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## NOTES AND READINGS

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### Two Poles of the Yom Kippur Experience in Agnon

Readers are familiar with the heightened, "Kafkaesque," experience of Agnon's literary figures as they become caught unprepared on the eve of sacred days such as the Sabbath, Passover, Rosh Hashanah and particularly, Yom Kippur. Unpreparedness initiates a state of existential malaise bordering on panic. Obsessive concern with petty details and anxiety-ridden indecisiveness characterize the agonizing of a fictional persona who might very well be as clinically depressed as he is adrift from his religious moorings.<sup>1</sup>

In the story *Pi shnayim* ("Twice Over"), for example, the protagonist cannot decide on Erev Yom Kippur which of two *tallitot* he should wear, and consequently misses the opportunity to pray during the critical atonement hours. At various junctures in the story, he feels "like a traveler whose ship is about to set sail when he discovers that his passport is not in order"; "like a plant uprooted from the soil and planted in a flowerpot"; like an apothecary so long at work mixing powders for a drug that in the meantime the patient dies; like an individual for whom every pulsebeat knells the ebbing away of time and of missed opportunities.<sup>2</sup>

The critic Barukh Kurzweil may have overstated Agnon's preoccupation with death in *Pi shnayim* as well as the monotone complaint of Agnon's protagonist in many of the *Sefer hama'asim* tales as a man of tarnished faith.<sup>3</sup> We may indeed style our reading of the angst in Agnon's surrealist stories as "Chaplinesque" (following Dov Sadan<sup>4</sup>) rather than nightmarishly bleak. It is, nonetheless, hard to mitigate their overall gravity and sense of alienation. By stark contrast and of a much lighter cast is a solitary Yom Kippur story by Agnon entitled *Etsel Hemdat*.<sup>5</sup> This story—which S. Y. Penueli called an "exquisite miniature"<sup>6</sup>—shows an entirely different face of Agnon and a radically different dimension of Jewish folk experience.

Specifically, it is the abundance of genuine, "carnavalesque" humor—not satire—in *Etsel Hemdat* that is not only refreshing but highly instructive. We shall be employing the illuminating categories of Mikhail Bakhtin, the great Soviet literary theorist,<sup>7</sup> in explicating what we see as two dimensions of Agnon's emotional and literary cast of mind in approaching the Holy of Holies of Jewish religious experience. (On the other extreme, the inspired *Etsel Hemdat* deserves to be set apart from a social satirical vignette such as "The Story of the Cantor" in *The Bridal Canopy*, which smacks of Haskalah didacticism.<sup>8</sup>)

Features of *Etsel Hemdat* bespeak aspects of what Bakhtin calls "the folk grotesque"—"the double-faced fullness of life"—whereas Agnon's other Yom Kippur stories—for which *Pi shnayim* is a paradigm—reflect the jaded, gloomy

and satirical (or "romantic grotesque")<sup>9</sup> perspective of a world-weary protagonist. Both stories contain elements of occasionally humorous exaggeration, which, following Bakhtin, we may type as "grotesque realism" and which help us to assign Agnon to a special literary category which Victor Hugo assessed in Rabelais, Shakespeare and other great authors of periods of transition or crisis.<sup>10</sup> (Initially, in fact, it was Arnold Band's characterization of the jocund feasting of the Cantor Hemdat on the eve of Yom Kippur as "almost Rabelaisian"<sup>11</sup> which inspired our present utilization of Bakhtin's book. After completing the analysis, we discovered Gershon Shaked's recent analogous citation of Bakhtin.<sup>12</sup>) Bakhtin considers seriously and critiques Hugo's discussion of a "Rabelaisian" tendency to "exaggeration, excessiveness, obscurity and monstrosity" in those extraordinary writers (of "genius" according to Hugo) who

reflect essentially and deeply the great moments of crisis in world history. These writers deal with an uncompleted, changing world, with the disintegrating past and the as yet unformed future. . . .<sup>13</sup> During those moments of crisis folk culture with its conception of an uncompleted being and a gay time had a powerful influence on great literature. . . .<sup>14</sup>

One does not have to be an unswerving follower of Barukh Kurzweil in order to situate Agnon along with Bialik as the great fictional barometers of Judaism's crisis of transition to modernity.<sup>15</sup> Bakhtin's two categories of the grotesque are most helpful in charting the polar elements of "romantic grotesque" alienation, on the one hand, and "folk grotesque" transcendence or resolution of alienation, on the other.

