

**A CITY IN ITS
FULLNESS**

S.Y. AGNON

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW

EDITED BY
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Foreword

“I Am Building a City”: On Agnon’s Buczacz Tales

In the mid-1950s, the great Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon began to publish a series of stories about Buczacz, the Galician town in which he grew up and lived until he left for Palestine in 1908 at the age of nineteen. These were not reminiscences of childhood but rather tales set beyond the reach of modern memory, from the middle of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth. Many of the stories appeared in the literary pages of the newspaper *Haaretz*, and he was working on his Buczacz project through the period of excitement surrounding his 1966 receipt of the Nobel Prize for literature right up until his death in 1970. He left editorial guidelines for his daughter Emunah Yaron for shaping of the stories into an orchestrated sequence. She executed his plans, and in 1973 *‘Ir u-Melo’ah* (*A City in Its Fullness*) appeared. It contained over 140 stories and ran to 724 pages.

Few readers or critics realized how powerfully the Buczacz project had preoccupied Agnon during the last period of his life. And few had paid much attention to the stories when they were appearing in newspapers and literary supplements. The 1950s and 1960s were a time

of intense institution building for the young State of Israel, and there was little ready interest in stories about the lives of Jews in the Diaspora long ago. Zionist culture persisted in viewing East European Jewish life as weak and compromised, and literary accounts of those times were chiefly of interest as a way of understanding the “corrupt” milieu from which the new Hebrew nation had broken away. Those readers who did notice the Buczacz stories tended to regard them as the over-ripe fruit, the products of the aging master’s nostalgia for his origins.

From our vantage point, over a half century later, things look very different. With the gift of hindsight, we can now discern in this late phase of Agnon’s life the contours of an enterprise that is ambitious, innovative and challenging. Rather than winding down into a wistful, elegiac homage to the cradle of his youth, Agnon was girding his loins to undertake a major revision of the perception of East European Jewry. He was seeking to rescue its memory from a series of unfortunate fates. In earlier Hebrew literature, the shtetl had been figured as a place of spiritual exhaustion and communal venality. The vector of judgment was reversed after the Holocaust in the abundance of memorial volumes for destroyed communities, which tended to present an idealized picture of a vanished way of life. And certainly the emergence of Holocaust literature itself, which focused on the ways Jews perished, portrayed pre-war Jewish life as existing always under the sign of persecution and extermination.

But it was not only balance and accuracy that Agnon was after in his grand revision. The deeper truth about Polish Jewry, he argued, could be grasped only by leaping backward in time to the period before modernization had eroded the authority that the Torah and the community exerted on the everyday lives of Jews. What he saw in this “classic” period was not a dour allegiance to rabbinic discipline but rather a variegated vitality bubbling up from an organically Jewish life. As the title *A City in Its Fullness* indicates, Agnon’s project has epic ambitions. And indeed the book succeeds in conjuring up a vast canvas that stretches horizontally over two centuries and vertically from the wealthiest merchants and most distinguished rabbis down to the poorest artisans and most piteous scoundrels. Yet even as Agnon aspired for totality, he recognized the need for selectivity and organization – not only to give shape to his sprawling evocation but also to impose on it a normative vision.

By the term normative I mean the relationship of an experience or an activity to a set of privileged values. Both Agnon the author and the narrator he created to tell these stories held the study of Torah and the worship of God in the synagogue service to be supremely important values in Jewish society. The difference between the world depicted in *A City in Its Fullness* and East European Jewish life in the period of modernity hinges on the force and plausibility of these values. Most all the stories in this collection attest to the difficulty in making Torah and worship preeminent and authoritative even in this so-called classic period. The human heart is what it is; grandiosity, cupidity, and resentment are constant obstacles, leaving a gap between the real and the ideal. The interests and animosities of the gentile rulers exert a corrosive effect on the community's ability or desire to live according to its true priorities. Yet amidst all the crowded instances of deviation and deficiencies, the narrator never lets us forget the force of the values against which these failures are found to be wanting. Thus *A City in Its Fullness* is distinguished both by its honesty in aspiring to represent all of Jewish life and by its insistence on viewing that fullness through a normative grid.

