A Guest for the Night

S.Y. AGNON

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY
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Foreword

Agnon's Roman à Clef of Going Home Again

A Guest for the Night was singled out by the Nobel Prize Committee as S.Y. Agnon's "greatest achievement" as a novelist. It is certainly his book which most closely reaches the perfection of form of the modern novel as conceived when written in the 1930s – a form which, critic Dan Miron has pointed out, Agnon struggled to "domesticate."[1] As opposed to his other novels – on which he worked sometimes for years, sometimes for decades – *A Guest for the Night* seems to have been written with the least struggle, and also supplies the most definitive and unambiguous ending of all of his books.

In the Spring of 1930 Agnon travelled to Leipzig, Germany, the center of Jewish and European publishing, where the Schocken Press was issuing the first edition of his collected writings in four volumes. An inveterate reviser of his own works, he supervised the preparation of the manuscripts, polishing his prose and editing the writing even as the type was being set for print.

Upon completion of the project, in August, Agnon took a tour of his native region of Galicia (today's western Ukraine), passing through his hometown of Buczacz. Having emigrated to Ottoman Palestine in 1908, when not yet twenty years old, he had only ever

returned for two short visits, immediately before and after his father's death in 1913 (Agnon was then in Germany during his extended sojourn of 1912–24). Aside from those very brief trips, Summer 1930 was the only return visit he ever made to the *Alte Heim*, a fact which underscores the enduring and remarkable presence of Buczacz in his writing. Like Twain's Hannibal, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, and Roth's Weequahic, Agnon demonstrates that you can "take the boy out of Buczacz, but you can't take the Buczacz out of the boy."

Upon arrival he was received with great fanfare, as documented by the letters he wrote to his wife and other people describing the visit.[2] He was a minor celebrity, and both the Jews and the non-Jews of the town seemed aware that this was the young boy Czaczkes (his birth name) who had gone off to *Eretz Yisrael*, now returning as a middle-aged Agnon (his pen-name), the renowned author.

In fact, he spent only seven days in Buczacz itself; by that point his parents were both dead and his four younger siblings had all left for other lands. He spent about a month travelling around Polish Galicia, including a visit to see his father's brother in the city of Ternopil. From that uncle he received a wealth of stories and legends and, he claimed, a manuscript of tales of the Czaczkes family history, which he spun into a posthumously published book, *Korot Beiteinu* (*The Beams of Our House*, not yet translated from the Hebrew).

However, the most significant outcome of the 1930 visit is clearly *A Guest for the Night*, a portrait of a homecoming visit to Szibucz (the literary "doppelgänger" for Agnon's native Buczacz). The plot contains the heaviest dose of autobiographical projection of all of Agnon's long-form work. To be clear, it is *not* an autobiography, and we should not fall into the trap of confusing the author with his first-person narrator. Yet, that narrator, his biography and his homecoming visit to Szibucz, map very closely onto the life of the author himself. In fact, we are told, the narrator – the Guest of the title – is himself an author living in Jerusalem's Talpiot neighborhood, and among his works set in his native town is a novella entitled "In the Prime of Her Life" – identical parallels to Agnon's own biography.[3]

The reader gets an impression of an artist painting a portrait of an artist painting a portrait of an artist, or, alternatively, of M.C.

Escher's well-known lithograph *Drawing Hands*, which captures the paradoxical act of two hands rising out of the sketch to draw each other. Where does the author end and where does the alter-ego character of the author projected into the work begin?

Among the clearest differences between autobiography and fiction is that Agnon expands his week-long visit into a period of eleven months starting with Yom Kippur, on whose eve the Guest arrives in town. The knowledgeable reader may recall the eleven-month period during which a mourner recites Kaddish in memory of a parent, and the novel's action is marked off as we travel with the Guest around the Jewish calendar and its holidays. Beginning with Yom Kippur, the day of repentance and potential renewal, and ending on the tragic note after Tisha B'Av, the memorial day of Jewish destruction. The Guest's visit spans that timeframe, with its emotional downward spiral; we imagine it to be the year of mourning for Szibucz, and so many other European Jewish towns, with the mournful tune of Kaddish echoing from between the lines.

