Agnon Before and After
Author(s): SIDRA DEKOVEN EZRAHI
Source: *Prooftexts*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Catastrophe in Jewish Literature (JANUARY 1982), pp. 78-94
Published by: Indiana University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689023
Accessed: 30-01-2017 20:27 UTC

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SIDRA DEKOVEN EZRAHI

Agnon Before and After

CONTEMPORARY HEBREW FICTION and drama reflect a growing preoccupation with the Holocaust as a central motif; works by Yehuda Amichai, Ḥanokh Bartov, Uri Orlev, Ben-Zion Tomer, Yoram Kaniuk, Ḥaim Gouri, Yonat and Alexander Sened, Naomi Frankel and, preeminently, Aharon Appelfeld, have explored the themes of personal and communal vengeance; the passage from the disintegrating world of the fathers to the emerging world of the sons; the survivor's struggle for rehabilitation.

These writers address the present situation and the immediate past of the Israeli Jew and reflect changing periods and moods in contemporary Hebrew fiction. While some of them draw on ancient biblical archetypes to provide an idiom for sacrifice and suffering, they do not for the most part enlist the European Jewish past as an historical and literary resource in the response to catastrophe. This is partly but not entirely because of the distance of the writer from the experience; in some respects it characterizes even the writing of the most serious of the survivor-writers, Appelfeld. At the heart of Appelfeld's fiction is a great yawning chasm—the elusiveness of the past, the agony of a yearning for a Jewish heritage never forgotten because never fully possessed.

S. Y. Agnon is not conventionally invoked in this context; the Holocaust was not an obvious major preoccupation in his writing and the few shorter works that do treat the topic have not been regarded as central to the canon of masterworks upon which the immensity of Agnon's achievement rests. Yet Agnon with a few strokes manages to portray Jewish society in its dissolution, applying and modifying the literary modes by which that society might have mourned its own losses. This unique capacity to move from the internal universe of the

PROOFTEXTS vol. 2 pp. 78-94
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Jewish past through the inexorable realities of the death of European Jews turns what are perhaps only secondary evolutions in his corpus into paradigmatic articulations of the continuities and ruptures in traditional and modern Jewish responses to catastrophe. The case I wish to make is that by taking two of these slighter works of Agnon's, the two postwar tales *Hasiman* ("The Sign") and *Kisui hadam* ("Covering the Blood"), and reading them not only in themselves but as alternative, opposed revisionary sequels to Agnon's great pre-Holocaust novel of contemporary East European Jewish life, *Oreaḥ natah lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*),[1] one recovers an artistic statement about the Holocaust more richly and intimately engaged with the vanished culture than many of the other more direct reflections of the subject in Hebrew prose. The fixed subject of all three texts is the fictional image of Agnon's hometown Buczacz. To chart the shifts in Agnon's viewing of this subject before and after the Holocaust, the dialectic between different forms of memory and commemoration and the tensions between inherited traditions and perceived realities is to explore the effect of catastrophe on one of the major authentic Jewish imaginations of modern times.

A Guest for the Night was originally serialized in the Hebrew press in 1938–39.[2] Based on the author's five-day visit to his native Galician town of Buczacz in 1930, it appeared in print as the forces were gathering that would obliterate that and all the other Jewish towns of Eastern Europe from the face of the earth. *Hasiman*, which was first published in 1944[3] and *Kisui hadam*, which appeared in the posthumous volume, *Lifnim min haḥomah* (*Within the Walls*) in 1975, reflect the same themes transformed by time and the changing historiosophy of the writer. If *A Guest for the Night* is the "Whither"[4] of the twentieth century, *Hasiman* is the eulogy and *Kisui hadam* the epilogue, the writer's final testament regarding the history and destiny of the Jewish people.[5] Taken for heuristic purposes of analysis as a trilogy, these three works mark a shift in tone from irony to elegy and to despair and form a dialectical statement on the function of poetry and testimony in a time of catastrophe.

Appearing as it did on the eve of World War II, *A Guest for the Night* later inspired critical acclaim for its prophetic insight or clairvoyance. It is worth recalling that Hebrew literature of the first half of this century is punctuated with seemingly interchangeable recollections and premonitions of catastrophe. Tchernichowsky's long poem "Barukh of Mainz," which had been read as a response to the Kishinev pogroms of 1903, became "prophetic" when it was discovered that the poem had in fact been written by 1900. Klausner, Halkin and others similarly persisted in reading Tchernichowsky's *Harugei Tirmunia* ("The Martyrs of Dortmund," 1937) as a premonition of the horrors of World War II.[6] These ballads, like so many of the poet's other poems, and like fiction by Asher Barash in Hebrew and Sholem Asch in Yiddish, are based on

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remote historical events but reflect the general sense of impending doom epitomized in Zalman Schneour's warning in 1913 that "the middle ages are approaching."[7]