Equally, the following distinction drawn by Bakhtin between two types of humor is helpful for understanding Agnon:

This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expressed the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.<sup>16</sup>

In *Etsel Hemdat* Agnon reverts to a folk ambience which juxtaposes "carnivalesque" banter and feasting on the eve of Yom Kippur with an abrupt shift to equally intense folk piety. This harking back to a "folk grotesque" mode contrasts starkly with the the "modern" satire of the *Sefer hama'asim* cycle of stories. Now, very little in Judaism (perhaps the Fast of Esther and Purim) approximates the sea-change from carnival to Lent in Christian folk tradition, a paradox which lies at the heart of Bakhtin's analysis. Yet, Agnon's organically developed story contains allusions to a oneness with the world, an acceptance of both joy and suffering, a harmonious proximity of the material bodily stratum with the sacred, of the lowly peasant with the aristocrat and the cleric, of death with life. All of these resonate with a rather primitive religiosity in which barriers were not as rigidly drawn as they are for modern man. That same ancient, syncretistic Jewish world in which Yom Kippur could be described in the Mishnah as a time for courting and which might have generated *The Song of Songs*, may approximate the

forgotten and eclipsed thousand-year "history of laughter" which Bakhtin seeks to resurrect in explicating Rabelais.

Agnon intuitively evokes a kind of antinomian folk religiosity which challenges stultifying social conventions. In *Etsel Hemdat*, as in the wonderful tale *Baya'ar uva'ir* ("In the Forest and in the Town"),<sup>17</sup> the young boy protagonist reverts to a state of nature through a series of grotesque transformations in order to achieve a novel understanding of some religious or ethical principle. In *Baya'ar uva'ir* he escapes the *heder* and comes to understand the relativity of social values which define criminality. In *Etsel Hemdat* the boy experiences banishment through the hellishness of his stepmother's behavior towards him; he further experiences a kind of "hell" in trying to find Hemdat in the cantor's bizarre town; only then does he become reintegrated into a kind of primal Jewish religiosity which runs the gamut from the visceral to the sublime.

Since *Etsel Hemdat* has received relatively little attention in the critical literature, it will be useful to chart some of its salient features. The story opens, as Band has noted, with an idyllic scene, but with the unique description of "the dewdrops of morning having opened their eyes." The same pantheistic atmosphere of *Baya'ar uva'ir* with its images of frogs, sun and breezes asserts itself at the very beginning, but as the boy dozes off in back of a cart, the harmony is quickly jarred by a nightmare in which his stepmother is squawking in the form of a hawk. Much of the detail of Jewish hustle-and-bustle on the eve of the holiday could have been taken from Mendele but for an occasional expressionistic detail such as the sight of slaughtered chickens for *kapparot* in a basket with the blood streaming out of it, "an atonement for all our sins." This detail assumes ironic importance as we learn that the boy was chased from his home because he had allowed just such a chicken of atonement to get away.

The boy is the son of a cantor, and he seeks refuge for Yom Kippur in the home of another cantor. Cantors are among Agnon's favorite people—reminiscent for Agnon of his own grandfather, a cantor. We learn this, as well as a further relevant insight, from Agnon's autobiographical *Ir umelo'ah*. The boy's plight in *Etsel Hemdat* may, in fact, be a veiled biographical embellishment on a real-life childhood trauma witnessed by Agnon when the cantor's orphaned children—Agnon's playmates, it would seem—were treated harshly by their stepmother.<sup>18</sup>

The plot of *Etsel Hemdat* is a plausible fictional refraction of one event in a childhood's shattered innocence. The story's positive resolution, moreover, harks back to a milieu in which reintegration within an organic folk culture was still possible. By contrast, the cantors of the *Sefer hama'asim* cycle, in story after story, epitomize Agnon's disillusionment with the hollowness of contemporary religious and communal life. The organic folk culture exists no more. Once the protagonist is cut adrift, he may experience flashes of grace or salvific insight, but there is no sense of permanent repair of the rift.<sup>19</sup>

The boy-narrator at the outset of *Etsel Hemdat* becomes quite lost and terrified, yet the denouement is totally satisfying and comforting. Until he finds Hemdat the boy encounters a kind of Dickensian brusqueness and uncivility that is cruelly inhospitable to a displaced child. In response to his query as to Hemdat's whereabouts he receives a series of burlesque responses from the eccentric townsfolk that heighten his dread to the point that "a sweat of terror covered [his] face and [his] heart began to ache from protracted anticipation."