The contemporary reader, who encounters the novel at such a historical remove from the time of the action (at this writing almost 85 years have passed), might reasonably assume Agnon had written the work following the Holocaust and destruction of European Jewry, but chose to set the story in the interwar period to heighten the sense of approaching disaster. Such a literary decision would have sharpened the reader's understanding of the degree to which World War I was indeed an unprecedented cataclysm, wreaking both physical and spiritual havoc throughout Europe, including the thereunto largely traditional Jewish society of Galicia and Poland. We ahistorical thinkers, living in the early twenty-first century, allow the scope of World War II and the Holocaust to eclipse the destruction wrought by the "Great War" of a quarter century earlier. Agnon, who lived out that war's years in Germany, never suffered from such a lapse, and his writing bears witness to this. The former presumed goal – Agnon writing the story in the 1950s, e.g., but setting the story earlier as a type of apocalyptic handwriting on the wall, seen yet ignored by all, would have fit in very squarely with a perceived Zionist message in *A Guest for the Night*. However, the book was released in September 1939 – the

very month Germany invaded Poland – having begun its serial run in 139 installments in the *HaAretz* newspaper between October 1938 and April 1939. In fact, read with this knowledge, *A Guest for the Night* becomes an eerie and ghoulish premonition of the 1940s. A tragic footnote to the prophecy of doom contained within the book is that in June 1943 the last Jews of the Buczacz Ghetto were rounded up and exterminated in the town's Jewish cemetery – a fact whose morbid irony won't be lost on readers who recall the role played by the cemetery in the novel (see, e.g., chapter 16).[4]

This pending doom is telegraphed already in the book's title, which, in Hebrew, is taken from Jeremiah 14:8: "O hope of Israel, his Savior at time of trouble, why should You be like a stranger in the land, and like *a guest for the night* (more literally: a wayfarer who turns aside to lodge)?" The eponymous Guest of this source is none other than God Himself, whom the prophet implores to return to an earlier period of intimacy with His chosen people and land, and not remain in self-exile following the destruction, a mere passing guest. The literal interpretation of the verse bears a measure of opprobrium to one who acts as a guest, as an outsider, as opposed to one (or One) who has an intimate and ongoing part in the life of the community. Continues Jeremiah (v. 9): "Why should You be like a man overcome, like a mighty man, unable to save? For You are in our midst, O Lord, and Your name is called upon us; forsake us not!"

So the titular Guest, the first-person narrator whom the reader is caused to assume serves as some kind of stand-in for Agnon himself, becomes also a stand-in for God, who could serve as a comforter amongst the destruction should he/He choose to do so. The potential is there if the Guest can overcome the self-imposed distance between himself and Szibucz (or between Himself and the Jewish people as a whole). This was neither the first nor the last time Agnon chose his Biblical resonances to simultaneously broadcast on more than one frequency.

Of course, the plot is reminiscent of other literary works as well. Long before I could have read it, I recall being enchanted by the evocative title of Thomas Wolfe's posthumous 1940 novel *You Can't Go Home Again*, which always occupied a central place on my grandparents' well-stocked bookshelf. Although a decidedly American,

Southern author, Wolfe, like his Hebrew counterpart, was known for his highly poetic prose, for depicting the changes sweeping the tradition-bound society of his youth, and for a heavy autobiographical element in his writing. To be clear, I doubt either author was aware of the existence of the other; yet like Heraclitus, Wolfe and Agnon remind their readers that they cannot step into the same river twice.

In Wolfe's version, an author returns home after making a name for himself writing thinly disguised novels about his hometown (a reflection of Wolfe's own experience). Unlike Agnon, and his writer protagonist, this character doesn't experience a very warm reception, having alienated many locals who feel they have been misrepresented by their fictional counterparts. Towards the novel's end the narrator tells us of the awful realization that George, the novelist character, reaches: "You can't go back home to your family, back home to your childhood, back home to a young man's dreams of glory and of fame, back home to exile… back home to the father you have lost and have been looking for, back home to someone who can help you, save you, ease the burden for you, back home to the old forms and systems of things which once seemed everlasting but which are changing all the time – back home to the escapes of Time and Memory." That's a passage that could just as easily have been lifted out of *A Guest for the Night*.