These writers, unlike most of those who would succeed them in the latter half of this century were struggling between inherited forms, adopted ideologies and the modern temper. A tradition of lamentation literature had evolved around the persecutions—from the destruction of the two temples, to the Crusades, to the expulsion from Spain and to the pogroms. At the beginning of this century, Bialik's poem, *B'ir haharegah* ("In the City of the Slaughter") appeared as a watershed between premodern and modern responses to catastrophe in Hebrew literature. Working within the tradition whose central features are the individual Akedah and the collective Destruction, and whose primary images are taken from the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, whose normative premises are the value of sacrifice—"for the sake of our sins" or for the sanctification of God's name—and the saintliness of the victims, Bialik succeeded in writing what still stands as the greatest Jewish lament of the modern epoch—while undermining and inverting the central norms of the genre. I think it can be argued that what Bialik did for the generation of Kishinev, Agnon was to do for the generation of Auschwitz (Oswiecim the Jewish town as well as Auschwitz the death camp). And if, at the end of *B'ir haharegah,* beyond the ignominy that attaches to the Jewish victims, the impotence of the Almighty and the bankruptcy of Israel's promise of redemption, the contemporary reader felt summoned to a program of self-defense and self-determination, while at the end of Agnon's *Kisui hadam* the reader may feel nothing but disgust, that may be the measure of the distance travelled by the writer who witnessed the death of six million from the one who had witnessed the death of forty; the destruction of an entire civilization beside the decimation of a single town.

The doom-ridden literature of the twenties and thirties must also be considered in the light of the ideological conviction of Zion's rebirth against the background of the sure dissolution of diaspora Jewish life. Later these "prophecies of destruction" would serve as a defense against accusations in the Hebrew press during World War II that Hebrew literature was lacking in its response to the great tragedy once it actually happened.[8] In their own time the apocalyptic works of Uri Zvi Greenberg, Tchernichowsky and Agnon should be read within the highly-charged ideological context in which they were written. This is certainly true of *A Guest for the Night* in which Erets Yisrael is the only haven envisioned for the surviving remnant of the decimated Jewish town.

For Agnon, like his contemporaries, linked in historical memory to a nearly unbroken succession of disasters, the bloody twentieth century nevertheless has a specific point of origin not in World War II or the

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Holocaust, but World War I.[9] Arnold Band has argued persuasively that Agnon's bleak view of Buczacz originates in his adolescence and is expressed as early as the 1907 feuilleton *Ir hametim* ("City of the Dead").[10] But only in *A Guest for the Night* and subsequent writings does the First World War assume symbolic, even mythic significance, recasting the past in the glow of romantic yearnings for a lost age ("how goodly were the days when the world was conducted according to God's will, until men . . . made wars, and disturbed the order of the world"; 275), while giving a temporal frame to the troubles of the present. In *A Guest for the Night* the war is felt less in its military effect than as the principal cause of unemployment and hunger on the home front, dispersion and wandering, disease and bereavement; it is the source of pogroms perpetrated by returning soldiers on whatever and whoever were left in the ravaged Jewish communities. It becomes a central agent or persona in the novel stalking through the town on active verbs: "Then the war came, took away his sons, sent his wife out of her mind, and destroyed his house" (55).

When the anonymous narrator returns to his hometown of Shibush over sixteen years after he left it for Erets Yisrael, he finds signs of the war everywhere. The physical diminution seems at first to be the reduced measure through which the adult surveys his childhood world. But it soon becomes clear that this is a city devastated by war and neglect. As he walks through the streets from the train station to the hotel, the narrator notices that the houses are lower, the streets empty, the well broken. As he encounters the surviving inhabitants, he perceives the crippling effects, direct and indirect, of the war which produced a peculiar breed of prosthetic people: Rubberovitch ("Gumevitz" in the Hebrew) with his rubber arm, Daniel Bach with his wooden leg; Ignatz with no nose at all. In the Beit Midrash, no prayer shawls or Torah crowns have been left by the marauding troops. There is a general diminution in stature which is emblematic of the spiritual decline; the generational regression leads from rabbis to scholars to men of action. A causal connection is perceived between all the disasters that have befallen the town:

> The Jews in Szibucz are more dead than alive, and they have no strength at all. First came the war and uprooted them, and they did not take root anywhere else. Then their chattels were taken. Then their money was taken. Then their children were taken. Then their homes were taken. Then their livelihoods were taken. And then they were given taxes and levies. . . . (p. 365)

The war has proved so totally disruptive that even a sense of continuity in martyrdom has been fractured by the anarchy of present death. The memory of ancient persecutions had been preserved in the list of names of victims of the Chmielnicki massacres engraved on the wall of the old

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Beit Midrash—until the Ner Tamid which had illuminated the names was extinguished during the war and memory abandoned. The old cemetery where the narrator's own parents are buried, and where only three of the town's present inhabitants find burial in the span of the narrative—the others die in exile—signifies a time when death was dignified by ceremony and the soul found its eternal rest in home soil. The tales of death in the battlefield, of the Jewish soldier "killed in the war and his limbs . . . scattered, so that he could not be given a Jewish burial" (232) are a measure of the ultimate degradation of life itself. (Several years later, the anarchy of death under the shadow of the Swastika was to become a dominant image in the fiction of Giorgio Bassani, Pierre Gascar and Piotr Rawicz.)

