream into reality.

The hero returns to Berlin at night in a dark, musty, foul-smelling train. He is annoyed when he realizes that he is returning to the very room he originally sought to escape, and is angrier still at the prospect of finding his room leased to another tenant, a likely possibility in war-torn Berlin teeming with refugees, where living space is scarce and at a premium. "The irony of fate," he mutters to himself. "What a joke. Of my own free will, I'm going back to the very place I wanted to avoid" (*AH*, 61). Fate's malicious sneer mingles with the raucous laughter of the wounded soldiers seated in the same railway car as Shmuel. As the soldiers exchange dirty jokes, only two individuals fail to laugh along with them: Shmuel, who is in a black mood, and the golem, the soldier who suffered a head-wound and who is oblivious to his surroundings.

Yet the golem who stares vacantly into space will surprise Shmuel. Shmuel senses that the golem sitting opposite him is looking at him as if he knew him. When the brain-damaged soldier seizes Shmuel's baggage at the end of the journey, even Shmuel has no idea where it should go, and he says to himself: "Since we [Shmuel and his valises] are homeless for the moment, we'd best return to the pension" (*AH*, 63). When he returns to Mrs. Trutzmiller's boarding house, he discovers that his baggage is already there. Evidently, the golem knew precisely what he was doing. Unbeknownst to Shmuel, his temporary shelter in the pension was the permanent home of the golem all along.

The golem's return to his family, the realization of his mother's dream, becomes the protagonist's nightmare. Shmuel's niche in the pension must now be forfeited to Hanschen, the long lost son. Literally and metaphorically, the family's joy over Hanschen's return leaves no room for the hero who helped realize their dream, and the Trutzmillers ignore him completely in the general excitement. As guests stream into the Trutzmiller home that night to welcome Hanschen back, Shmuel, overcome with fatigue, has no place to rest his weary head and muses to himself: "in the end, I stood there like a golem" (*AH*, 74).

Late at night, while the boarding house is filled with guests and every corner of the big hall is crowded with sleepers, Shmuel, still standing like a golem "whose deeds are not in his own hands" (*AH*, 74),

is finally offered "salvation" in the form of a bathtub. "The maid measured me with her eyes, like a gravedigger measuring the dead to determine the size of the grave he must dig. And do you know what she said? She said, 'The bathroom is vacant until morning, I'll go and prepare it for you'" (AH, 76). The protagonist who left his room during the turmoil of war to perform a generous mission—to advise Doctor Levy's widow on her late husband's spiritual heritage—spends the remainder of his "homecoming" night in a bathtub that is compared to a grave. Despite the cramped setting, he manages to fall asleep.

The protagonist realizes that he has fallen asleep because he had a dream:

How did I know that I fell asleep? Because of a dream I had. What did I dream? I dreamt that a great war befell the world and I was called to fight. I vowed to God that if I returned in peace from the war, I would offer in sacrifice anyone who stepped out of my house. I returned home in peace, and behold, it was myself I saw coming out of the house. (AH, 76)

Shmuel's dream is a clear adaptation of the biblical episode in the Book of Judges, where Jephthah vows:

If thou wilt indeed deliver the children of Ammon into my hand, then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, it shall be the Lord's, and I will offer it up for a burnt-offering (Judges 11: 30–31).

When Jephthah returns in triumph from the war, to his horror he sees his only daughter emerging with timbrel and dance from the house.

Aside from the biblical association, Shmuel's dream may also be Agnon's ironic, intertextual reference to the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus, a valiant warrior, resists numerous temptations on his way back to Ithaca and returns home with the help of benevolent gods, Athena and Zeus.

Shmuel's dream is one of several dream-situations that form an integral part of the hero's private experiences in war-torn Germany. But unlike his other dreams, which do not contain images of war, this one seems to give an idiosyncratic expression to the war and its disruptive influence upon the individual. In his dream the hero is called to war, and to allay his fears, he makes a vow unto the Lord to ensure his safe return. He returns in one piece, but must then confront the consequences of his vow.

