

The Gift of Debt:

Agnon's Economics of Money, God and the Human Other

YONATAN SAGIV

Money, gifts, and debts play a crucial role in Agnon's first novella, Vehaya he'akov lemishor (And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight; 1912), which tells the story of the bankruptcy of middle-class shopkeepers Menasheh Hayim and his wife Kreindel Tcharni in mid-nineteenth-century Galicia. Following Nietzsche's claim of the internalization of debt as the origin of monotheist religion, I read Agnon's novella as the literary construction of an analogy between capitalism and religious faith as two economic systems of debt and credit, destined for crisis. Framed this way, Menasheh Hayim's subsequent journey as a beggar brings up questions of sin, responsibility, and the hierarchy of monetary and divine debts. Whereas Menasheh Hayim's life is constructed via debts to external authorities, his death exchanged for his wife's life underscores that the debt to the human other functions in Agnon's novella as a gift which bypasses the economy of debt and credit. Read this way, Menasheh Hayim's death for an other against the demands of an external authority becomes a critique of both the traditional and modern Jewish subject, constituted through debt to religion or its modern substitutes such as capitalism or Zionism.

One motif—money—stands out clearly in Shmuel Yosef Agnon's first novella, *Vehaya he'akov lemishor* (And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight), published in 1912 in pre-state Israel.¹ The text's pious narrator outlines the disastrous route to bankruptcy taken by middle-class shopkeepers Menasheh Hayim and his wife Kreindel Tcharni in mid-nineteenth-century Buczacz, Galicia. After the childless couple loses their shop and all their funds, Menasheh Hayim sets out to raise money as a beggar, with the help of a

letter from the town rabbi that lists his name and misfortunes. Failing to get a sufficient number of donations, he is persuaded by a drunkard beggar to sell his letter so that the latter can raise a fortune with it. The plan fails. Not only is Menasheh Ḥayim robbed, losing all of his money yet again, but the beggar, now his double, suddenly dies. Subsequently, the letter found in the beggar's clothes is used as proof of Menasheh Ḥayim's death. Later, upon his return to Buczacz, Menasheh Ḥayim discovers that his wife has remarried and given birth to a son. Acting against Jewish religious ruling, Menasheh Ḥayim decides to keep silent in order to protect his wife's happiness, and he slowly perishes in a nearby cemetery.

Though the monetary economy plays a crucial role in the text, the many insightful essays written about Agnon's novella have either relegated its extensive influence to the historical backdrop of the nineteenth-century Jewish diaspora, or have accepted too willingly the narrator's construction of the strict opposition between a misguided economic pursuit and "proper" religious ideals. Even Baruch Kurzweil, the first scholar to emphasize the ironic and tragic aspects of the novella, saw the text's preoccupation with money as serving only to condemn the protagonist's utter dependency on bourgeois values.²

And yet, Agnon's novella does not only highlight the opposition, but rather illustrates the multiple analogies between the economic and religious spheres. By focusing on the extensive portrayal of the monetary economy vis-à-vis the description of religious perceptions in *Vehaya he'akov lemishor*, my reading underscores that economy does not reside "outside" of religion in Agnon's novella, but is actually ingrained in it. As a result, the plot of the story presents religious thought in the form of what I will call, following Nietzsche, a "divine economy," one based on the exchange of human debt and divine reward.³ Consequently, the religious subject can never, as the devout narrator assumes, truly escape economy, for this subject is already *constituted* by economy. Through close examination of the two seemingly contradictory terms *debt* and *gift* in the text, Menasheh Ḥayim's life and death invite a consideration of the economic constitution of modern Jewish identity after the breakdown of Jewish tradition in nineteenth-century Europe.

DEBT AS AN EMPTY SPACE

Referencing the tradition of the Hasidic story upon which Agnon based his own novella, the pious narrator of *Vehaya he'akov lemishor* begins his story by stating that capital has no substantial value.⁴ Supplying an economic lens for the reader from the beginning, the narrator argues that according to the sages, capital is of an “inferior” nature; therefore, when we see a wealthy man lose his fortune, we should not question why this has happened. Capital vanishes precisely because it has no “substance” of its own.⁵

In stark contrast with the narrator’s marked tone of condemnation, Meir Tamari argues that the Torah perceives wealth as God’s gift to man. In fact, Tamari claims that the mainstream tradition of *halakhah* legitimates economic pursuits as long as they are subjugated to the religious sphere, seeing economics and religion as intertwined rather than in opposition.⁶ However, as Mordechai Levin shows, since the medieval period, and especially in East European communities such as those of Russia, Poland, and Galicia, a dominant ascetic Jewish strain has emerged, promoting ideals of self-denial and condemning economic activity as a severe hindrance to religious devotion.⁷ In Galicia, the locale of *Vehaya he'akov lemishor*, the rabbinic and Hasidic segments of the Jewish population shared a mutual disdain for economic pursuits and productive labor well into the nineteenth century and beyond.

Although the opening of the first chapter of *Vehaya he'akov lemishor* clearly places the narrator within this branch of East European Jewish ascetic thought, the paragraph reveals its irony when read in the larger framework of the entire novella. On the one hand, true to his position as a religious storyteller, the narrator constantly asserts that there is no point in understanding the monetary economy. On the other hand, the rest of the chapter engages in a meticulous examination of the economic conditions of mid-nineteenth-century Galicia that led Menasheh Ḥayim and Kreindel Tcharni to bankruptcy.⁸

Menasheh Ḥayim and Kreindel Tcharni started out as typical members of a Galician middle class made up of Jewish merchants and shopkeepers, but their financial decline begins with a competition. A rival merchant offers to pay more rent for the couple’s store. The narrator’s description of the competition, which increases

the store's expenses while its income dwindles, is detailed enough to even include the specific ratio between the state tax and the cost of rent. Notably, while competition is considered to be a basic and positive element of capitalism in classic economic thinking, Agnon's text presents competition as the driving force of economic crisis, echoing Marx's vision of capital's predestined collapse due to its inherent need for expansion.⁹ As the slippery slope from riches to rags gains momentum and money begins to run out, the first imagery of debt appears in the text as an expanding *lack*. The constant "leakage" of money leaves behind "an empty space between the goods" (62) and the emptiness establishes a sense of "lack" in the store.