By the time the volume *Ha'esh veha'etsim* appears in 1962, the rupture between prewar and postwar reality and consciousness has become so profound that it is no longer the war at large but a specific date which ushers in an apocalyptic era that has a genesis but no foreseeable end:

> *Sefer takhlit hama'asim* [one of the cycle of stories in the collection] was meant to relate the deeds of our brothers in Galicia at the time they lived in the shadow of the Austrian Empire and a kind of serenity prevailed until that Tishah b'Av 5674 [1914], when the great war started from which emanated the trouble which continues through all the generations and all the lands until the Comforter will comfort His world and call an end to our troubles. ("Apologia")[11]

This sense of bifurcated time, of the summer of 1914 as the great divide between innocence and corruption, between felicity and despair, pastoral and anti-pastoral, has, in Paul Fussell's words, had a structural impact on postwar consciousness; "for the modern imagination that last summer has assumed the status of a permanent symbol for anything innocently but irrecoverably lost."[12] But whereas it initiates a new era, the date easily finds its place within the Jewish calendar that has absorbed cataclysmic time within its yearly cycle. It is only fitting that the "troubles" of this and all the generations to come began on the ninth of Av. The traditional date of the destruction of both temples, the Spanish expulsion and, in days to come, the birthdate of the Messiah, Tishah b'Av is also the birthdate of Agnon and of the narrator in *A Guest for the Night.* It is an historical date which is linked thematically to another central date in the novel as elsewhere in Agnon's writing—Yom Kippur. The two are connected through the dominant motifs of the house and the key,[13] which are subsumed under the most available of the archetypes of destruction, the "ḥurban." The allusions to and parody of the service in the Temple and midrashim on the *ḥurban,* recalling the last days and the destruction of the Temple, the *mikdash,* serve to both elevate and undermine present reality.

In the center of the commonwealth of Jewish living and learning which has flourished in Poland for over six hundred years and which

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Buczucz/Shibush embodies, is the house of study and prayer—a *mikdash m'at,* a Temple in miniature on alien soil. It is the destruction of this *mikdash* and of the entire European Jewish commonwealth that the narrator has come to witness. At the outset, parody still preempts elegy. The narrator returns to his hometown by train on the eve of Yom Kippur; his station is announced by Rubberovitch, the man with the false arm who "waving the flag in his hand, called: 'Shibush!' It was many years since I had heard the name of Shibush coming from the lips of a man of my town. Only he who is born there knows how to pronounce every single letter of that name" (p. 1). The resonances of the Avodah service in the Temple produce a series of ironies: Rubberovitch, emblematic of the defective shape of postwar humanity, is a caricature of the High Priest who was designated as a man without blemish, and who once a year entered the Holy of Holies to pronounce the Divine Name. Shibush, which is also a tetragrammaton in Hebrew, denotes corruption and defilement[14] (Shibush = error), so that the conductor is announcing not only the *name* of the town, but also its *condition.*

The narrative of *A Guest for the Night* is structured as a series of encounters between the visitor and the people of the town through which their grotesque, deformed lives are exposed before his discerning but increasingly compassionate eye. His efforts at restoring the life of prayer and learning to the Beit Midrash are temporarily successful, but only so long as winter lasts and the furnace in the study house beckons poor men in from the cold. As spring comes, the Beit Midrash is again abandoned and the narrator, forced to admit defeat, prepares to leave Shibush for Erets Yisrael. But before he departs he must find someone to whom he can entrust the key to the deserted Beit Midrash, and his search becomes a kind of shadow-play of the aggadah of the High Priest who climbed up to the roof of the burning Temple with the keys to the sanctuary in his hand and cried out, "'Lord of the Universe: Since we did not succeed in serving you as faithful guardians—we hereby return to you the keys to your house.' And he threw them skyward. A hand appeared from heaven to receive them."[15] The key is eventually bestowed upon the infant son of Rachel and Yeruham Hofshi, the only couple to be married and bear a child within the entire scope of the narrative. Since the couple plan eventually to settle in Erets Yisrael, the child and the key will presumably be transferred to Zion, where, according to the tradition reiterated several times in the novel, all the houses of study and prayer built on alien soil are to be transferred in the days of the Messiah.

In a gesture directed to that same end the narrator peers through the keyhole one last time and encompasses the Beit Midrash within the span of his eye, committing to mind a reality which, though he could not fully anticipate it, would soon shrink to the domain of memory. He leaves the city with the words of the Kaddish resounding in his ears.

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And as he retraces his steps along the path to the train station, he no longer notices the ruins that greeted him on his arrival: "I did not look at the houses and the ruins as on the eve of the Day of Atonement, when I had come to the town, but I opened my nostrils wide and breathed in the odor of the town—that odor of millet boiled in honey" (463). Like the taste of Proust's madeleine, the odor of millet boiled in honey serves to safeguard the involuntary memory, triggered by sensory association, through which the world of the past can ultimately be retrieved.