For Agnon's Guest, the return to Szibucz offers no escape because the town has become a waking nightmare. From the moment the train arrives in the station in chapter 1, ominously on the eve of Yom Kippur, the very first character we meet, Rubberovitch, telegraphs to the reader the uniquely Agnonian mix of nostalgia and nightmare (to borrow Arnold Band's phrase). Nostalgic in that depiction of the dispatcher who stood on the platform, "waving the flag in his hand, and called: 'Szibucz!' It was many years since I had heard the name of Szibucz coming from the lips of a man of my town. Only he who is born there and bred there and lives there knows how to pronounce every single letter of that name." Nightmarish in the man's very name: Rubberovitch has lost an arm in the war, had it replaced with a rubber prosthesis. Like the character Daniel Bach and his false leg and lost faith, Rubberovitch (whose name in our translation has been Anglicized from the Hebrew Gummovitch, to capture the essence of

his deformity) greets the Guest upon arrival, representing a society maimed in body, but also in soul.

In search of lodging, the Guest walks from the train station into the town. "Every place was changed – even the spaces between the houses. Nothing was as I had seen it when I was little, nor as it had been shown to me in a dream shortly before my return. But the odor of Szibucz had not yet evaporated – the odor of millet boiled in honey, which never leaves the town from the day after Passover until the end of November, when the snow falls, covering all." Like Proust's madeleines, the evocative smells of his youth, and their pull on his memory, emphasize how Agnon's tale, too, is one of a "search for lost time."

The day after his arrival, the Guest stands in the old Beit Midrash at the close of Yom Kippur. "A sound of weeping rose from the darkness, like the voices of a crowd supporting the cantor in his prayer. The doors of the Ark stood open, like a heavenly ear attentive to Israel's prayer… [When the Cantor, Reb Shlomo Bach, Daniel's father] came to the verse 'Every city is builded in its place and the City of God is degraded to the depths of hell,' he wept for a long time." The weeping is for Jerusalem, the City of God in the prayer, but the reader knows it is for Szibucz as well, for religious life in the town has disintegrated along with its material ruin. In fact, only on Yom Kippur itself, the year's holiest day, does a minyan assemble any longer in the Beit Midrash. Hoping to revive religious life in the prayer and study hall, the Guest is entrusted with the old, heavy metal key to the building by its last disdainful bearers, as they abandon the town for foreign, presumably American, shores.

As winter sets in the Guest pays to heat the Beit Midrash, which draws the many old, infirm, and otherwise indigent townsmen to study and prayer – not so much for the revived religious services, but for the warmth of the furnace. The Guest knows that he is, at best, running a spiritual halfway house. As the story unfolds in its episodic way we encounter some of the most beautifully portrayed characters in Hebrew literature; yet all of them are broken people (see the "Cast of Characters" appended to this edition). Take the case of old Reb Hayim who was once a great Torah scholar, taken off by the Russians to Siberia (during the Polish-Soviet War of 1919–21, another

tragic period with mass killing of Jews, similarly overshadowed by subsequent events). Fearful that he would never make it back, he sends a *get* (writ of divorce) to his wife so that she shouldn't be left an abandoned *agunah*. Miraculously, he gets out of Siberia to return as one of the broken, now divorced from his wife, sitting in the Beit Midrash – having returned to his spiritual home too late and awaiting death, which meets him by novel's end.

In the course of a few chapters the Guest loses the key to the Beit Midrash, and bewails the fact that the building still exists, yet he and the others are locked out and cannot enter – so symbolic of an old world and its values which we who stand on the other side of some historical divide cannot return to. The missing key becomes the central symbol which unlocks the entirety of *A Guest for the Night*, which is quite literally a *roman à clef*, a novel with a key. With the key the townsmen may still gain access to the world behind the door – an earlier world where tradition still has the force that it once did. But one needs a key, or a passport, or an enchanted cave, or floating handkerchief (all symbols used elsewhere by Agnon) to magically transport oneself.