The abundance of economic details in Agnon's text ironically subverts the narrator's pious declarations. The text thus nourishes a growing tension between two possible explanations for the course of the story's events. On the one hand, the narrator promotes a metaphysical and ahistorical worldview. Suggesting that only the divine determines the economic sphere, the narrator comments: "When God wants to undermine a man's path, quickly his luck will run out" (62). On the other hand, the narrator supplies all of the necessary information to construct a historical and rational narrative to account for the couple's financial decline. Within the framework of the story, a universal capitalist monetary language based on abstraction, calculation, and exchange competes with and replaces a religious discourse in explaining the couple's downfall. Yet while the narrator explicitly advances only the proposed opposition between these two discourses, the text also implicitly reveals multiple analogies between these two competing narratives.

INVESTING TRUST AND GIVING CREDIT

When Menasheh Hayim and Kreindel Tcharni anxiously debate selling all their merchandise to a crafty merchant, the narrator suddenly tells a Hasidic tale about the Ba'al Shem Tov. In the tale, a tax collector, who welcomes the Ba'al Shem Tov to his home, needs to pay a debt immediately, or he shall lose his house. Marching penniless to meet his creditor, the tax collector miraculously meets a traveler who suddenly pays him all the money he had previously owed him. The Ba'al Shem Tov concludes by telling his disciples that God rewards those who have trust (*bitaḥon*) in the divine.¹⁰ The tale thus weaves into the text one of the most prevalent principles of

Jewish thought: the idea of trust in the divine as the only true determinant of man's fate. That which brings about man's good fortune in business is not a rational analysis of the market, but rather his complete trust in the workings of the divine.¹¹

Yet this tale can also teach us readers another lesson. The reading of the Hasidic tale by the Ba'al Shem Tov adheres to the language of miracle, which presupposes a strict opposition between religion and economy, between having trust (as belief) in God and having trust (as credit) in money, between the receiving of a salary and the winning of a divine reward. However, by the same token, when we reverse the reading of the Ba'al Shem Tov, the tax collector can be perceived as a truly accomplished businessman, dealing successfully not only with a debtor of his own, but also with two creditors, his landlord and God. The Hasidic tale then tells a story of two acts of commerce, not just one.

Commerce and exchange, Friedrich Nietzsche argues, are not merely acts of human subjects, but rather economic procedures standing at the origin of human subjectivity. Claiming that "making prices, assessing values, thinking out equivalents, exchanging—all this preoccupied the primal thought of man to such an extent that in a certain sense it constituted thinking itself," Nietzsche underscores that economy formulated human thought.¹² Exchange between individuals enabled man to measure, to compare, to calculate, and to establish values. Exchange facilitated agreements between people. It founded human society. As such, the most rudimentary form of human interaction, the relationship between buyer and seller, between debtor and creditor, constitutes later, complex social institutions, such as religion, morality, and the law. Accordingly, for Nietzsche, sacredness of duty, the sense of guilt, conscience, and above all the belief in God, all originated in the sphere of the economic contract: the law of exchange. As a result, what stands at the basis of the relationship between God and humanity is the exchange between a creditor and his debtor. In the case of religious thought, this divine economy constitutes the human being as an infinitely indebted subject vis-à-vis an all-powerful creditor. With the violent evolution of the law of collective monotheistic religion, the religious subject internalizes the economic debt so as to experience it as guilt before the fiction it created, before God.

Nietzsche's argument finds fertile linguistic ground in Hebrew, where the words *duty* (*hovva*), *debt* (*hohv*) and *guilty* (*hayav*) all share the same root.¹³ The

linguistic connections between debt, duty, and guilt in Hebrew highlight the economic underpinnings of religious Jewish thought. The duty to God is experienced by the religious subject as an infinite debt, a debt in the form of guilt. In this divine economy between the indebted religious subject and God the creditor, the exchange of debts (rituals, prayers, services, festivals, and sacrifices) for divine rewards is underlined by the ultimate exchange: the guilt of the indebted subject for the forgiveness of the all-powerful creditor. The human debt to the divine thus stands above, beyond, and prior to any other debt. Still, the rereading of the tale of the tax collector in *Vehaya he'akov lemishor* reveals that the religious subject invests trust in order to be *paid back* by a divine reward. Though the structure of divine economy is supposedly based on an infinite debt to God, according to the notion of trust, this debt, once embraced, is simultaneously effaced through the perception of a reciprocal and profitable exchange.

The structure of a divine economy based on trust in a symmetrical and profitable exchange appears throughout Agnon's oeuvre. For example, in the short story titled "Haprutah" (The Coin; 1934), a poor man who does not take a silver coin in order to observe the sanctity of the Sabbath is rewarded: "and since he observed one Sabbath in poverty, he was allowed to observe many Sabbaths in riches."¹⁴ This story's "happy ending," however, is undercut by irony. As we have already seen in the opening of *Vehaya he'akov lemishor*, Agnon's poetics time and time again presents the imagery of gold as insubstantial, transient, and unworthy. Similarly, although gold as God's gift is a familiar biblical trope, gold and wealth also function in the Hebrew Bible as a deceptive distraction that draws one away from God. This is why the book of Proverbs warns us that "those who trust in their riches will fall."¹⁵ In this biblical warning lies the understanding that the perception of gold as divine reward reduces religious thought to nothing more than the most basic logic of a calculable exchange, turning trust into credit, God into creditor, and faith into nothing more than economy.

In this sense, then, what is shared among many of Agnon's texts is the *semblance* of a conflict between duty (debt) to God and monetary debt. When each protagonist resolves the conflict by choosing his debt to God over his monetary debt, the stories seemingly maintain the opposition, elevating the principle of trust over rational economic activity and the divine debt over the monetary one. However, the same conclusion that supposedly cements this opposition, subjugating economy to religion,

also subverts it. The receipt of gold as a divine reward reverses the story's explicit moral claim, redefining the relationship between believer and God as one of a purely economic nature. Thus, while the devout narrator of *Vehaya be'akov lemishor* explicitly advocates the principle of trust in God as purely a matter of spiritual faith, Agnon's text critically constructs the notion of trust as actually constituting a divine economy that shares the same logic as a monetary economy, the logic of a utilitarian, reciprocal, and profitable exchange of investment and reward.¹⁶