The presentation of the narrative self in *A Guest for the Night* is complex. The fact that the "I" speaks both as a *landsman* and a stranger and the mixing of biographical elements into the fictive space of the text produces what Shaked defines as an authenticating effect.[16] The blurring of distinctions between reality and the imagination lends greater credibility to what comes to be a commemorative portrait of a dying community. Although still far from the "documentary" impulse which underlies much of contemporary writing on catastrophe in general and holocaust writing in particular,[17] Agnon's narrative posture adapts to the secular, quasi-historiographical task that he assumes. As the town dwindles before his very eyes, he becomes its primary witness and, ultimately, its chief chronicler. The identity of the I, in fact, undergoes a noticeable change in the course of the novel from the figure of the wayfarer in pursuit of childhood haunts to the figure of the chronicler-scribe of a moribund society. Although the "I" is the sole integrating mechanism of the narrative, each of the numerous characters for a moment occupies center stage, and the act of creation and reconstruction seems to be controlled by the dynamic of the unfolding pageant rather than by the artist's center of consciousness. Beyond all the stories of the living and the dead of Shibush, the sense of an infinitude of untold tales anticipates the encyclopedic mission of memorialization that characterizes so much of post-Holocaust fiction.

As a writer, the narrator eventually provides for the inhabitants of Shibush a lasting memorial: "Paper is better even than a tombstone, for if the tombstone is a large and beautiful one the Gentiles steal it and use it for their buildings, and if it is small it sinks into the ground. Paper is a different matter, for if you print a book it spreads all through the dispersions of Israel and lasts for generations" (p. 356). The role of the writer as scribe or *sofer* is further elaborated through the numerous digressions on the craft of writing. There is a repeated and almost perfunctory disdain for poetic language, for the literary enterprise that is not directed toward *talmud Torah;* in keeping with the generally regressive forces that prevail in the postwar world, contemporary sec-

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ular literature is regarded as a degenerate form of the sacred: "The rabbi writes commentaries on the Torah, the rabbi's son writes about the love of the Torah, and the rabbi's grandson just writes about love" (355). The reality of catastrophe imposes additional constraints on the very language of metaphor, which is commanded to relinquish its place to the flat, literal language of protocol:

> A verse came to my lips: "She has become as a widow." When Jeremiah saw the destruction of the First Temple, he sat down and wrote the Book of Lamentations, and he was not content with all the lamentations he wrote until he had compared the congregation of Israel to a widow and said, "She has become as a widow"—not a true widow, but like a woman whose husband has gone overseas and intends to return to her. When we come to lament this latest destruction we do not say enough if we say, "She has become *as* a widow," but a true widow, without the word of comparison. (p. 231)

The harsher reality becomes, the less occasion or justification there is for figurative language, for images of comparison—the more factual or mimetic the writing is meant to be. Metaphor, simile, fantasy, dream provide escape from but also coherence to harsh reality (and here the association of the *ḥurban* of the Eastern European diaspora with the destruction of the Temple clearly "favors" the former on a scale of suffering), and though the narrator continues to indulge in such figures of speech, a kind of documentary mandate has been defined. Reality has, as it were, reached the limits of imagination. When, ultimately, Agnon does come to write the memory-book of Buczacz (*'Ir umeloah*, written over a 30-year span and published posthumously in 1973), it is a fairly straightforward chronicle, the trappings and claims of fiction—though not of storytelling—having been relinquished in the face of the sacred task of recording what is irrevocably lost. The writer is, then, enlisted to reconstitute the ground of reality which has crumbled before he can rebuild his fictional world.

The truth-claim of testimony becomes central in the age of man-made disasters and a literature of atrocity that favors journalistic techniques. But the enduring model of the Hebrew writer is still Bialik, heir to all the medieval *paytanim*, who came to Kishinev to "report" but left it to struggle within the classical elegiac mode. In this dialectic between modern and traditional forms of remembering, chronicling will give way to the inherited role of the Jewish writer in a time of catastrophe: that of the *mekonen*, the threnodist. Again the prototype is Jeremiah and the literary paradigm the Book of Lamentations. In *Hasiman* the commemorative function of the chronicler is superseded by the ideal liturgical, normative function. I am suggesting, however, that this role is only adumbrated at the end of *A Guest for the Night*, but not in fact realized in the course of the narrative. A long passage in chapter

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seventy-three traces the regresson of piyyut from the eighth-century *paytan,* R. Elazar Hakalir, whose poems were heaven-inspired, whose songs of praise came of the honey, and whose *kinot* came of the sting of the bee, through a succession of poets denied heavenly vision but impelled by the reality of personal or collective misfortune to write great songs of lamentation. The present-day writer becomes somehow a shadow or imitator of his "master's writing" (449). Yet the task of witnessing and of admonishing, of recording the encounter with the wretched inhabitants of his town and of tracing their spiritual as well as physical deterioration preempts the pious role of the *paytan* which the narrator would appropriate. The narrative is committed rather, to a vision of catastrophe mediated by realism that—in the dream sequences—threatens to shatter into surrealism as reality gives way to nightmare. It is, then, not simply that inspiration has been lost over the generations; it is also that the condition he witnesses and the tone it calls forth—compassion tinged with disdain, the irony that Frye sees as inherent in the condition of bondage and that Fussell has shown to be the prevailing mode in the literature of the First World War—precludes elegy.