A key example is the novella-length story "In Search of a Rabbi, or The Governor's Whim." As a city with a long tradition of Torah scholarship, Buczacz considers itself deserving of a distinguished scholar as its rabbi. But many real-world forces frustrate this ambition. Richer cities lure away Buczacz-born scholars and even "kidnap" rabbis on their way to Buczacz to take up a rabbinical post. The Polish nobles who own the city mix in the internal affairs of the Jewish community, and their interference puts off high-minded scholars from settling there. The community itself is dividing among quarrelsome factions. The story begins when all parties agree upon the candidacy of the Rabbi of Zabno, and an embassy is dispatched to his faraway town. After a long and fascinating tale-within-a-tale told by the rabbi, the representatives are informed that, to their amazement, the greatest scholar of the generation, one Rabbi Mordechai, is actually a tinsmith living unacknowledged within their very midst, within Buczacz itself. The representatives bring their report back home, and the leaders of Buczacz pride themselves on their willingness to set aside a bias against artisans and to appoint Rabbi Mordechai their rabbi, and they are further encouraged to discover

that the appointment is looked on favorably by the Polish ruler of the city. But once Rabbi Mordechai learns of the ruler's involvement, he peremptorily turns down the appointment and moves away from Buczacz, leaving the city once again without spiritual leadership and with nothing to show for its considerable troubles.

Although seemingly capricious, Rabbi Mordechai's rejection in fact comes at the end of a long series of telescoping narratives that demonstrate the treacherous influence of gentile rulers on the disinterested pursuit of Torah study. The proof that the noble pursuit of Torah study is not in fact an unobtainable ideal is provided by the story the Rabbi of Zabno tells the Buczacz representatives about his private study sessions with Rabbi Mordechai, which are both deeply passionate and bracingly competitive. To be sure, the norm of true Torah study is only fleetingly realized, but its truth serves to locate and organize the array of human experiences represented in the story. This same constellation applies in the other hallmark area of normative value: synagogue worship. A series of stories about ḥazzanim, synagogue prayer leaders, valorizes purity and selflessness in the pursuit of this vocation and at the same time presents them as ideals that ordinary human nature can fulfill only rarely and with extreme difficulty.

To be sure, study and worship are transcendental values that provide the keys to the iconography of *A City in Its Fullness*. Yet the vivid liveliness of the stories depends on Agnon's grounding these values in the concreteness of geography and history. Agnon chose to re-imagine the inner life of Polish Jewry by focusing exclusively on one city, a city of some ten thousand Jewish souls that was certainly not among the first tier of Galician cities, despite its scholarly *amour-propre*. The choice of Buczacz is of course an homage of a son of Buczacz to his hometown, and it is the place whose stories and legends he knew best. But the choice is far cannier than nostalgia and convenience. Like James Joyce's Dublin and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Agnon was expressing the modernist's aesthetic preference for the particular over the universal. Anatomizing this one, modest community gave Agnon a greater chance of saying something true about the larger picture of Polish Jewry.

A City in Its Fullness is conceived in part as a "Baedeker" to Buczacz. In the larger Hebrew original from which these stories are taken,

the reader is accompanied on a guided tour of the city that begins with its sacred center (the study houses and synagogues), proceeds to its civil spaces (marketplace, fountain, Town Hall), and eventually leads to the liminal areas on its fringes and beyond the River Strypa that runs through it. Each of these places serves as an impetus to storytelling. Sometimes the purpose of the story is straightforwardly etiological. On his tour of the Great Synagogue, the narrator comes across a chandelier made of Italian glass and tells the story of the Buczacz merchant who brought it back from Trieste as a gift from a Jewish apostate (“The Brilliant Chandelier”); the fate of the synagogue’s seven-branch candelabrum provides an occasion for reviewing the uneasy relationship between the Jewish community and the successive regimes of gentile rulers (“The Tale of the Menorah”). At other times, the place, be it as grand as the magnificent Town Hall, is only the occasion for a “back story” that becomes a fictional exploration on its own terms. Such is the case with the story “The Partners,” which, in the guise of explaining why a family of Jewish yeast merchants has occupied the basement of the Town Hall for far more than a century, provocatively imagines an intimate encounter between a humble Jewish charcoal maker and Count Potocki, the owner of Buczacz.

The vivid realization of time and place might appear to be simply good literary practice. But if this takes place in Hebrew within the Zionist imagination and if the place is located in the Diaspora, then the matter is not so simple. Even before the emergence of political Zionism at the end of the nineteenth century, Hebrew literature represented Jewish life in Eastern Europe as riddled with corruption and obscurantism; and once a viable Jewish settlement in Palestine was established in the 1920s, the disintegrating life of European Jewry was constantly compared to the promise of the new society being created in the Hebrew homeland. The impatient and scant reception given to the stories of *A City in Its Fullness* when they were published already after the establishment of Israel is further evidence of a general turning away from the European past and a suspicion of large-scale investment in imagining its inner workings. The exception to this distemper was of course Agnon’s own writings, beginning from *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* in 1912 through *A Guest for the Night* in 1939. But the epic and sustained nature

of the Buczacz stories, coming as they did after the establishment of the state, made a claim that was especially provocative. While David Ben-Gurion, Israel's Prime Minister during the country's first two decades, was engaged in the process of building a state, S.Y. Agnon was engaged in another kind construction project. "I am building a city," he wrote to the literary critic Baruch Kurzweil. That city was Buczacz, and it was located very far from Zion in both time and place.