THE INFINITELY DEFERRED DEBT

While the Hasidic tale in *Vehaya be'akov lemishor* produces credit in both divine and monetary economies—the payments made with trust and with money both end in a successful transaction—Menasheh Hayim and Kreindel Tcharni's storyline points to a different analogy between capitalist economy and divine economy. In their story, both economies are based on an endless postponement of debt, destined inevitably to collapse. Aptly enough, while the word *trust* appears more than five times in the two-page-long Hasidic tale, the word *debt* begins to haunt Agnon's text right after Menasheh Hayim and Kreindel Tcharni's bargaining with a fellow merchant leaves the couple with no money to buy goods for the store, and no goods to sell for money. For Marx, the circular movement of money in capitalism turns the positions of buyer and seller into those of creditor and debtor due to the temporal separation between the act of selling and buying.¹⁷ The effect of this necessary separation, based on the principle of credit, is that the circulation of money is always on the brink of a crisis. As such, crisis is inscribed within capitalism; it can be postponed, but never avoided.¹⁸

The description of capitalistic circulation as a constant movement founded upon debt and destined for a fall materializes in Agnon's text through its intense focus on the notion of interest. When the desperate couple takes a high-interest loan, the narrator comments that "the next morning Kreindel Tcharni went to the city and bought all that was missing from her store, and all the cupboards were filled with food, and all was well" (69). The happy conclusion is, however, immediately charged with irony when the narrator follows it with an explanation that the biblical Hebrew term for interest, *neshekh*, literally means "bite." The narrator further explains that

the rabbinic interpretation of the chosen noun points to the nature of interest, which keeps on “biting” into your shares.¹⁹ Though “customers are not lacking,” and “when asked for donations, Kreindel Tcharni gets all dolled up, laughing with her eyes” (69), this constant oscillation between, on the one side, fullness, food, laughter, and money, and on the other, the hollowing emptiness of interest and debt, rapidly intensifies. Kreindel Tcharni borrows continuously from her neighbors, “sometimes for profit” and sometimes just for “the sake of the business,” while the couple’s debt increases.

The tension between excess and lack, movement and pause, materializes in full force in the image of the empty/full store, through which a rampant movement of customers, vendors, commodities, and money keeps circulating for the sake of appearance and movement itself. Menasheh Ḥayim and Kreindel Tcharni ignore their debt and increase their spending in the hope of setting circulation back on track, but the actual effect is to bring economic movement to a complete halt. Within the logic of this story, the encroachment of debt can be postponed, yet never overcome. Accordingly, when Menashe Ḥayim and Kreindel Tcharni eventually close shop, the narrator assures us that despite God’s “infinite affluence . . . when heaven falls, all winged creatures come to an end,” and when “the pillars of the store” are ruined, no livelihood can be found (71–72). Attributing the economic crisis to divine authority yet again, the narrator uses the metaphor of the “pillars of the store,” an image that merges economic and religious spheres by inserting the religious “pillars” of the Temple into the description of an everyday store. While the metaphor ironically mocks the couple’s “religious” subjugation to commerce, it also marks the breakdown of both divine and monetary economy. The movement of mercantile fervor, running on an empty battery before the crash, is analogous to the divine “plenitude that came down, but did not stay” (72). Agnon’s text portrays both capitalist circulation and God’s plenitude as two forces that produce a semblance of excess while yielding nothing. Both the divine and monetary economies are founded on a debt that can be deferred, but never paid off. Their equally destructive circulation leaves behind a ruined, closed store governed by a debt that appears once again as the “empty space” where the *mezuzah*, a religious sign of trust, once was.

The closing of the store therefore finds Menasheh Ḥayim doubly indebted to capitalist economy and to divine economy. Menasheh Ḥayim’s double indebtedness,

however, is not mutually exclusive, but also coincident, as he still believes that if he finds the means to pay off his debt to these formal economies, he will be saved. The conflict and analogy between these two economies mirror another conflict staged within Menasheh Ḥayim and Kreindel Tcharni's marriage: the couple has no children after a ten-year marriage, a time limit after which *halakbab* encourages the man to divorce his wife. Menasheh Ḥayim's refusal to divorce is portrayed as a sin against God by Kreindel Tcharni, who thinks that "she has made him sin. Ten years . . . and still he does not divorce her" (68). The text thus constructs the couple's marriage as another site of conflicting debts. In preserving his contract of marriage with his wife, Menasheh Ḥayim is already in breach of his contract with God. In accounting for Menasheh Ḥayim's finances, then, one registers three conflicting deficits: a debt to the divine, a monetary debt, and an intersubjective debt. To pay one debt necessarily means to default on other debts. Read this way, the questions the text raises become questions of economics: can one determine the hierarchy of these debts in this markedly ironic text? By what means should one pay one's debts? Above all, what light do these questions shed on Menasheh Ḥayim's self-sacrifice at the end of the text, exchanging his own death for the life of Kreindel Tcharni?

QUESTIONS OF GIVING

The question of the gift first appears in Agnon's novella when Kreindel Tcharni and Menasheh Ḥayim lose all of their money. To Kreindel Tcharni, the act of giving to the poor signifies social power. This is why "at any opportunity to publicly give *tzedakah* [charity], Kreindel Tcharni's donation would not go unnoticed" (72).²⁰ However, once she finds herself on the receiving end, Kreindel Tcharni turns to Menasheh Ḥayim in despair, saying: "if God does not want us to benefit from our own labor as every son of Israel, we will arrive, heaven forbid, at the gift of flesh and blood" (76).²¹ The term *matnat basar vadam* (gift of flesh and blood) comes from *Birkat hamazon* (blessing for sustenance), in which one prays to God: "Please make us not dependent, O Lord our God, upon the charity of others [literally: gifts of flesh and blood] nor of their loans, but rather of thy hand, that is full, holy, open and generous."²² The blessing then not only distinguishes between the open and generous divine gifts and dismal human gifts, but hints at an equation

between these human gifts (gifts of flesh and blood) and loans. One wonders whether a gift given as a loan, a gift that needs to be reciprocated, can still be called a gift.

For Marcel Mauss, the answer is a positive one. In *The Gift*, his 1924 seminal anthropological essay, Mauss argues that the capitalist notion of a free gift works against the primitive universal custom of the obligatory gift, what he calls the gift-through-exchange.²³ The economy of the gift, the economic structure of primitive societies and ancient religions, also explained for Mauss the notion of sacrifice, which he saw as “a gift that compels the deity to make a return.”²⁴ Consequently, for Mauss, the gift economy encourages religious, ethical, and social obligations, while capitalist societies that renounce it turn man into an “economic animal,” operating as a utilitarian and calculating machine.

