



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Figurative Language in Agnon's Sippur pashut

Author(s): WILLIAM CUTTER

Source: *Prooftexts*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (SEPTEMBER 1981), pp. 311-315

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689013>

Accessed: 30-01-2017 20:33 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*

In light of this ending, it seems as if the “wind” (*ruah*) of the poem acquires additional overtones. The Hebrew word *ruah* is of course ambiguous; “wind” is only one of its meanings. It was not unusual for medieval Jews writing about contemporary poetry to use expressions such as *ruah hakodesh* and *ruah Elohim* in referring to what we might call poetic inspiration.* And we have seen that one of the functions of the *ruah* (in line 3) was to liberate the poet so that he could sing his song. I am therefore tempted to suggest that *ruah* as used throughout the poem may be understood on a deeper level as alluding to the poetic enterprise as a whole. At the beginning, it belongs to the west, to the realm of secular poetry. But in the course of the poem, two realizations occur. The first is that the value of poetic inspiration is to bring the poet closer to the sacred mountains. Religious poetry, not secular poetry, is the ideal. Then, at the end, comes the realization that even this inspiration is from God, that the poet needs God even to write in praise of the Almighty. Halevi’s voyage to the land of Israel is certainly a real voyage, on an actual boat contending with the physical elements. But in this poem, the voyage is transformed into a metaphor of Halevi’s poetic endeavor. The attempt to write poetry may have begun with the secular inspiration of the west, but for him, at least, it ended with the Creator.

MARC SAPERSTEIN
Harvard Divinity School

Figurative Language in Agnon’s *Sippur pashut*

This paper explores some similes and metaphors in Agnon’s *Sippur pashut* (“A Simple Story”),** in terms of their effect on the novel’s many ironies. Similes are often innocent voices which simply clarify what something looks, feels, or sounds like by comparing it to something better known. They are abundant in this novel, and they seem as simple as does the story line. But there is great flexibility in this ancient usage, especially when the similes are “interactive,” that is when tenor and vehicle shed light on each other, or when a series of associated commonplaces are gathered into the original figure. In addition to the potential for complication by extension, expansion, interaction or plurisignification, similes and metaphors can repudiate or reverse meaning and yield ironies as a consequence.

Simile, in its straightforward usage, is especially appropriate to clarification, and it has traditionally been associated with good teaching strategies in rabbinic literature. Current educational method is beginning to focus on similes and simple metaphors more than at any time in the recent past. That association with rabbinic pedagogy at first blush attaches itself to Agnon’s usage, since rabbinic signal phrases such as “to what may the matter be compared” occur

* Yedaiah Bedersi, רוח המשורר השופע שיר כלו נבחר קראנוהו רוח אלהים in *Sefer hapardes* (see *Otsar hasifrut* 3 [1889–90], section 6, p. 12); Shem Tov Falaquera, ומהמשוררים, היו אנשים צדיקים וישרים ברוח הקדש מדברים in *Sefer hamevakkesh* (Schirmann, vol. 2, p. 338) and Falaquera, והמשוררים, ותחל רוח יי לפעמו במחנה הנביאים in “Iggeret Musar,” *Kovets ‘al yad* 11 (1936), 48.

** In *‘Al kapot hamam’ul* (Tel Aviv, 1964).

with great frequency in *Sippur pashut*. The use of rabbinic idiom identifies him on the one hand with a world of parables and piety, but in many cases the figures result in ironies when the narrator subverts the reader's expectations. A further surprise exists for those whose work in both kinds of texts tells them that one should not push a rabbinic *mashal* too far, whereas one is required to do that very thing when tackling a bit of Agnon's figurative language.

Sippur pashut is about a lad named Hirshel Horowitz who grows from boyhood to manhood under his parents' influence and in the shadow of their prosperous Galician store. This influence and this shadow lead him into a marriage which rabbinic tradition describes as a *mekah ta'ut* ("a bad deal," see *Ketubot* 75a), and from which he tries to extricate himself through romantic fantasies about his housekeeper's cousin, Bluma Nacht. The reader is always on guard to determine how many of the associations connected with a rabbinic concept or a name have bearing on the novel's meaning, and in some measure the decision is influenced by the total effect of simile and metaphor in the novel. The same is true of characters' names.