The fact that Agnon inserts the protagonist's dream in a realistic series of events alludes to the existence of a psychological undercurrent flowing beneath the external processes narrated in the work. In *Ad hena*, this undercurrent is obscured by world events that are historically

crucial. Since the First World War is in the foreground of the novella, the historical, documentary aspects of *Ad hena* have dictated the prevailing critical approach to the work. Thus, the protagonist's meanderings throughout Germany and his thoughts and dreams are lumped together, and both, it is claimed, are controlled by a single overriding factor: the war.⁴ The protagonist's dreams, daydreams, and semi-conscious nocturnal encounters (see Chapter 8) are generally viewed as part of an internal world horribly disturbed by the chaos and evil of external events beyond human control. Mrs. Trutzmiller's portentous dream has been considered by some critics as a leitmotif in a deliberately disorganized, structureless plot line. In their view, the hero's disoriented journeys are the means to express the turmoil of a world at war. Nevertheless, these same critics sought and found a way to impose a semblance of order and symmetry on this labyrinthine novella. Mrs. Trutzmiller's dream and the fulfillment of its prophecy are taken to offer a kind of organizational axis to show that in the end, a benevolent God intervenes in mysterious ways to set things right. The main problem with this theosophical approach, however, is that it is not consistent with the larger existential, religious, and moral structure of *Ad hena*. The connection between the hero's disrupted inner world and the chaotic world at large does not hinge upon the intervention of a *deus ex machina*, however mysterious. If these two worlds intersect, and they do, it is to show that individually and collectively, men make choices, however ill-advised and unfortunate, and must then bear the consequences. This is borne out in the message of Shmuel's dream on the night when he and the golem return to the pension in Berlin. Agnon, a writer with deep religious roots, was preoccupied with the issue of *behirah hofshit* (free will).

It was of his own free will that Shmuel left Berlin for a variety of motives, both altruistic and selfish. He returns to Berlin to a room he had every intention of leaving for good, because his plans in Grimma, Leipzig, and Lunnenfeld were foiled. Mrs. Levy's house was locked because she was ill in the hospital; no rooms were available for rent in Grimma; and Shmuel stayed in Leipzig and Lunnenfeld because there he encountered an old flame, a Gentile and former actress named Brigitta Schimmermann, who was unfortunately too busy with the war effort to spend much time with him. Hardly the agenda of a man buffeted by the winds of war. Moreover, Shmuel is a free agent; as an outsider from Palestine, he is a civilian who can afford to observe the war unscathed. Shmuel, then, can come and go more or less as he pleases, and he makes decisions on the basis of his desires and inclinations. Yet in the dream, which is supposed to refract and

condense reality, Shmuel, for some reason, perceives himself as a soldier victimized by the war and unable to return home in peace. The only element of the dream that can be construed as consistent with Shmuel's emotional reality is his sense of having been wronged by the Trutzmillers, who fail to appreciate his services in returning Hanschen from the front. Hence, he feels he is the victim, or the dupe, of his own good deeds, for which he must pay an unfair price, i.e., he must forfeit his room and sleep in a bathtub. But is the dream-image of a self-sacrificing warrior warranted in view of the fact that Hanschen really returns *on his own* from a bloody war? The price Shmuel pays for that return is hardly a feat of heroic proportions.

To be sure, it is Hanschen the German, and not Shmuel the Jew from Palestine, who is called to war and comes home. It is Hanschen who found his way back against all odds. In essence, Hanschen, despite his injury, is revealed as much less of a golem than originally thought, and as more determined than Shmuel. The wounded soldier, in his sudden renewed contact with reality, brings to mind the archetypal, legendary Golem of Prague, created in the sixteenth century by the renowned kabbalist, the Maharal, who fashioned the automaton of clay and endowed it with life by inserting the Ineffable Name in its mouth.