In regard to the key there seems to be a particularly interesting linguistic device at work. In Hebrew the lost object is a *mafte'aḥ*, whose etymological root *p-t-ḥ* literally means "to open," so that the Hebrew reader sees the word *mafte'aḥ*, and understands it principally as an "opener." In terms of the history of language that is an interesting choice, because a key always serves two opposite yet equal functions – it is simultaneously an "opener" but at the same time a "locker" or "closer," and we can easily be mindful of the fact that every time a key opens something it can just as easily be locked. Indeed, in other languages, the etymology of those shiny metal objects on a ring in your pocket corresponds to this latter function. While in English the origins of the word "key" happen to be unknown, in Yiddish (borrowing from German) a *mafte'aḥ* is called a *shlissel*, meaning "that which closes."[5]

While the reader considers the symbolism of the book's lost "opener," we should recall that despite the fact that Agnon of course writes in Hebrew, the dialogue of the novel "takes place" in Yiddish – or would have if we were witness to its events as they actually happened, were it to be an actual historical record (which it is not). So we read in

Hebrew, if we can, and hear about the *mafte'aḥ*-opener being lost, and understand that without it we are divided from the inaccessible world within the Beit Midrash. Yet here Agnon may likely have been packing multiple hidden meanings into his prose. For despite the associations that the Hebrew text carries, he was aware that for many of his readers, the hidden Yiddish dialogue would have poked its way from between the lines, broadcasting a very different and opposite connotation – for every Hebrew opener there is a shadow Yiddish closer. If we interpret the novel through the Hebrew it is written in, the language of the newly revived Jewish world in *Eretz Yisrael*, it means one thing. But if we "hear" the novel in the language of the old world, it means something very different. When the key is replaced or recovered, it is only through the new Jewish language (or the *altneu*, if you will) that the Beit Midrash stands a chance of being accessed and revived. In the old language of European Jewry, the *shlissel* leaves it eternally sealed.

And how is the key replaced? "One day Daniel Bach came up to me. He hunched over his wooden leg and said, 'You should do as I did. If you have lost the key, get another key made.' That was a simple piece of advice Bach gave me, a solution that no one else had offered before he came along. And Daniel Bach went on, 'I will send you the locksmith and he will make you a new key.'" Just as arms and legs and noses have been replaced, so too keys. Bach represents a world where in place of what once was, ersatz copies take their place. One can get around on a peg-leg, but it's not the same thing as a leg of flesh and blood, and while a replacement key can open the door, the lost world remains inaccessible.

After nearly a year the Guest sets to return to Jerusalem. In his final days in Szibucz a baby had been born to Yeruham and Rachel, secondary yet important characters to the story. Time and again we had heard that new babies were nearly unheard of in Szibusz; the gravediggers are overworked while the midwives are idle. Honored as the *sandek* to hold the baby at the circumcision of the boy, the Guest gifts the (replacement) key to the child, in the hope of rebirth and future vibrancy in the Jewish town. This scene is set in 1930, and was written in 1938 at the latest. If it is meant to be a closing note of optimism we now know it is a tragic one. Despite the pessimism

of the novel, even Agnon could not have foreseen what the next few years would bring. We who read the novel standing on this side of history cannot do so ignoring the knowledge that *Kristallnacht* – and all that followed – took place just three weeks after *A Guest for the Night* began its serial run in the newspaper.

And yet there is an optimistic epilogue to the novel, albeit one pregnant with anticipatory anxiety. Upon his return to Jerusalem, the Guest's wife finds the original key hidden in a tear of the lining in his suitcase. He decides it is pointless to send it back to Szibucz, where the one key they have anyway sits unused. Recalling the Talmudic legend (Megillah 29a) "In the future, the synagogues and the study halls in Babylonia are destined to be transported and reestablished in *Eretz Yisrael*… in reward for their actions, all the more so should the synagogues and study halls in Babylonia, in which the Torah is read and disseminated, be relocated to *Eretz Yisrael*," he decides to keep the key in Jerusalem, awaiting the day of redemption and ingathering.

"The key being put away in its place," says the narrator (at the end of the penultimate chapter), "I returned to my work, and whenever I remembered it, I would repeat to myself: 'The synagogues and the *Batei Midrashot* are destined…,' and I would open my window and look outside to see if perhaps they were making their way to establish themselves in the Land of Israel. Alas, the land was desolate and silent, and the sound of the steps of the synagogues and *Batei Midrashot* was not heard. And still the key lies there, waiting with me for that day. However, it is made of iron and brass, and it can wait, but I, who am flesh and blood, find it hard to endure." Some await the white donkey of the messiah, others the Great Shofar of Judgment Day; our Guest awaits the day when Szibucz will return to its true self by coming back to the Land of Israel.