Critiquing Mauss, however, Jacques Derrida claims that if giving a gift is defined as a giving that anticipates no reciprocation, then any entrance of the gift into an economy, circulation, or exchange implies a return and thus destroys the gift.²⁵ In other words, the gift is opposed to economy, annulled by it. Where there is calculation, interest, or reason, there can be no gift, only credit and debt. This leads Derrida to suggest that, paradoxically, the only gift possible is one that cannot be recognized as a gift. The suggestion recalls Maimonides who, in his highly influential conceptualization of Jewish charity in the twelfth century, lists giving in secret—when donor and recipient do not know of each other—as one of the most sacred acts of charity.²⁶ At the same time, for Maimonides and for all codifiers of Jewish law after him, the most sacred form of charity was not the giving of donations, but rather the giving of free-interest loans to the poor.²⁷ Paradoxically, the Jewish system of charity to the poor identifies its most sacred act of giving as in fact an act of loaning, a concept that, at least according to Derrida, excludes the idea of the gift and the act of giving.

Taking this discussion into account, Kreindel Tcharni’s fear of the gift can be read in many ways. Mauss’s illustration of the capitalist world as a zoo filled with economic animals corresponds well with Agnon’s depiction of Buczac’s Jewish peddlers who refuse to give donations: “for who is willing nowadays to use his trade for the purpose of charity without getting paid” (74). In Agnon’s text, the capitalist system, constituted on the basis of utilitarian calculation, excludes any

possibility of the gift, and the couple becomes completely impoverished. However, Kreindel Tcharni expresses her fear of the gift by quoting from a blessing from a pre-capitalist age, whose value-set is by no means an isolated case in Judaism. Maimonides himself, who devoted many of his writings to the ethics of charity, also warns: “Do not accept gifts from human beings; trust in God, blessed be he, and not in generous men.”²⁸ In his warning, Maimonides also cites Proverbs 15:27: “He that hates gifts shall live.” Accordingly, while it is true that the Hebrew Bible emphasizes the importance of charity, it is also true that poverty is sometimes perceived in the biblical text as a punishment from God and as a state marked by shame and embarrassment.²⁹

In echoing these and other Jewish texts, Kreindel Tcharni’s eagerness to give alms while fearing to receive them points at an unresolved tension in Judaism. On the one hand, giving gifts is a strategy for social justice, a sign of one’s commitment to God, of one’s generosity and devoutness; on the other hand, accepting the gift is a sign of a wavering trust in God, of one’s inability to sustain oneself, of social and religious weakness. As such, many religious Jewish texts in fact view the gift as ambivalent and potentially dangerous.

There is another way however to read Kreindel Tcharni’s fear of the “gift of flesh and blood,” which complicates the first. Though the common interpretation of the religious term “the gift of flesh and blood” refers to gifts received from other men, the quotation appears in Agnon’s text in a more ambivalent way: as a gift received by others, but also as a gift given to an other. In fact, when the quotation is read retroactively, in light of Menasheh Ḥayim’s eventual death, this phrase, this gift of flesh and blood, is now weighted with another meaning: sacrifice. The phrase thus works in Agnon’s text as foreshadowing Menasheh Ḥayim’s tragic end. Kreindel Tcharni fears not only receiving the “gift of flesh and blood” from others; she is also afraid of giving the gift of flesh and blood. Read in this manner, Agnon’s text becomes aligned with Mauss’s theory of sacrifice-as-gift. Arriving at a place of need for the “gift of flesh and blood,” for the need to give up one’s life, becomes, in Agnon’s text, an arrival at the act of self-sacrifice. As such, the gift and the act of giving are constructed in *Vehaya he’akov lemishor* as passive and active, dangerous and beneficial, selfish and selfless. This double, ambivalent, and at times dangerous structure of the gift brings to mind Mauss’s observation that

“the Gift therefore at one and at the same time is what should be done, what should be received, and yet what is dangerous to take.”³⁰

THE IMPOSSIBLE GIFT

If modern capitalist economy in Agnon’s text excludes any true act of giving, the text’s shift to an exploration of the Jewish system of charity through Menashe Ḥayim’s wandering as a beggar in Galicia can be understood to mark an initial sense of hope. As opposed to the capitalist system, the Babylonian Talmud suggests at one point that charity (*tzedakah*), the giving of alms, is equal in its importance to all the other commandments combined.³¹ Could this calculation indeed offer something more substantial than the utilitarian capitalist calculation that first governed Agnon’s text?

From its earliest stages, Menasheh Ḥayim’s journey underscores one of the main tropes that will define the workings of Jewish charity in the text, namely decency. When Menasheh Ḥayim arrives at the first town, carrying with him the rabbi’s letter vouching for his honesty, he accuses a crowd of mocking young yeshiva pupils at the synagogue of “leaving me, a decent guest [*ore’ah hagun*] . . . until his strength runs out and he dies of hunger” (85). Menasheh Ḥayim’s emphasis on the words “decent guest” accentuates the economic aspect of charity as an act of exchange by quietly weaving into the text one of the most determinant factors in the distribution of Jewish charity. As Elimelech Horowitz notes, the term *decent*—as a criterion distinguishing between people worthy or unworthy of receiving charity—already appears in the ancient period of the Babylonian Talmud.³²

Why is decency so important? In the logic of the “Jewish gift economy,” people should give charity only to decent poor people because charity has the status of a *mitzvah* (commandment), which will be rewarded by God.³³ In this calculation of the commandment worth all other commandments combined, the value of the act of charity depends on whether the one who needs help is *worthy of help*. This moment of calculation ingrained in the economy of charity becomes explicitly clear in a story Menasheh Ḥayim hears of one Reb Liber who generously welcomes a guest, giving him his own bed to sleep in. Explaining his generosity to the astonished guest, Reb Liber says: “Do you think that I am making your bed? It

is mine I am making.” The narrator further explains that he meant that he was “preparing his own bed in the world to come” (89). Emphasizing this logic of exchange motivated by self-interest and reward, Reb Liber’s reply aligns the calculation of the Jewish gift economy with that characterized by the capitalist system in the text. In the capitalist system one invests in order to be rewarded in this life, while in the Jewish gift economy one invests in order to be rewarded in the after-life; both systems, however, still offer a utilitarian logic of self-interest and profit.