Does Shmuel, who in wakeful life considers himself a golem, and who in his dreams considers himself a warrior, switch roles with the wounded soldier, even to the point of dreaming what ought to be the latter's dream? Who is the real golem, and who is the rightful hero? Where should we draw the line between these two characters who return from war and between the two homecoming visions (Mrs. Trutzmiller's and Shmuel's) that stretch across a spectrum of events where dream and reality, war and peace, illness and health, interpenetrate and become one?

The answers to these and other perplexities lie in the psychology of Shmuel's mind. It is not by chance that Agnon seats the brain-damaged golem vis-à-vis Shmuel in a railway car packed with the wounded, nor is it by chance that Shmuel senses that the golem recognizes him (an obvious projection on Shmuel's part, since the golem is still in a catatonic state of withdrawal). Agnon is showing us that Shmuel and the golem are kindred spirits. Shmuel feels uncomfortable and imagines that the soldier is staring at him because Shmuel knows, deep within himself, that he is an emotional golem, and he squirms at the thought of facing up to this unpleasant truth. The truth is that Shmuel is an incomplete and deficient soul who is constantly running away from himself. He is a kind of a voluntary golem whose real motives for meandering across Germany involve not the disruptions of war but his lust for a Gentile woman, a vague desire to extend his stay on alien soil remote from Palestine, and a *wanderlust* arising from his restless

dissatisfaction with himself. The golem has "earned" his pitiful state of mental paralysis the hard way, but what is Shmuel's excuse? Thus, he fits so well into the golem's skin because he has wished himself into a lazy state of self-ignorance, in which the war serves as the expedient cover for procrastinations of varied kinds.

Two key scenes in *Ad hena* underscore the evasive personality of the antihero that Agnon created with such care: they are Shmuel's final moments in Mrs. Trutzmiller's room before he leaves Berlin and a conversation with Brigitta Schimmermann. Shmuel's personality is typical of many of Agnon's protagonists who tirelessly seek ways to avoid unpleasant truths, especially in matters of love and sex. Not only are their paths to self-evasion tortuous and self-defeating, but they also attempt in ingenious ways to mask from themselves and from others any hint that would betray the real urges and impulses simmering beneath a falsely calm exterior.

When Shmuel enters Mrs. Trutzmiller's room and learns that she asked to see him because of a dream, he hastily interjects, even before hearing the dream:

I'm not a Pharaoh or a Nebuchadnezzar, and in these times, there are no Josephs or Daniels to be found. And if there are descendants of Joseph or Daniel who delve into dreams and their meaning, may God be with them. I have no need of them. (*AH*, 10-11)

Which is to say that a priori, Shmuel belittles and dissociates himself from the psychological revelations embedded in dreams. Though he admits that "sometimes I, too, have dreams," he insists that his dreams, unlike those of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, are neither prophetic nor profound. And though he is a descendant of the nation which produced a Joseph and a Daniel, seers who could resolve the riddles of dreams, he has no need of them because "I'm not looking for answers" (*AH*, 10). Shmuel's deprecatory reference to the modern counterparts of Joseph and Daniel implies a clear aversion to psychologists and psychoanalysts of the Freudian school, and perhaps to Freud himself for whom the dream is a pre-text that must be understood in order to read the secrets of the soul. Shmuel's rejection of the discipline belies a fear of being "discovered." Hence, it is easier for him to remain in a paradise of fools, i.e., to remain a golem.

The conversation between Shmuel and Brigitta reveals the complexity of a man who is intensely self-involved, more so than others, because he has so much free time on his hands (conveniently, as soon as the war broke out, Shmuel stopped work on a book he was in the midst of writing). But since Shmuel fears himself as much as he fears being discovered by others, he pretends to be a man who doesn't know or understand who he is.

Brigitta said: "Who knows how many things you know about me that I've never even guessed." I told her: "In that, you're no better than anyone else, since others usually know more about us than we know about ourselves." [. . .]

"And you?"

"Me? Since I have no choice, I'm forced to think about myself alone."