In reading *Etsel Hemdat* together with Bakhtin's study of Rabelais's rootage in the circus atmosphere of carnivals with their hawksters, freaks, masks and use of raucous language and billingsgate, one can sense here a Jewish equivalent of that suspension of societal norms to which Bakhtin points.<sup>20</sup> Altered by the state of anomie in which the boy finds himself, he can later experience a rebirth or rediscovery of the consoling power of Jewish myth and ritual. This again corresponds to the state of crisis—death and revival—which characterizes the pre-modern feast in the Christian world.

The genuine lightheartedness which accompanies Hemdat on the eve of Yom Kippur calls to mind Bakhtin's statement that "moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world."<sup>21</sup> One senses a harking back in *Etsel Hemdat* and its description of jocularly on Erev Yom Kippur to the popular marketplace festival. In ancient times, biblical scholars posit, the New Year festival in Israel incorporated elements of Sukkot with its festive celebrations. The crystallized festivals, by contrast, conform to the following statement of Bakhtin:

Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. . . . That is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it.<sup>22</sup>

Hemdat is quite funny in his charming banter with his wife and in his casuistic quasi-pietistic and quasi-medical justifications of why he has to eat more or have another drink. He uses biblical verses in a humorous manner recalling a kind of "Purim Torah" or the "parody of Scripture" which was also characteristic of Christian medieval feasts.<sup>23</sup> The story also incorporates folkloristic details which one may find in Agnon's encyclopedic *Yamim nora'im* (*Days of Awe*), such as when his wife tells Hemdat that he had better plan to have a full meal at home if he intends to abide by the rabbinic prescription: "On Yom Kippur it is fitting for a man to instill peace in his household."<sup>24</sup>

When Hemdat enters the ritual bath he utters a phrase which bespeaks a oneness with the masses of Israel. "The smell of a thousand Jews," Hemdat says, "may no evil eye befall them." For a Jewish work of this type, this remark—which could have been penned by Mendele—approximates a gross materiality that is about as close to Rabelais's fleshy and scatological references as Agnon could get. Agnon's interspersions of Yom Kippur liturgical language and his interpolation of poetry and whole paragraphs in the *maqama* (medieval rhymed prose) style in his narrative are equally reminiscent of Mendele's picaresque style and for the Hebraic reading public more than a little "Rabelaisian."

The religious transformation of Hemdat and his wife with the onset of the hallowed Yom Kippur hours is very stirring, for all its grotesque figuring. Their tears and agitation contrast to the utmost degree with their previous lightheartedness. When the time comes for Hemdat to approach the lectern to lead the prayers, he falls to his knees and crawls gropingly towards it. When he reaches the lectern he seizes on to it "as if it were a consuming fire." Then he smashes his head against it, crying out: "Oy!" Hemdat's glasses become fogged with his tears as he chants, while the entire congregation quakes and sobs at the spectacle.

Although the Yom Kippur stories of the *Sefer hama'asim* cycle contain some moving nostalgic interludes and segments of ecstatic prose, none of them approaches the sustained power of the synagogue service in *Etsel Hemdat*. The *Sefer hama'asim* tales such as *Pi shnayim* are nostalgic and sad; their mode of depiction is that of the "romantic grotesque." As such there is always the barrier of rationalization and distance. They do not envelop and convince the reader as powerfully as the "folk grotesque" description of the Yom Kippur prayers in *Etsel Hemdat*, a first-hand participant-observer evocation and refraction through circus mirrors of Agnon's idealized childhood experience.

In the above-cited section on "the cantors," in Agnon's memoiristic *'Ir umelo'ah*, Agnon notes that one of the cantors had been virtually addicted to reading a book entitled *Hemdat yamim*, and that Agnon, too, had read this book in his youth.<sup>25</sup> The book *Hemdat yamim* was published in Livorno in 1762, and it is attributed to the Sabbatian Nathan of Gaza. Volume Four contains a section entitled *Le'erev yom hakippurim*, which sheds considerable light on the behavior of the cantor, Hemdat, in Agnon's story.<sup>26</sup>

The Sabbatians went far beyond the talmudic suggestion to eat well on the eve of the fast. The author of *Hemdat yamim* prescribes that the joy of the eve of Yom Kippur is a precondition for the acceptance of one's repentance on the Holy Day itself. If a person eats and rejoices he can somehow receive "credit" for two days of fasting, an idea that obsessed Agnon in *Pi shnayim* as well. One of the authorities cited went so far as to argue that Yom Kippurim was destined to become Yom Ki-Purim, or literally, a day like Purim—a day of feasting and joy! In this spirit the author of *Hemdat yamim* penned a mystical prayer for recital during the day preceding Yom Kippur and especially at the *se'udah hamafseqet* or final meal.<sup>27</sup>