A nervous breakdown, its cure, and the eventual resolution of Hirshel's problem by settling into his parents' way of life is assuredly Agnon's way of making a statement about the universe in general and Galician Jewish society in particular. What that statement is, however, is not so clear once the motifs of the novel are probed, and once the reader extricates himself from the antibourgeois bias which is characteristic of most readers who take literature seriously. Our intellectual values make us perceive as depressing the suggestion that the world is like a store (implicit throughout the novel) and that marriage is a business, (p. 123) whereas for Agnon's narrator, the equations may not be so discouraging at all.

The comparisons of this novel—the similes and condensed metaphors—are among the keys to the imagination of Agnon's storyteller, a narrator who knows his people well, is part of them, and yet keeps enough distance to make both straightforward and ironic comparisons. The frequency of the similes is consistent with the fact that comparisons hover behind every major event in the narrative. Will Hirshel Horowitz be like his uncle who became insane (pp. 66, 112, 149, 216)? Can Mina, the dull fiancée, stack up to Bluma, who embodies eros (pp. 89, 106, 124)? How is Hirshel like and unlike his friends (p. 104)? How is Shibusch like America, or Jerusalem of a generation later (p. 89 and throughout)? Can Hirshel become enough like his mother to survive in this world (p. 163)? Mirroring these major questions of like and unlike is a lengthy chain of comparisons which relate more specifically to the day-to-day events of the narrative. Hirshel is not like a groom (pp. 117, 146, 155). He behaves like a good bourgeois (p. 104). Is Bluma like a good Jewish girl (p. 105)? Hirshel is like a lamb led to slaughter (pp. 110 and 125). And finally, there is the simpler directly mimetic use of simile, which sharpens the picture in the most immediate way: someone is "hungry as," "rich as," "tired as," etc.

By using so many similes, Agnon's narrator tells us that "there is more than meets the eye," and occasionally that there is less. This playing with more and less enriches the problem of appearance and reality which is a part of the total ambiguity of the novel. And while Shaked, Band, and Elstein have alerted us to the importance of the subject, the specific role of figurative language in

this novel deserves further consideration. One or another character, or the narrator himself, uses similes to diminish clarity and helps us read *Sippur pashut* in such a way that Shibbush, the locus of the action, though typical on many levels, is really unlike any place in the world; and though easy to comprehend in one sense, is more complex than we might expect.

A number of apparently clear-cut similes operate at first blush in conventional but later ironic ways. The two heroines of the novel, Bluma Nacht and Mina Tsiemlich, are more boldly drawn for having been declared and described as opposites. Hirshel's discomfort at the Hanukah party of his friends the Gildenhorns is made more vivid by the narrator's assertion that he is "like one into whose clothes a moth has entered" (p. 105). Hirshel's and Mina's parents at different times are compared to schnorrers in the way in which people condescend to them. The Gildenhorn party is compared to a much more elaborate affair (chap. 9). Hirshel's parents are suitable to Shibbush as pepper is to fish (p. 132), and Hirshel is not like his mother in wit and aggressiveness. These comparisons help to strengthen the simple mimetic force of the narrative, either by comparing or contrasting the thing described to something extremely vivid or well-known.

But even these similes have a number of significations and an element of repudiation. Hirshel's discomfort at the party adumbrates his engagement to Mina during which time he will never be comfortable; pepper is a lively and appropriate condiment to describe Hirshel's mother and she makes Shibbush as happy as pepper makes fish pleasant; but fish stinks, and pepper sometimes covers the odor. Mina and Bluma are compared constantly, but the code words for that comparison in the form of the deception are "we shall not praise Bluma at the expense of Mina" (p. 89). Hirshel is not like his mother, but he ultimately does share her world. Thus even some straightforward similes decrease the direct forms of rhetoric, and prod the reader either by extension or reversal beyond the layer of appearance or surface reality to another reality.

Four particularly ironic uses of simile occur at the critical party during which Hirshel tumbles into his engagement to Mina (chap. 9). The card playing, smoking, drinking, and robustness of the guests throws Hirshel into terrible confusion, characterized by a tendency to see images and distortions which personify inanimate objects and which reduce people to inanimate things.

After the engagement has been announced, Gildenhorn toasts the couple by comparing Hirshel's love affair with Mina to a latke in that the exterior flour of a latke covers the meat which is within. Like the deep secrets of Kabbalah which are hidden before revealed, Hirshel "kept his love from us" at first. The figure "hidden from" and "revealed to" is, of course, appropriate to the relationship, but as much hidden from the bridegroom himself as from his friends. Thus there is nothing in this figure of speech that is incorrect, even though the usage is entirely ironic. In addition, of course, is the fact that this relationship weighs heavily on the protagonist.