"Because you have no choice?"

"Since I'm so intimidated by others, I don't dare think about them. But since people tend to think about things, I think about myself, and only about myself."

Said Brigitta: "In that case, you must know yourself very well.

I said to her: "There's the rub. The more a man thinks about himself, the less he knows who he is, and since he's not worth the effort or the interest, let's stop talking about him." (*AH*, 48–49)

Brigitta continues to interrogate her guest while Shmuel attempts to divert her and continues to refer to himself in the third person. "Even if you dissect him organ by organ, you won't wrest the tiniest bit of self-knowledge from him." Cornered and under pressure, Shmuel tells Brigitta that he wishes the telephone would ring to interrupt the conversation. When Brigitta persists, Shmuel agrees to tell her a "parable" about a "certain man" who climbed many mountains, raised many stones, shattered many locks, entered many doors leading to many caves, and in the last cave he found a scroll, which read: "Idiot. Did you leave something here that you're working so hard to find?" (*AH*, 50–51). Agnon, like the heroes he creates, knows full well that the road to self-knowledge is a difficult one, a veritable obstacle path of by-ways and false and frightening beginnings. But at this stage in the novella, Shmuel refuses to travel that arduous road.

Because Shmuel is so evasive, even in the dream he starts out by assuming the persona of a heroic warrior, an Odysseus or a Jephthah returning from the fray, although he is in actuality a comfortable civilian, albeit one displaced from his room. This self-delusion works up to a point and is then abruptly discarded in the final seconds of the dream. The concluding twist of the dream, in which Shmuel must face the consequences of his vow, transfigures the imagery of physical war into a war of the divided self, a mental siege in which the onus of Shmuel's actions are placed squarely on his own shoulders. He alters the Jephthah episode and recasts it so that his dream will reflect a new-found insight. Jephthah's daughter, who greets her father in joyous celebration, has no idea that in emerging from the house, she has sealed her doom. But Shmuel, who has split himself in the dream and emerges to greet himself, knows that he is no one's victim but his own. Shmuel's battle, unlike the golem's, cannot be fought with guns and mortar. His

is an internal battle against his own temptations and cynical alienation from himself.

Of all the biblical and mythological heroes at his disposal, Agnon chose Jephthah to figure in the protagonist's dream. Jephthah's vow apparently served as the kernel of Agnon's thoughts regarding free will, and in elaborating his views, Agnon fused the vowtaker and his sacrifice. A simple psychological maneuver on our part, which will help explain how Jephthah created the situation that forced him to sacrifice his daughter, will also serve to reinforce the message of Shmuel's dream, in which a man may—through one word too many and after returning in peace from struggles and wars—wreak his own disaster.

The biblical Jephthah was the son of a prostitute, a stepbrother in his father's house. He was banished by his brothers from Gilead and he gathered men of low character around him. At a time of distress under the oppression of the Ammonites, Jephthah was asked by those who banished him to return to serve as their valiant warrior. The tragic vow is uttered before he undertakes the battle. Against this background, it is difficult to avoid the harsh judgment that Jephthah's rashness, probably the outcome of his rejection by his brothers and his camaraderie with men of dubious character, led to his strange vow and the unnecessary sacrifice of his only child. The inferior son, the outcast, was probably ready for any sacrifice to win the war so that he could at last earn the respect of his superiors. Jephthah's impulsive character is also manifested in his later acts. His overreaction to the Ephraimites' grievance concerning his exclusion of their tribe in the war against the Ammonites caused the slaughter of forty-two thousand fellow Israelites (Judges 12: 1–6). Thus, Jephthah himself triggered a bloody and avoidable civil war. (Significantly, and as a useful contrast, Gideon, a better diplomat than Jephthah, managed to subdue the wrath of the Ephraimites when he faced a similar situation in Judges 8:1–3.)