Whereas the Maussian law of the gift-through-exchange, which even uses the Jewish charity system as an historical example, states that a gift economy promotes social and ethical bonds, *Vehaya he’akov lemishor* forcefully illustrates Derrida’s claim that economy annuls the gift. Accordingly, the last example of the Jewish gift economy in Agnon’s text is the story of Rabbi Enzil. In the story, before attending a charitable Shabbat dinner held by Rabbi Enzil for the poor members of the community, a beggar unknowingly calls the rabbi a miser to his face. In response, Rabbi Enzil advises the beggar to eat before supper so as not to rely on this infamous miser. Listening to this advice, the beggar walks into the trap, and a lengthy description ensues, recounting his regret and suffering in face of the extravagant dinner that Rabbi Enzil has prepared for his revenge. This story within a story emphasizes the annihilation of the gift once it enters public exchange and social power relations. Working against Mauss’s claim that the gift is only possible through exchange, Menasheh Ḥayim’s begging only serves to set the gift in opposition to economy, under whose logic every gift becomes a future debt. In Agnon’s text, once there is an economy of alms, a Jewish gift economy structured by rules, calculation, and exchange—be it even the gratitude of the reciprocator—the system itself destroys the possibility of a true gift.

THE LETTER, OR, WHEN ECONOMIES BREAK DOWN

While an act of commerce brings Menasheh Ḥayim back to his hometown, it is a poisoned gift that will lead him to his death. Missing his wife dreadfully, Menasheh Ḥayim decides to sell the letter he received from the town’s rabbi to another beggar.³⁴ Menasheh Ḥayim’s sale of the letter and his subsequent visit to the big fair (*bayarid bagadol*) exhibit his continued cooperation with the various

formal economies of debt in the text.³⁵ A product of the religious principle of trust on the one hand, and of the emerging capitalist market on the other, Menasheh Ḥayim still believes that both divine and monetary economies are established, in the end, on a profitable and reciprocal exchange. Wishing to return to his wife as an “honest” merchant, and not as a “beggar,” Menasheh Ḥayim tells himself: “and now God, may he be blessed, is his helper . . . he will be able now to buy merchandise from *hamakor mamash* [the actual source], and just like people say: the one who falls and gets up, *earns* another pace” (97). Still, the actual source, be it the market or be it God, fails Menasheh Ḥayim again, and this failed venture anticipates the all-encompassing crisis that will soon envelop Menasheh Ḥayim. The text now shifts focus to the letter found in the clothes of the dead beggar, leading to the rabbi’s public declaration of Menasheh Ḥayim’s death.

The selling of the letter, therefore, the selling of the letters of “the name that is etched inside it” (95), triggers what becomes the complete breakdown of trust in any system of signification operating within the text, be it religion, economy, or this time, language. On returning to Buczacz, Menasheh Ḥayim quickly learns what the reader already knows: he himself was declared dead, and as a result, Kreindel Tcharni has remarried and given birth to a son. Despite his unshaken trust in God and in the market, Menasheh Ḥayim’s return does not lead therefore to acts of restitution, but to the opposite. His return marks a literal and metaphorical economic crisis. Not only did his trust in monetary and divine economy fail him, but he now discovers that the rabbi’s letter, his letters, signifies much more than he can control or comprehend. The letter, the essence of a wandering text, wandered beyond his control. Its act of signification effects a doubling of Menasheh Ḥayim: the beggar with the letter who died, and the beggar without the letter who lives. The letter thus marks death where there is life and life where there is death.³⁶ It is a gift that gives much more than was intended. In fact, it gives the opposite of what was intended: the gift becomes the harbinger of death. Like money and God, the letter is a determining force that cannot be trusted, though paradoxically its effect is based on trust itself.

The letter in Agnon’s text thus becomes the final breaking point of economy, religion, and language, which can no longer be accredited. The logic of their movement, the intelligibility of their signification becomes opaque. None of their signs,

be they coins or letters, can be trusted. This extreme state of unintelligibility, of a break between signs and what they presume to signify, is already hinted at when Kreindel Tcharni stands at the empty store after their failed bargain, astonished by the fact that “her calculations and her eyes contradict one another, namely, the bill is the bill, but the store is still empty” (67). While it is trust in bills, letters, coins, and texts—in short, in signs—that determines the events of Menasheh Ḥayim’s life, a trust in signs is no longer possible; one can no longer trust their inherent truth. Consequently, *Vehaya he’akov lemishor* undermines the idea of divine economy as transparent and profitable, presenting it instead as an unstable, opaque, and irrational economic structure. Just as in capitalism, crisis is inscribed within divine economy. Its erratic circulation, its unintelligible production, distribution, and consumption of signs, leaves the modern Jewish subject with no coherent narrative through which he can grasp both his life and looming death.

BETWEEN CREDIT AND CRISIS

Physically alive but legally dead, Menasheh Ḥayim finds himself in a state of social excommunication. As noted, Menasheh Ḥayim is in an impossible bind. As a living dead, he can resolve his excommunication by telling the truth. However, if he tells the truth Kreindel Tcharni will have to divorce her husband, and her son will be considered a bastard according to the rules of *halakhab*.³⁷ Simply by living, Menasheh Ḥayim condemns Kreindel Tcharni to sin according to Jewish law; but at the same time, Menasheh Ḥayim cannot commit suicide, for this too will make him a sinner.³⁸

Already socially dead, Menasheh Ḥayim’s meditations on this tragic predicament take form on the course of his wandering outside the town, until he ends up at the cemetery. Prior to his arrival at this final destination, Menasheh Ḥayim still draws a link between his faults, his guilt, and his feelings of shame before others and God. Despite the narrator’s suggestion that God is to blame—earlier he laments, “Master of the universe, you are just . . . but may what you have caused to happen here be the fate of all the enemies of the people of Israel” (83)—Menasheh Ḥayim shifts the blame from God onto himself, internalizing it as guilt and shame. At this stage, Menasheh Ḥayim still embodies Nietzsche’s religious subject whose guilt is the product of his imagined debt to God, his all-powerful creditor.

Accordingly, Menasheh Ḥayim's subsequent deliberations in favor of telling the truth go as follows: "The sages said: whoever is ashamed of his sins is forgiven for his transgressions" (122). To follow the sages then, the telling of truth amounts to the selling of truth, the exchanging of human guilt for divine forgiveness.