In a novel with such elegiac reflections on Diaspora Jewry, we should not be surprised that Agnon also included a strong note of optimism for the Zionist enterprise and the return to the Land. In the eightieth and concluding chapter we hear of the old cantor, Reb Shlomo Bach, Daniel's father, as the only character from Szybucz to both successfully settle the Land, having gone on *aliya* mid-way through the novel, and retain his commitment to tradition. A different son,

Daniel's brother, had previously emigrated, yet tragically fell defending Kibbutz Ramat Rachel during the Arab riots of 1929. In an epilogue to the novel, this final chapter recounts the Guest's visit to Reb Shlomo, himself now settled in Ramat Rachel in old age, tending the *kibbutz* garden, reflecting that "There is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel. Here I am, some seventy years old, and I was not privileged to understand the truth of the Torah until I came to the Land."

For Agnon, who loved to embed meaning in the names of his characters, it is no accident that Reb Shlomo's family name is Bach (ב"ח), written unusually but deliberately as an acronym, the meaning of which seems to clearly hint at the rabbinic work of the same name, *Bayit Ḥadash*, or "new home" – as if to say after the destruction of traditional society from within and without, the only hope for the continuation of the world of the Beit Midrash is in a new home, one where "learning leads to doing" as Reb Shlomo states. For "there is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel" only has meaning in a Jewish society in which no key is needed to unlock that hidden away in the Beit Midrash, since in the Land "wisdom [Torah] calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares" (Proverbs 1:20).

Tragically, there's a coda to the novel in a posthumously published and not-yet translated novella, *Kisui HaDam* ("The Covering of the Blood"), a modern-day iteration of the Biblical Job. In this story, Agnon's only with extended action set in America, we discover, parenthetically, that Shlomo Bach lived out his days in Ramat Rachel,

הארץ

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התותחים הצרפתים תוקפים את בצורי הגרמנים

ברלין מודיעה על הכנעת חיל־המצב הפולני בוסטרפלאטה.—ווארשה מודיעה על קרבות נמשכים בין גדיניה לדאנציג

אנא כאן, המנהיג הרוחני של 10 מיליוני מושלמים, קורא אליהם לבוא לעזרת הסיטרות הברישית, „מגן אמונתנו וחירותנו"

האבקות־הגבורה של פולין
הגרמנים מודיעים על התקדמותם מצד צפון לווארשה

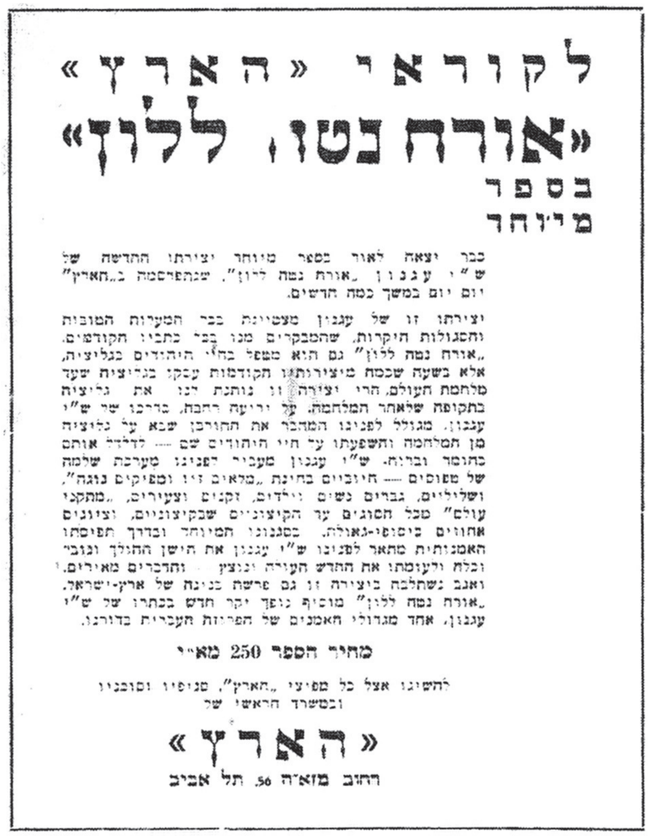
התפתחות המערכה בחזית המערבית
המשך הקרבות בין הריינוס למוזל.—העזרה המוגברת של הצי הבריטי בים לחה