In *Ad hena*, Shmuel's dream pushes the biblical tale to the extreme. The reflective sacrifice-dream, in which the individual emerges to meet himself, indicates that all the forces are present within man, moving out of and coming back to him. He is self-guided and must therefore seek within himself the cause and effect of his dreams, as well as their interpretation and realization.

The dream-condensation, which also fuses the narrator and the returning golem into one figure, does not cancel their independent existence in *Ad hena*. There is still a lost son who returns injured from the war, and there is a protagonist whose moves are frustrated at every turn. Jephthah's return from the war, as echoed in the dream, illuminates both the golem's return from the front and the narrator's return from his personal ordeals. In contrast to Jephthah's great victory and the honor bestowed upon his return, the war from which Hanschen

returns drags on, and its casualties increase rapidly. There are no conquerors, only the conquered. The son is not decorated for valor, and he never recovers from his debilitating head-wound. The golem remains the very realization of the distortion of humanity. Both the narrator who voluntarily left Palestine and who was subsequently expelled from his room, and the golem who returns home to his room, are victims of the different manifestations of human character. The latter is a victim of the war, an evil phenomenon which is, after all, intrinsically linked to the mental constitution of mankind. The narrator, as an individual who is alienated from himself, becomes the metaphor for a humanity that resolutely pursues its own follies, war being the greatest folly of all. In his freedom to choose, Shmuel is a representative of humanity at large, which can convert reality into nightmare. The predicaments in which the protagonist of *Ad hena* finds himself cannot be attributed solely to an external war; they are part and parcel of an internal battle waged within himself, a war reflected in his self-accusatory dream of self-sacrifice. The unique message of his dream is that the great external processes, which are regarded as beyond the individual's influence and understanding, can no longer provide the only explanation of his destiny.

In *Ad hena*, Agnon is not rejecting the belief in divine dispensation per se, so much as opposing the misuse and distortion of this belief, whereby divine will is invoked as an excuse for passivity and evasion. For Agnon, there is no guarantee that insight into the soul will inevitably lead to self-control and sanity. It is, however, a beginning.

Near Eastern Studies Department
Princeton University

NOTES

1. S. Y. Agnon, *Ad hena* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1977). The volume, the seventh in a series of Agnon's complete works, is named after the novella, which appears first in the book. *Ad hena*, a longer novella, was first published in 1952 and was never translated into English. I am indebted to Ms. Goldie Wachsman, who translated the excerpts cited in this article, and who helped me abridge and edit this article.

2. Unlike other locations cited in *Ad hena*, e.g., Leipzig, Lunnenfeld, and Berlin, Grimma has not been found on the map. Avraham Kariv, in "Many Facets and a Single Face" [Hebrew], *Moznaim* 41 (June 1975): 8-17, noted that Shmuel's stay in Grimma was created by Agnon to serve as an allegorical episode. Kariv viewed Dr. Levy as Moses, descended from the tribe of Levi; his library, composed of two rooms, as a symbol of the written and oral Law; and Mrs. Levy, who is ill, as a metaphor for the unhealthy state of Jewish life in World War I Europe, where Jews were forced to fight each other across enemy lines. In our estimation, the word *grimma* is linked to the word "cause." That appellation supports the psychological interpretation, where internal mental processes

are the real cause of events. Mrs. Levy's letter, the surface "cause" of Shmuel's decision to leave Berlin, is the excuse Shmuel finds to camouflage his real motives for setting out towards Leipzig and Lunnenfeld, locations where he is likely to meet Brigitta Schimmermann, a Gentile woman who is married, and who represents an illicit desire that Shmuel, throughout the novella, is unwilling to acknowledge for what it is.

3. Shraga Kadari, "The Artist in His Faith" [Hebrew], *Hatsofeh* (20 February 1970).

4. See Baruch Kurzweil, "Ad hena," in *Masot 'al sippurei Sh. Y. Agnon* [Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon] (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1975), p. 162. See also Matti Meged, "The Author in His Own Eyes" [Hebrew], *Masa* (December 1952).