The elegiac mood eventually does come. It is just a few years later when word reaches Jerusalem that the town has been destroyed. The invitation to read the story *Hasiman* as autobiographical is quite tempting; the narrative "I" is clearly identified, in location, time, and characteristics, with the author and the town is Buczacz and not its fictional image Shibush. But there is a continuity of conception here that renders the formal distinctions between memoir and first-person fiction insignificant; Buczacz is as much a construct of the mind in *Hasiman* as Shibush is a version of reality in *A Guest for the Night.* Emunah Yaron, Agnon's daughter and literary executrix, has appended this story as a sequel to the tales of Buczacz published posthumously as *'Ir umeloah.* I think it can also be read as an afterword to *A Guest for the Night,* as a groping toward the *kinah* which could not be written while the town was still alive. Agnon, who had set out to write of the *internal* collapse of European Jewish civilization, suddenly finds himself bereft of his subject. His response is a return to the sacral forms of memory and lament.

The setting of the story is the narrator's home in one of the neighborhoods of Jerusalem on the eve of Shavuoth. The news reaches him that his hometown has been destroyed. Immediately he indulges in a series of diversions to dull the pain and delay the full impact of the tragedy. He dwells at length and repeatedly on the beauty and serenity of his home and garden, naming every variety of flower—almost as displacements for the victims who have not been enumerated. In the denial is both guilt and an implicit indictment of the response of the Yishuv to the news that trickled through in the early forties.

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The prayers and the festive meal are further occasions for a staying action, although thoughts of his townspeople come unbidden when he is at prayer, and the dark rumor of death threatens repeatedly to eclipse the glow over the remembered landscape of their lives. Late at night, in the synagogue, he sinks into a reverie prompted by the ḥazan's recital of Ibn Gabirol's *Sheviyah 'aniyah,* and has a vision of the eleventh-century *paytan,* who composes a piyyut to commemorate the martyrs of Buczacz.

The story, first published in 1944, can be considered a proximate literary response to the historical event. A number of other stories, such as *Baderekh* ("On the Road," 1944), *Leila min halelot* ("One night," 1951), and *'Im kenisat hayom* ("At the outset of the Day," 1951), capture with nightmarish surrealism the terror of the times, but this short story stands out as a *hesped* written, as it were, over the open grave.

Yet the distance is crucial. The narrator is after all no longer *there* but in Erets Yisrael, where, he assures himself repeatedly, Jews are safer than abroad, and if not safer at least capable of defending themselves against their assailants (chap. 1). The distance ensures not only his security but the purity of his memory. All of Buczacz-Shibush now resides within his mind, and memory is restorative. He sits in the synagogue and summons the inhabitants of his town to appear before him—not in their infirmities, spiritual and physical, as they appeared to him during his sojourn on the eve of the war, not in the agonies they must have endured before their deaths at the hands of the enemy but in a state of primordial grace:

> I closed my eyes, so that I would not see the deaths of my brothers, the people of my town. It pains me to see my town and its slain, how they are tortured in the hands of their tormentors, the cruel and harsh deaths they suffer. And I closed my eyes for yet another reason. When I close my eyes I become, as it were, master of the world, and I see only that which I desire to see. So I closed my eyes and asked my city to rise before me, with all its inhabitants, and with all its Houses of Prayer. I put every man in the place where he used to sit and where he studied, along with his sons, sons-in-law, and grandsons—for in my town everyone came to prayer. (chap. 27)

This is elegiac vision, freed from irony by tragedy; it is a vision of wholeness that harks back to the golden age before the onset of all the troubles so thoroughly catalogued in *A Guest for the Night.* The empty Beit Midrash which the narrator had briefly restored through the ruse of a furnace is now in his mind's eye fully populated in the moment before the final silence: "Is it possible that a city full of Torah and life is suddenly uprooted from the world and all its people, old and young, men, women and children are killed, and that now the city is silent with not a soul of Israel left in it?" (chap. 27). The purity and innocence of the victims must be commensurate with the tragedy of their death; here there is a reversion to the pious evocation of the victims as *kedoshim,* as martyrs and saints, which characterized lamentation literature

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prior to Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter." A therapeutic memory performs what the Messiah has failed to do: gathers in the exiles, restores the amputated limbs of the cripples, heals the heretics of their impiety.

Unlike the narrator in *A Guest for the Night,* who was forced by his very presence to bear witness to the reality he encountered, the narrator of *Hasiman* is freed by distance from the specific historical circumstances; he exercises his power as a creator to banish the thought of the final defilement and suffering of his people and to substitute an idyllic vision that can serve as a memorial. The world viewed with open eyes is the locus of lost sovereignty and control. The poet defies the loss by legislating the world as it should have been. He returns in his fantasy not to the town as he witnessed it on the eve of the Holocaust , but to the idealized world of his childhood (". . . and the old Hazzan served in the Great Synagogue, and I, a small child, saw him standing on the platform intoning 'O poor captive' . . ." [chap. 29]). It is only in his imagination, then, that the world he had sought on his visit to Shibush still exists, and it is only art that can reconstruct it.

The art form to which he aspires is the piyyut or lamentation. Yet a poetics predicated on the dying light of inspiration assumes that the youngest poet can only simulate the writing of the "master." So when Ibn Gabirol appears before the narrator in *Hasiman* it is not, as Kurzweil claims, simply a "retreat to the sacral"[18] but a return, through the force of bitter circumstance and the spirit's yearning, to the ideal liturgical mode mediated by the master of medieval piyyut. The poem *Sheviyah 'aniyah,* with its traditional themes of galut, suffering and the promise of redemption, brings some order to the desolation that has settled in the narrator's soul and, finally, unleashes repressed emotion and brings forth tears (chap. 39). The narrator now feels the full weight of his mission as survivor, as the sole representative of his town before the great poet. He lowers his eyes in humility as the *paytan* asks for the name of his town and promises to make a *siman* to keep the town from falling into final oblivion; the *siman* is the poem whose acrostic spells the town's name.