Agnon's engaging hero, Hemdat, must have derived his name and some of his behaviors from the book *Hemdat yamim*. (It is curious that the bohemian artist-hero of Agnon's short story of early twentieth-century Jaffa, *Giv'at ha'hol* was also named Hemdat.) There is no hint or trace of the kabbalistic reasoning underlying Hemdat's wholesale eating, drinking and good cheer on Erev Yom Kippur. The story smacks of deeply entrenched custom into which Sabbatian leanings have been seamlessly integrated. This custom goes well beyond the norm of halakhic or midrashic prescription. It was for this reason that we expanded on Hemdat's "Rabelaisian" nature. Our characterization of Agnon's narrative technique as one of "grotesque realism" and exaggeration still applies; the added information gleaned from the book *Hemdat yamim* only enhances our appreciation of the syncretistic components of the folk culture depicted in Agnon's stories. To the degree that Sabbatianism constituted a recrudescence of myth or "paganism" within Judaism, this dimension only reinforces our feeling that something pre-modern and perhaps more authentically "carnavalesque," in Bakhtin's sense, is being conjured up and tapped in *Etsel Hemdat*.

It is also not coincidental that the section of *Hemdat yamim* adjacent to the prescription for feasting on Erev Yom Kippur dwells at length on the necessity for stringently fulfilling the custom of killing the *kapparot* chickens—in spite of the author's awareness of Nachmanides' frowning on this "pagan" behavior.<sup>28</sup> The

slaughtered chickens, it will be recalled, figure prominently in establishing the special mood of the child's kaleidoscopic transmutation to a kind of circus world anomie, foreshadowing his ultimate reintegration and transcendence. What we have in Agnon's story, in sum, is a creative refraction of Sabbatian-inspired folk custom through the prism of Agnon's original and artistic perception of the Jewish holiday's socially integrating and therapeutic capacities.

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### NOTES

1. David Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock, Themes in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon* (New York, 1984), pp. 56–57 and *passim*.

2. Most of Agnon's Yom Kippur stories are conveniently assembled and annotated in S. Y. Agnon, *Sippure yom hakippurim* (Tel Aviv, 1967). *Pi shnayim* (pp. 37–56) has not been translated.

3. Barukh Kurzweil, *Massot 'al sippure Shai Agnon* (Tel Aviv, 1970), chapters 19 and 20 and *passim*.

4. Dov Sadan, *'Al Shai Agnon* (Tel Aviv, 1967), p. 30.

5. Translated by Israel Levin in *Israel Argosy*, 1 (Autumn, 1952): 82–111. For the Hebrew version see *Sippure yom hakippurim*, pp. 5–36.

6. S. Y. Penueli, *Yetsirato shel Shai Agnon* (Israel, 1960), pp. 158ff.

7. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington, 1984).

8. S. Y. Agnon, *The Bridal Canopy* (New York, 1968), pp. 262–76.

9. See for example, Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 62: "When the grotesque is used to illustrate an abstract idea, its nature is inevitably distorted. The essence of the grotesque is precisely to present a contradictory and double-faced fullness of life."

10. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 127.

11. Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), p. 357.

12. Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon, A Revolutionary Traditionalist* (New York, 1989), pp. 201 and 274n.

13. Bakhtin, p. 127.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 127n.

15. See n. 3 above and numerous other essays by Kurzweil.

16. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 12.

17. In S. Y. Agnon, *Ellu ve'Ellu* (Tel Aviv, 1960), pp. 267–78 and translated in J. Weinberg and H. Russel, *A Dwelling Place of My People* (Edinburgh, 19??), pp. 94–109.

18. S. Y. Agnon, *'Ir umelo'ah* (Tel Aviv, 1973), p. 80.

19. See, for example, Agnon's "At the Outset of the Day," in Robert Alter, ed., *Modern Hebrew Literature* (New York, 1971), pp. 215–24.

20. Bakhtin, chapters 2 and 3.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 83ff.

24. *Days of Awe* (New York, 1965), pp. 156, 168.

25. S. Y. Agnon, *'Ir umelo'ah*, pp. 81–82.

26. *Sefer Hemdat yamim*, 4 (Livorno, 1762–1764), pp. 62A–64A.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, p. 64A.