Kurtz, a guest at the party, follows Gildenhorn's toast by comparing the love of the couple to the loves which Schiller and Heine treated in their poetry (p. 65). Is Kurtz aware of the mocking behind the simile? Or is the narrator aware, again on a deeper level, of the connections between romantic love and

Hirshel's psychological collapse. Then, again, how would Schiller have felt about latkes?

Balaban, another guest, alerts Hirshel that his happiness on this engagement day is as nothing compared to the happiness of the wedding day (p. 113).

Each of the similes is humorous, and grows out of an ambiguous comment by the narrator at an earlier stage of the festive action. When the host offers Hirshel congratulations on the engagement into which he passively slides, he says *Ich gratuliere* and the entire party follows suit as a chorus of well wishers, trapping Hirshel into marriage and doom as they smother him with good wishes. This is especially surprising, notes the narrator, because that is not usually the term used for wishing a bride and groom well: *Ich gratuliere*, he explains, is not like *mazal tov* which one offers to a groom. The term is generally used for someone who has won something frivolous as at cards, but it would seem that the Heavenly Voice which announced this marriage was speaking through Gildenhorn's voice, so that his words sounded like *mazal tov* to everyone at the party.

The explanation suggests the double determinism of the universe: Just as life is determined theologically, so it is determined sociologically; and beyond both suggestions resides the narrator's voice implying that the world is really more complicated than this. At the same time the simple truth is that Hirshel has, in a sense, won Mina at cards, so *mazal tov* is like *Ich gratuliere*.

The entire party scene of chapter 9 begins with a central ambiguity (*mazal tov* for *Ich gratuliere*) from which other ambiguous similes hang: your love is like a latke; Galician love is sublime like that found in German romantic poetry; and a man's engagement day is as nothing compared with his wedding day.

Hirshel's father's name, Baruch Meir, may or may not be intended as "blessed light giver," but in one telling scene, we are exposed to another humorous element of figurative language. Emerging from the family celebration of the engagement, the local matchmaker greets him with: "Oh, you're here too!" (chap. 13). Hirshel's father takes special pride in his son's downbeat response: "It seems to me that I am," by noting to himself that even on a well-known historical occasion, a condemned man did not say it to the hangman. "Baruch Meir did not sense that this comparison wasn't appropriate and rubbed his hands in glee" (p. 125).

What we learn from this incident is not that Hirshel is like a condemned man—for that is not new information—but that the characters in the novel are sensitive to simile making, that the narrator is struggling with metaphors, and that the very statement that a comparison which is not "appropriate," for a certain social context is "appropriate" indeed in its accuracy.

The comparison can be charted on a continuum of clarity. They range from the clarity of cases of direct correspondence or clear repudiation on the one end of the scale to the complex usage suggested in an early scene, where the narrator struggles to compare Bluma's and Hirshel's sexual restraint and gives up because they are the *mashal* for which he seeks a *mashal* (p. 84). And in between are a variety of shadings of clarity and ambiguity and reference to a number of rabbinic parables and folk tales which themselves are of different degrees of clarity and ambiguity.

The novel is shaped by the activity of simile making—similes which increase the simple mimetic force of the narrative and similes which decrease the simple mimesis, and increase irony. Indeed Agnon's use of the *mashal* and simile reflects on a major question within literary criticism: In what way is fictional material like or unlike the world which gives it the raw material? And, most importantly, in what way does the lack of simple or literal correspondence—the repudiation or distortion—really suggest a higher order of similarity?

At a major celebratory meal Hirshel's mother Tsirl is eating, and is described as "looking like a chicken keeper feeding her chicks" (p. 127.). If Tsirl looks like one who feeds chickens when she is eating chicken, hovering over her plate as the keeper hovers over her brood, then, in the ecosystem of eating, waste and feeding, isn't a chicken feeder ultimately a chicken eater? Is everything the opposite of what it seems to be?

Agnon's nimble use of simile and condensed metaphor helps create the sense of ambiguity which is one part of irony, and then it pitches the reader onto the plane where a more elusive truth is maintained, which is the other half of effective irony.

Hamlet's speech to his mother comes to mind ("I know not seems"), for sometimes seems means "is," and sometimes "is not." So Agnon continues in a tradition where forms, moods, and shapes sometimes denote, sometimes confound, and sometimes repudiate what really lies beneath. Whether Hirshel's return to the family store is good or bad is not as important as the fact that our expectations have been stretched by language, and that we have been made more restless by the act. The restlessness will send us in quest of further realities behind appearance.

WILLIAM CUTTER
Hebrew Union College
Los Angeles