The sages' claim that guilt can be exchanged for forgiveness still constructs divine economy as symmetrical, transparent, and profitable. In this light, Menasheh Ḥayim's decision to keep silent and substitute his own life for Kreindel Tcharni's life becomes an expression of his objection to the sages' judgment. Defying their calculation, Menasheh Ḥayim wonders if it is "forgiveness he desires, when Kreindel Tcharni is locked in hell?" (122). Menasheh Ḥayim understands that according to the sages' computation, he can indeed exchange his guilt for divine forgiveness, but at the cost of Kreindel Tcharni's life. As such, his choice of silence over and against Jewish formal ruling (against what he perceives to be the order of the divine) is propelled not by thoughts of divine credit, but by the thought of his wife's suffering, of the other's pain. It is only after making the decision to keep silent, only after defying the calculation of guilt and forgiveness, that Menasheh Ḥayim reaches the cemetery. The text thereby creates a separation between the two former social spheres already explored—that of the capitalist monetary economy and that of the Jewish gift economy—and the sphere of cemetery, which bypasses these economies of debt and credit. It is in this isolated space that the cemetery guard, who hears Menasheh Ḥayim's story and witnesses his death, erects Kreindel Tcharni's gravestone over Menasheh Ḥayim's true place of burial, "and gives him a name and a remainder in Israel" (127).³⁹ Yet, in a bankrupt divine economy, does this act of religious commemoration, this "name and remainder," still hold any value?

THE GIFT OF DEBT

To read Menasheh Ḥayim's tragic death as a repudiation of the idea of a reciprocal and profitable divine economy establishes *Vehaya he'akov lemishor* as a narrative that traces the transformation of the meaning of debt and its relation to the emergence of the modern Jewish subject. In Agnon's text, Menasheh Ḥayim is initially constituted as an indebted subject through his relationship both to God and to capitalism. The subject thus can never defy economy, but rather emerges from it.

Inseparable from the circulation of the monetary and divine economies, the text envisions the subject's debt as an empty and negative space that corrodes subjectivity and economy from within. The text's exposure of these economies as bankrupt is an implicit critique of both the religiously indebted Jewish subject and its modern replacements: the subject of the early Haskalah with its unqualified indebtedness to universal rational economy, and even the Zionist subject, fervently indebted to the national revival of the homeland.⁴⁰

Alternatively, in the cemetery, Menasheh Ḥayim's social excommunication results in his rejection of any debt to any *formal* economy and authority. He becomes instead indebted solely to the human other: his wife. By refusing to exchange his guilt for divine forgiveness, Menasheh Ḥayim chooses to exchange his life for Kreindel Tcharni's life, though his choice is in opposition to what he imagines as God's demand: "and he kept his silence, and spared her . . . for if she had sinned, he would carry her sin" (122). While in the divine and monetary economies at work in the text, debt is always a negative presence that effaces any form of giving, Menasheh Ḥayim's silence paradoxically functions as both debt and gift. His silence can be read as paying a debt to the other, but at the same time his silence, which leads to death, also becomes the gift of flesh and blood mentioned by Kreindel Tcharni earlier in the text. Menasheh Ḥayim's gift of flesh and blood becomes a giving up of one's flesh and blood, of one's own life for the other; his self-sacrifice is a gift given not to God, and not in order to compel God to give something in return, but given to Kreindel Tcharni without her knowledge, and without expectation of recompense. In this respect, paying one's debt to the human other is the only act of giving in the text that breaks away from the reciprocal exchange that annuls the gift. Read in this way, Agnon's text indirectly serves as a critique (*avant la lettre*) of Derrida's contemplations on the gift. While for Derrida in both *Given Time* and *The Gift of Death*, debt as a negative term always effaces the possibility of the gift, Agnon's text conceives of debt not only as the annulment of the gift, but also as the condition of the gift in itself, the gift of debt, as it were.

Unlike the Hasidic tale in the story, Menasheh Ḥayim's life and death present divine economy as asymmetrical, impenetrable, and destined for crisis. However, in his moment of crisis, Menasheh Ḥayim still gives his own life for the sake of his beloved without a rejection of faith, without knowing in what light his silence will

cast him or Kreindel Tcharni in the eyes of God. This is why he confesses to the guard that “even in the world of truth [the afterlife] he expects no rest” (127). Menasheh Ḥayim still believes in God, yet chooses to act against any formal demand that claims to represent the wishes of the divine. His rebellion is an act of faith, yet his faith is an act of rebellion. It is precisely because of this paradox that his silence can be a true gift. He gives without expecting reciprocation, not from God, and not from Kreindel Tcharni. In fact, Menasheh Ḥayim’s silent gift is mirrored by Kreindel Tcharni’s purchase of the gravestone, which she also aimed to keep secret. Reflecting each other’s acts of giving without any horizon of reciprocation, Menasheh Ḥayim and Kreindel Tcharni break away from trust in either a divine or a monetary economy, which are based on a utilitarian exchange. Both enter into an economy of love established on the asymmetrical exchange of paying a debt to the human other with no trust or credit in a future compensation.

In this respect, we should not trust the pious narrator when he asserts that Menasheh Ḥayim earned his divine reward of “a name and a remainder.” It is in this moment of giving back credit that the text collapses into itself, trust is restored, circulation recuperates, and any true gift is lost. Indeed, Menasheh Ḥayim’s self-sacrifice is enacted only after the text has shattered all trust in religion, economy, and language. As such, the “name and remainder” etched on Menasheh Ḥayim’s gravestone by the cemetery guard cannot restore trust in a just and reciprocal divine economy. Instead, the guard’s act constitutes Menasheh Ḥayim’s death as a gift of self-sacrifice, the results of which remain a secret for the subject who actively takes part in an ambiguous and asymmetrical exchange. The reader thus can never truly know if the crooked indeed became straight, as the title of Agnon’s story suggests.⁴¹ This is precisely why Menasheh Ḥayim says to the guard right before his death: “As the Holy Sh’lh wrote: know, my sons, that the keys are given to man, and in that lies a hidden secret, for truly into the hands of man they are given, the external keys, and the inner keys” (127).⁴² Reading Menasheh Ḥayim’s riddling, one realizes that what is given, the gift that is given to man by God, cannot be deciphered. On the one hand, Menasheh Ḥayim argues here that the keys to man’s understanding of himself and of the world are given to him. On the other hand, what is given here is a secret, which will remain hidden from man. Written in Palestine in 1912, and set in historical mid-nineteenth-century Galicia at the time of a burgeoning modernity and

nationalism breaking from tradition, Agnon's story imagines a modern Jewish subject who is constituted through the paying of a debt to the human other, while expecting no divine reciprocation, no future reward, and no approval from any formal authority, ideology or economy.