Even were he to try, the narrator could not have imagined the events he did not witness; as related later when rumor becomes information, the reality of this *ḥurban* far exceeded the bounds of even the imagination practiced in sorrow: "The power of the imagination is stronger than the power of deeds, except for the evil of the nations, which goes beyond all imagination" (chap. 6). There is no attempt, here or elsewhere in Agnon, to appropriate the historical details of life and death in ghettos and camps in a prose as declaratively committed to the mimetic as was the prose of *A Guest for the Night.* Instead, there is a return, however shortlived in Agnon's *oeuvre,* to the commemoration and consolation of the classical lament. "And if my town has been wiped out of the world, it remains alive in the poem that the poet wrote as a

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sign for my city" (chap. 41). But the narrator, his soul overpowered by the force of the poem, has forgotten its words. To whom can he turn to retrieve the text? In the end poetry too seems to be defeated; the poem cannot survive the death of the celebrants and the surviving remnant is not worthy enough or strong enough to receive it; for "the poem sings itself in the heavens above, among the poems of the holy poets, the beloved of God" (chap. 42).

The valence of the reversal at the end of *Hasiman* can best be understood by linking it to another story in *The Fire and the Wood. Lefi hatsa'ar hasakhar* ("According to the Difficulty, the Reward") also traces the sorrows and the poetry of a medieval *paytan*. Mar Rivi Tsidkiyah was in the habit of applying a kind of empirical test to the value of his poems; the appearance and piety of the beggar at his door would determine the fate of the poem written that day. His piyyut on the Akedah is, presumably, so eloquent that it would deserve a central place in the liturgy, were it not for the deformed shape and blasphemous words, born of untold suffering, of the beggar who comes to his door that evening and whose appearance prompts the *paytan* to burn the poem. But the epilogue is redemptive; years later, during the Yom Kippur minhah service, his reading of the Akedah brings to mind the piyyut and a choir of seraphim appear to recite the verses. On the following day, when he attempts to record the poem memory fails; but this piyyut, like ibn Gabirol's elegy for Buczacz, has been accepted in Heaven: "Since it was accepted on high it was no longer needed down below" (18). The inference is that aesthetic standards differ from the higher to the lower spheres. There are no historical correlatives, no empirical touchstones in the celestial zone of pure poetry; yet on earth the poor mortals who have survived the latest atrocities find it "rather difficult" to accept the decree: "The Eternal One had a wonderful idea when He chose us from among the nations and gave us Torah and life. Still, it is rather difficult [for us] that he created as our adversaries various people who deprive us of our lives because we obey His Torah" (302).

There is a gentle irreverance here which pervades all of this fiction but never crystallizes. Daniel Bach, the narrator's primary interlocutor in *A Guest for the Night,* lost his faith in the trenches of the First World War; but as the narrator leaves Shibush, Daniel is seen reciting the Kaddish with the rest of the community—a desperate act of affirmation that is, perhaps, the ultimate accusation. Yet even where the narrator in *A Guest for the Night* or *Hasiman,* or the *paytan* in *Lefi hatsa'ar hasakhar* is confronted by the empirical challenge to theodicy, basic tenets of faith remain axiomatic. Israel remains the center of the redemptive drama and Torah the substance, and what has been ordained on high becomes increasingly difficult to bear but, ultimately, remains impenetrable.

It is not the bitterness or rage of apostasy and disbelief but a sense of infinite sadness and loss that pervades the empty page which was to

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have reproduced the sublime poem. After each destruction the only thing left to Israel was its memory, its *kinah*. If the text of the elegy for the town and its martyrs is unavailable on earth, what will be the future of memory? *Hasiman* is, at once, a elegiac tribute to the town remembered and imagined by Agnon, and a confession of the loss of elegy, of poetry itself.

If *Hasiman* represents one moment in the dialectic between elegy and irony, then *Kisui hadam* represents the other. Gershon Shaked has made a case for reading *Kisui hadam* as an unremitting realization of the prediction of one character in *A Guest for the Night* that the generations to come will be one-third like Daniel Bach and one-third like Rubberovitch and one-third like Ignatz (*A Guest for the Night*, p. 339). The theme, tone and style of this story are of a piece with *A Guest for the Night*, and though there are symbolic elements, it too is largely a realistic tale of encounter. The narrator, a rather more reticent version of the earlier novel, meets an organ grinder in Jerusalem and induces him to relate the story of his life, which encompasses the entire panorama of recent Jewish history: the First World War, the postwar struggle for survival in Europe and then in America, echoes of World War II and settlement in Israel. The ironic mode in *A Guest for the Night* evolves here into cynicism and despair and replaces the elegiac tone that elevated the dead to the status of martyrs and healed their limbs and their spirits in *Hasiman*. A historiosophy of progressive destruction replaces traditional faith in the cycle of *ḥurban* and *geulah*. A second war has come to finish off the work of the first and we are plunged again into the fragmented, truncated world of physical cripples and moral degenerates. The narrator's interlocutor, Reb Hillel the ritual slaughterer, has, like Daniel Bach, a wooden leg (which, like Bach's, was lost not during the war—either war—but during the struggle for a livelihood in a war-ravaged world). Bach himself is recalled, and he is assigned a sordid death at the hands of Hitler's henchmen.[19] Death is faced in its grotesque finality, and all hope of repair, of *tikkun*, which the narrator brought with him on his visit to Shibush, has been abandoned.