שאלות א"י בפארלאמנט
קורת־רוח על העמדה האסטרטגית של תושבי הארץ

"French Cannons Attack German Reinforcements. Berlin Announces Surrender of Polish Garrison in Westerplatte (Gdańsk)"

but his surviving son Daniel, who remained behind in Szibucz, perished in the Holocaust.

A Guest for the Night is Agnon's depiction of how all modern movements aside from Zionism – secularism, Haskalah, socialism, communism – failed to provide a viable alternative to traditional life. But, he is clear, even traditional life was untenable, because it all fell apart from within *before* the first furnaces were ignited in Auschwitz. Even the Guest's well-intentioned attempt to revivify and to re-engage the lost world of piety is also doomed. The *Alte Heim*, the old home, can no longer exist – it is a place where we can only be passing guests for the night. Therefore "you can't go home again," but not for the reasons that Wolfe suggests; rather, because home no longer exists.



Headline of the *HaAretz* newspaper for Friday, September 8, 1939, one week after Germany's invasion of Poland (at left). That same day the newspaper, which had run Agnon's *A Guest for the Night* in serial form between October 1938 and April 1939, printed its first advertisement for the book edition from the Schocken Press (above): *"In his unique style and artistic manner Agnon portrays for us the vanishing past and the shining future."*

It has to be rebuilt, but it can only be rebuilt in the *Bayit Ḥadash*, in the new home in the Land of Israel.

This is Agnon's greatest theme in the novel and, in differing ways, throughout his body of writing: The idea that modern man, modern Jews, are alienated from their spiritual home. While we can't go home again, that doesn't mean we can't move forward through conceiving of a new home – although doing so comes with the great danger of being caught in the disconnect between the old and the new, between what was and what might be. That Agnon could stand at this crossroads, that he was able to author his stories and novels specifically while standing there, as heir to the Beit Midrash, communicating its message in the most modern of artistic forms, is the defining characteristic of his achievement as Hebrew literature's greatest writer.

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Notes

1. Dan Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transactions with the Novel," *Prooftexts* 7:1 (January 1987), pp. 1–27.
2. The journey through Galicia is documented in the letters of S.Y. and Ester Agnon, *Esterlein Yakirati [Letters]* (Schocken Publishers, 2000), pp. 283–294. For information regarding the 1930 visit to Buczacz, I am indebted to Prof. Dan Laor's biographical research in *Ḥayye Agnon [Biography]* (Schocken Publishing, 1998), pp. 231–240, and his Hebrew essay "*Masa veShivro: Polin, Kayitz 1930*" ["The Shattered Journey: Poland, Summer 1930"] in his collection *S.Y. Agnon: Hebetim Ḥadashim* (Sifriat Poalim, 1995), pp. 154–174.
3. "In the Prime of Her Life," recently issued in revised and annotated translation in *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town and Other Novellas* (The Toby Press, 2014), pp. 163–222.
4. For Agnon's reaction to the news of Buczacz's destruction, as depicted in his fiction, see his story "The Sign" in *A Book That Was Lost: Thirty-Five Stories* (The Toby Press, 2008), pp. 397–429. On the role of the Holocaust in his writing see: Dan Laor, "Did Agnon Write About the Holocaust?," *Yad Vashem Studies* 22 (1992), pp. 17–63.
5. This bilingual, semantic irony was first identified and explored by Yael S. Feldman, "How Does a Convention Mean? A Semiotic Reading of Agnon's Bilingual Key-Irony in *A Guest for the Night*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 56 (1985), pp. 251–269.

A Guest for the Night

The Great Synagogue of Buczacz in 1922.
"In my childhood I thought that there was no bigger building in the world than the Great Synagogue, but now its area had dwindled and its height shrunk."