The Centre for Jewish Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)
University of London

NOTES

- 1 The ideas presented in this article will be expanded in my forthcoming book, *Indebted: Capitalism and Religion in the Writings of S. Y. Agnon*, analyzing representations of money, economy, and debt in the works of Shmuel Yosef Agnon. The book will be published by Hebrew Union College Press. The reworking of this essay was made during my appointment as a post-doctoral fellow of the Israel Institute at SOAS, University of London.
- 2 Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot 'al sipurei S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962), 190–93. An exception to this approach was Israel Rosenzweig's short review of *Vehaya he'akov lemishor* through a Marxist point of view. See Israel Rosenzweig, "Hatluna neged hakapitalizem bevehaya he'akov limishor," *Orlogin* 11 (1955): 312–14.
- 3 As I explain below, the term *divine economy* in this article specifically refers to the economic infrastructure of religious thought as founded on the idea of human debt and divine reward. However, the *divine economy* in Judeo-Christian tradition has many other definitions. In Christian doctrine, for example, it can also refer to the economic understanding of the revelation of God through the son and the spirit in the history of revelation, to the internal relations of the trinity, and to the Jewish or Christian economy of salvation. See Ralph Dell Cole, "The Triune God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Collin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 121–39.
- 4 The tradition of the Hasidic story began with the publication of *Shivvei habesbt* in 1814, which contains 251 tales of the life Rabbi Ben Eliezer, the founder of Hasidism. The Hasidic story usually presents a framing story within which shorter stories are intertwined, all of which didactically praise the virtues of the *tzadik* (the Hasidic sage) and the power of belief. See Gedalia Nigal, "Yesodot hasidi'yim be'ahat meyetsirot Agnon," in *'Al vehaya he'akov lemishor: masot al*

- novelah leShai Agnon*, ed. Yehuda Friedlander (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1993), 165–77, 165–71.
- 5 S. Y. Agnon, “Vehaya he’akov lemishor” in *‘Elu ve’elu* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1966), 57–127, 61. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.) Subsequent references will be given in parentheses in the text.
 - 6 Meir Tamari, *With All Your Possessions: Jewish Ethics and Economic Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 25–38.
 - 7 Mordechai Levin, *Erkhei hevrah vekhalkalah ba’ideologia shel tekufat habaskalah* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1975), 16–26. While traditional Judaism is considered as a non-ascetic religion, Eliezer Diamond claims that a significant ascetic strain existed within rabbinic Judaism throughout late antiquity, dovetailing with a rabbinic tendency toward voluntary self-denial. To follow Diamond, the different forms of asceticism in rabbinic Judaism were at least partly responsible for the development of later ascetic factions in Judaism in medieval times and modernity. See Eliezer Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 132, 135.
 - 8 A comparison between *Vehaya he’akov lemishor* and its earlier models—Hasidic tales such as “Shemen hatov”—would also compel us to take the narrator’s traditional views with a grain of salt, and instead to attribute these statements to the ironic intention of the implied author. These earlier Hasidic versions, much more aligned with Agnon’s narrator’s claim, do not examine the specific economic causes that led to their protagonists’ impoverishment. For further analysis of the early Hasidic versions, see Nigal, 165–76. Also see Louis Landau, “Mekorot upsavdo mekorot be’Vehaya he’akov lemishor’ leShai Agnon,” *Hasifrut* 26 (1978): 94–103.
 - 9 For a discussion of the varied ideologies of classical economy, see Norman P. Barry, *On Classical Liberalism and Libertarianism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1987). As for Marx’s fully developed argument on capitalism as an unstable system due to inherent contradictions, see Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1996).
 - 10 I translated here the word *bitaḥon* as trust, and not as faith (*emunah*). Throughout the essay, I distinguish between these two words as referring to two different concepts. The word *trust* should be understood here to refer to a belief in the circulation of divine economy, as a system of human debt and divine credit, a system of reciprocal and profitable exchange. In contrast, the word *faith* refers here to a belief that is not grounded in an economic model that includes symmetrical and transparent exchange.

- 11 Levin, 16–18.
- 12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Modern Library, 1997), 42.
- 13 The shared root is *h-y-v*. This linguistic connection is also true in German, where the word *schuld* refers to both guilt and debt. Notably, Agnon spoke both languages and would have been aware of this double resonance.
- 14 Agnon, “Haprutah,” in *‘Elu ve’elu*, 344–46. For more examples of divine economy throughout Agnon’s oeuvre, see Agnon’s first Hebrew story “Agunot” (1908), the novel *Hakhnasat kalah* published in 1931, and “Lefi hatsa’ar hasakhar” (1947), to name but a few.
- 15 Proverbs 11:28.
- 16 Nigal also reads Agnon’s novella as a critique of the principle of trust in God common to Hasidic tradition; 168–69.
- 17 Marx argues that as the economic system expands, it becomes impossible to predict the fluctuations of the circulation of money; *Capital*, 112–13.
- 18 See Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Gateway Editions, 1985).
- 19 The explanation for the term *nesbekh* appears in the Babylonian Talmud. See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Mezi’a 60b.
- 20 The word *tzedakah* in Hebrew comes from the root *z-d-k* (*tzedek*), which means justice. The linguistic connection points to the relationship in Jewish thought between charity and social justice.
- 21 Just as in Latin and in English, in Hebrew, the word for *gift* (*matanah*) is derived from the same root as the verb *to give* (*latet*). My translation here is intentionally very literal. I wished to preserve the ambivalent meaning of the gift in Agnon’s text, as an object received but also given, as we shall see later.
- 22 See *Seder hatfilot* (London: The Movement for Reform Judaism, 1995), 470. Where the translator has chosen to write “charity,” the blessing in Hebrew uses the term *matanot l’evyonim*, gifts for the poor.
- 23 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Primitive Societies* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2000), 18–19.
- 24 See Mary Douglas, foreword to Mauss, ix.
- 25 Jacques Derrida, *Given Time. 1. Counterfeit Money* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996).
- 26 Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh torah: sefer zra’im, hilkhot matnot any’im*, 10:10–14.