There are several tales within tales reminiscent of the episodic narrative of *A Guest for the Night*, but the testimonial or commemorative impulse which generated an attempt at comprehensive reportage in *A Guest for the Night* and a restorative vision in *Hasiman* becomes here a series of encounters emblematic of the degradation of the times. In the pre-Holocaust world that Reb Hillel describes, moral degeneracy had become so widespread that no newly-ordained rabbi without family status or a wealthy father-in-law could obtain a position; no shoḥet without loyalty to a rebbe could find work. The narrator's startling conclusion is that through strife and slander Israel has brought about its own destruction:[20] "And furthermore, I tell you that were it not for

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the denouncing and the slander and the pandering to the authorities, not one fingernail of Israel would have been harmed" (pp. 65–66).

Along with the demeaning memory of the dead comes a certain domestication of the murderers. Hitler is awarded the usual epithets reserved for the descendants of Amalek—"*shikuts meshumam*," "*hatsar hatsorer*," "*hakoret*"—while, alternately, being reduced (or elevated) to human dimensions. The myth that he had a Jewish father is recalled, as is an incident in which he is said to have begged for food at a convent (90, 82). Conversely, in a monstrous fantasy of victim collaboration, one of R. Hillel's acquaintances, Sergeant Adolf, envisions himself progenitor of the enemies of the Jews; he fantasizes that an affair with a gentile noblewoman might have produced offspring who would join the ranks of Israel's oppressors. This is not just a simplistic vision of the universal potential for evil, of the interchangeability of the roles of victim and victimizer such as we meet in Holocaust literature in the dramas of Peter Weiss (*The Investigation*) or Arthur Miller (*Incident at Vichy*). In the literature of the victims in general and Hebrew literature in particular, which tends to focus on the suffering of the Jews and either to ignore the Nazis altogether or to demonize them in the manner of Uri Zvi Greenberg's "*haGerman*," this image is startling. But it is, after all, consistent with an autonomous reading of Jewish history. The Nazis here serve as an intensification of the attitude of self-loathing and self-recrimination which can only be matched, perhaps, by stories of internecine strife during the Second Commonwealth.

This seems to be Agnon's final judgment: like the Second Temple, the Jewish commonwealth in Europe was destroyed not primarily by its external enemies but because of *sin'at ḥinam* (baseless hatred) among the Jews. The Holocaust appears here to have been but a necessary episode in the chain of destruction which now reaches back, in this century, to the first war and forward even to the shores of Erets Yisrael: those of one's city (it is immaterial now *which* city, for they all shared a common fate) who managed to survive cruel death at the hands of the Nazis, and those fewer still who survived wanton killing by the Ukrainians, managed to board ships for Erets Yisrael, which were then turned back at the shores of the Holy Land to sink at sea (78).

And as the fortresses do not prove to be impregnable on the soil of Israel, so the soul of Israel proves to be as corrupt here as anywhere else. Clerks are insensitive even in matters of life and death (104); those Jews who come to the synagogues to pray stay to revile (87); the ingathering of the exiles has brought about an alienation of spirit (92). The only hope of the future is Adolf's nephew, who is in a Syrian prison and, if still alive, is very likely maimed in body and spirit. A few scattered pious tributes are paid to the idea of Israel as the land of redemption (86 ff), but reality is so bleak as to overshadow the dream. There is,

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then, very little of even the *promise* of redemption that animated *A Guest for the Night,* and Erets Yisrael, which once contained the Jewish past, encompassed like the Beit Midrash, within the span of the inner eye, and the dreams for the Jewish future, becomes desacralized by the deeds of its inhabitants until it reconnects to what now appears to be an inexorable Jewish fate.

Here again, in all this tale of Jewish suffering and degeneracy, God remains aloof and inscrutable; the challenges to theodicy are not expressed in the tradition of petition and controlled blasphemy that goes back at least as far as the *Mekhilta* of R. Ishmael (*"mi khamokha ba'elim, mi kamokha ba'ilmim"*), where God is held accountable for the workings of history, but muted within the tradition that accepts God's answer to Job, that posits a vast, unbridgeable gulf between human and Divine intelligence (96). The prevailing metaphor is the ritual slaughter of animals and the ritual covering up of their blood (*kisui hadam*). Oblique but not explicit is the implication by extension of God's countenancing the slaughter of His people. But the writer directs his rage not primarily at exogenous forces but at the corruption of the soul. The intractability of this story may be in the inherent tension between the conflicting mandates to mourn and to judge the victims.

The force of regarding *Kisui hadam* as Agnon's final reckoning must be qualified by the fact that the author did not allow it to be published in his lifetime. Throughout the narrative, the two major personae, the first person narrator and R. Hillel, reiterate the strictures against revealing Israel's failings in view of its tragedy; oblivion, it is said, would be preferable to exposure: "There is no end to the quarrels and controversies and the wasting of money and the bribery and family corruption and blasphemy. But now that the cities have been laid waste and the communities wiped out and most have died hard and cruel deaths, and those who did not die suffered agonies worse than death, it is better that these things be forgotten" (65; see also 73–74). This does not stop the narrators from relentlessly pressing forward with their revelations. But the implication is clear that, unlike the *siman* which was at least received in Heaven, or the piyyut on the Akedah sung by a choir of cherubs, this story would not be acceptable on high. (There is a special heavenly injunction against those writers who defame the name of Israel; 104.) The silence then is not the merit of a text granted eternal status beside the sacred songs of all generations, though forgotten on earth; it is the silence of a text so terrible that it can be recited neither in heaven nor on earth.

Agnon was already an old man when he wrote this story, and the desolation he saw around him may coincide with the failing sight and faith of old age. "That is no country for old men," Yeats wrote of Byzantium. Yet of the "monuments of unageing intellect," which trace

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the passage from irony through elegy to despair, *Kisui hadam* presses its claim as the final portrait of the age by Israel's most compassionate and committed artist, and stands beside Bialik's Kishinev poem as an assessment of the desolation of the body and soul of Israel and the poverty of poetry in the twentieth century.

Department of Contemporary Jewry
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

NOTES

1. S. Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night,* trans. by Misha Louvish (New York, 1968). All references are to this edition. Except when quoting directly from the text, I have used the phonetic rendering of "Shibush."

2. *Ha'arets,* 18 October 1938 through 7 April 1939.

3. *Hasiman* was first published in *Moznayim* in 1944 and later revised for inclusion in *Ha'esh veha'etsim* [The Fire and the Wood] (Jerusalem, 1962). Translated as "The Sign" by Arthur Green in *Response* 19 (Fall 1973): 5-31 All translations are his.

4. So claims Simon Halkin in "On *Oreaḥ natah lalun*" [Hebrew], *LeAgnon Shai,* ed. Dov Sadan (Jerusalem, 1966), referring to Feierberg's novella of the 1890s, *Le'an.*

5. Gershon Shaked argues that *Kisui hadam* is the epilogue to *Oreaḥ natah lalun* and Agnon's final testatement and *ḥeshbon nefesh.* See *"Kisui hadam* as S. Y. Agnon's Social Testament" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 45 (June-November, 1977): 3-11.

6. Joseph Klausner regards both *Barukh miMagentsa* and later, *Harugei Tirmunia* as prophetic visions of the respective horrors to come, but also reprimands the poet in a letter of 1906 for his failure to respond to the Kishinev pogrom *after* the event. See *Shaul Tchernichowsky ha'adam vehameshorer* [S. T., the Man and the Poet] (Jerusalem, 1947), pp. 86, 109, 295. See also, Simon Halkin, *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York, 1950), p. 148.

7. In 1892 a history of the Crusades was published in Berlin which was to furnish historical material for both *Barukh miMagentsa* and *Harugei Tirmunia* and reflects the general contemporary interest in the history of persecution. For an evaluation of the impact of this research, see Shlomo Eidelberg, "The Historical Element in the Poetry of Tchernichowsky" [Hebrew], *Hadoar* (January 4, 1963): 162-63.

8. See, for example, Immanuel Ben-Gurion, "War Literature in Hebrew" [Hebrew], *Tav Shin Daled* [Davar Almanac for 1944] (Tel Aviv, 1945), pp. 348-54; M. Lipson, "Notes: if your son should ask you . . ." [Hebrew] *Moznayim* 16 (1943): 112-17.

9. Paul Fussell has demonstrated in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London, 1975), that World War I was a watershed in modern consciousness; David G. Roskies, in "The Pogrom Poem and the Literature of Destruction" has traced the ruptures that World War I and the pogroms that came in its wake precipitated in Yiddish literature, within a genre that had evolved over the centuries as a normative framework for incorporating disaster (*Notre Dame English Journal* 11 [April, 1979]: 89-113).

10. *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, 1968), pp. 37-38. Band's analysis of *A Guest for the Night* is very extensive and touches on many of the themes developed here.

11. *Ha'esh veha'etsim* (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 336.

12. Fussell, p. 24.

13. Many critics, including Kurzweil (*Masot 'al sippurei Shai Agnon* [*Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon*], Jerusalem, 1963) and Band have considered these themes separately.

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14. Band shows that Agnon used this name as early as his Jaffa period (*Nostalgia and Nightmare,* p. 290).

15. *Pesikta Rabati,* p. 131a.

16. "The Narrator as a Writer: The Function of the Narrator in S. J. Agnon's *Wayfarer Stopped for a Night*" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 1:1 (1968): 18–35.

17. On "documentary literature" of the Holocaust see my book, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago, 1980), chap.2.

18. Kurzweil, p. 316.

19. The references to *Kisui hadam* are taken from *Lifnim min haḥomah* (Jerusalem, 1975).

20. On this point see Shaked, "*Kisui hadam* as S. Y. Agnon's Social Testament," p. 8.

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