- 27 See Tamari, “Jewish Ethics, the State and Economic Freedom,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Judaism and Economics*, ed. Aaron Levine (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 468–79.
- 28 Moses Maimonides, *Mishneh torah: sefer kin’yan, zekhiya umattanab*, 12:21. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Bible are taken from Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
- 29 In Deuteronomy 28:48, poverty is God’s punishment for disobedience. In Proverbs 13:18, poverty and shame are the consequences of ignoring God’s discipline and instruction.
- 30 Mauss, 59.
- 31 See Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Bathra 9a: “*Tzedakah* is equal to all the other commandments combined.”
- 32 Elimelech Horowitz, “Ve’iyhu any’im (hagunim) bne betekha: tzedakah, any’im vepiku’ah hevratu bekehilot yehudey eropah bein yamey habena’yim la’et haḥadashah,” in *Dat vekalkalah*, ed. Menahem Ben Sasson (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1995), 209–31.
- 33 Following Mauss, I shall refer to Jewish charity from now on as the “Jewish gift economy.”
- 34 In accordance with the narrator’s critical tone toward Menasheh Ḥayim’s behavior, many scholars see the selling of the letter as Menasheh Ḥayim’s tragic mistake, if not an outright sin: Menasheh Ḥayim’s subsequent actions and mishaps—his unsuccessful attempts to earn more money in a business fair, his spending spree and gluttonous binge, his waking up penniless after being robbed by his innkeeper—are all read as proof of his flawed character. For Kurzweil, for example, the sale symbolizes Menasheh Ḥayim’s complete surrender to the values of the bourgeois world. See Kurzweil, 188–92. For Halperin, the sale becomes the trademark of a Jewish tragedy. See Sarah Halperin, “Le’ofya hayehudi shel hatragedyah ‘Vehaya he’akov lemishor,’” *Alei si’ach* 10, no. 11 (1981): 101–108. In Hillel Weiss’s reading, the beggar is no less than the embodiment of Satan. See Hillel Weiss, *Parshanut lehamisha misipurei Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Akad, 1974), 112–28.
- 35 The “big fair” is a traditional term in Judaism used to describe the afterlife opposed to the “small” and “meaningless” fair of mercantile life. The text’s use of the traditional term to describe an actual fair is another example of the text’s double irony deployed

- against Menasheh Ḥayim's subjugation to capitalism, but also directed toward the economic infrastructure of traditional Judaism. See Levin, 16–17.
- 36 In his reading, Uri S. Cohen focuses on Menasheh Ḥayim's self-perception as dead, even prior to his alleged or actual death, due to his childless marriage. See Uri S. Cohen, *Hisardut: tfsat hamavet bein milhamot ha'olam be'eretz israel wo'e'italia* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 35–40.
 - 37 Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot 87b.
 - 38 Though there is no direct prohibition on suicide in the Bible, Jewish law usually relies on Genesis 9:5 to establish suicide as a sin against God.
 - 39 The biblical expression, written on Menasheh Ḥayim's gravestone by the cemetery guard, first appears in 2 Samuel 14:7. The guard of the cemetery, who senses Menasheh Ḥayim's sorrow, tells him of a woman who came and bought a gravestone for a dead beggar called Menasheh Ḥayim. Realizing that this woman was Kreindel Tcharni, who bought a gravestone for his dead double, Menasheh Ḥayim recounts his story to the guard.
 - 40 Agnon thus both continues and departs from the writers of the *Haskalah*, such as Yehuda Leib Gordon and Mendele Mokher Sforim, who critiqued the principle of trust in God as promoting irrationality and laziness while advancing a modern subject who is a forceful preponderant of the advantages of rationality and universal economic discourse. Additionally, as Yael Feldman argues in her research on the trope of the binding of Isaac, it was already in the early stages of twentieth-century Jewish nationalism that modern Hebrew literature replaced an exilic and passive Jewish religious martyrdom with the idea of an active and heroic sacrifice for the future nation. See Yael Feldman, *Glory and Agony: Isaac's Sacrifice and National Narrative* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 41–45, 108–111. Also see Gershon Shaked, *Mendele: lifnai ve'aharai* (Jerusalem: Magnus, 2005), 50–77.
 - 41 The title of the story is a quotation from Isaiah 40:4, a prophecy foretelling redemption.
 - 42 The Holy Sh'la (1555–1630), Rabbi Isaiah Levi Horowitz, was an important Jewish codifier who combined mystic and Orthodox doctrines. His most-known work is *Shnei luhot habrit*, published in 1648 after his death.

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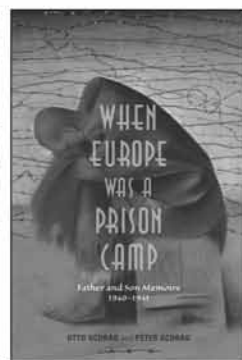
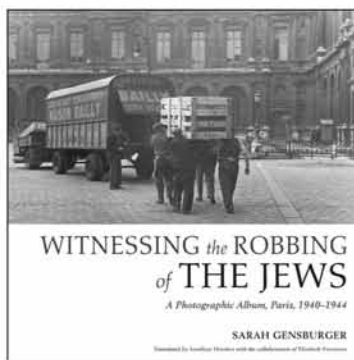
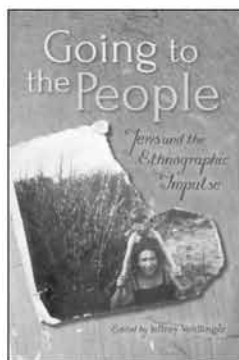
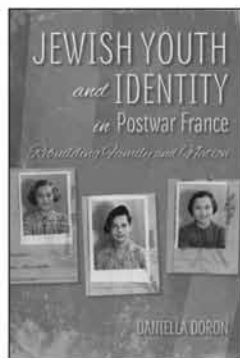
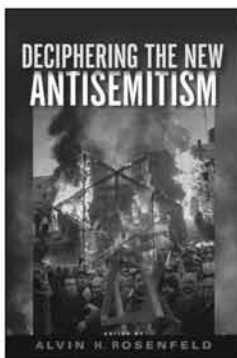
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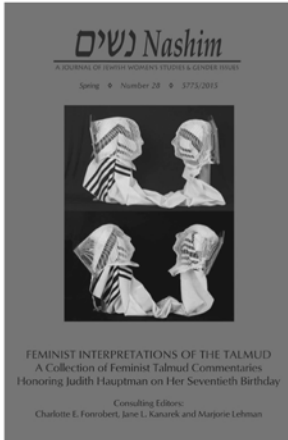
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