Agnon was a deeply professing religious Zionist whose commitment was manifest in his life choices and at all levels of his writings. How then to reconcile the old city with the new state? The prompt to solving this puzzle is found in the very first story in *A City in Its Fullness*, titled, simply, "Buczacz." Many Jewish communities in Eastern Europe have stories about how they were founded, so-called origin myths, and this inaugural story is the one Agnon tells about Buczacz. In this telling, the city was founded by Jews from an ancient community in the Rhineland Valley who undertook "to ascend" and settle in the Land of Israel. Setting off with no practical direction and only their faith in hand, their eastward march was overcome by winter, and they are forced to wait out the cold season deep in the forests. Their encampment was discovered by Polish nobles on a hunting party. The Poles had recently colonized what is now western Ukraine, and they invited the Jews to survive the winter by returning to their estates. They found the Jews brought them economic benefit by helping to manage their vast holdings and by introducing commerce into these primitive regions. When the next winter came, the Jews calculated that the elderly and the pregnant could not withstand the rigors of a renewed journey to the Holy Land, and it was decided to stay put for the time being. Their affairs prospered, and eventually they were able to create a centralized Jewish settlement with all the appurtenance of a *Kehilah Kedoshah*, a full Jewish community with its synagogues, study houses, law courts, and schools; the dream of continuing on to Zion was quietly put aside.

In Agnon's rendering of its origins, then, Buczacz is a way station on the path to the Land of Israel, the result of an arrested journey. The Rhineland Jews did not reach their objective because they were deficient in the practical worldliness necessary to accomplish such a journey

and because of the very real geographical and historical difficulties that stood in their way. But their motivation was unimpeachable, and the fact that the Holy Community of Buczacz came into existence was the result of their readiness to move forward and upward. Buczacz is thus a compromise, a millennium-long act of temporizing between the (old) Exile and Zion. As such, it is a community that is aspiring rather than fallen. It is as much of a sovereign Jewish polity that can exist *short* of the return of the people to its homeland. In the best of times, the covenants granted by the Polish nobility allowed the Jews a substantial degree of self-government, which was implemented by rabbinic law and communal cohesion. The stories of *A City in Its Fullness* recount tales not only of rabbi-sages but also of non-rabbinic communal leaders like R. Moshe Aharon, a mead merchant who is presented as being nothing less than a statesman (“R. Moshe Aharon the Mead Merchant”). Buczacz is but one constituent city-state within the larger commonwealth of the Council of the Four Lands, which, until it was abolished in 1764, served as a kind of legislative body for the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe.

The relationship between Buczacz and Zion is deeply dialectical. On the one hand, as we have seen, Buczacz is presented as a link in the movement toward Zion. This takes up a position against early Zionist historiography, which viewed the intense religious culture of Diaspora communities as a sublimation of the worldly national impulse; inscribing daily life within the world of Torah was taken merely as a way of surviving the abnormal conditions of Exile. Agnon’s Buczacz, by contrast, is a fully-functioning organism engaging life at all levels possible, and as such it is a true anticipation of the Jewish state to come. On the other hand, Buczacz, in its capacity as a representative of the classical civilization of Polish Jewry, presents a critique of the State of Israel, the culmination of Zionism in Agnon’s time. Because of their subjugation to gentile rule, to be sure, the Jews of Buczacz could never attain to the sovereignty enjoyed by the modern Jewish state. But that modern state is hobbled by a radical secularity that produced as a reaction an obscurantist Orthodoxy. The organic integration of Torah and life, the particular with the universal, is an example of what would be necessary to make the Zionist reality whole.

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The factors that prevent Buczacz from being whole are evident in nearly every story in this collection. Agnon displays a nuanced awareness of how the lives of the Jews were affected by the changing history of the region. When the Jews were brought to the area by Polish landowners in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the local population was made up of Ruthenian (Ukrainian) peasants, who became serfs to the Polish nobles. The Jews served the interests of the Poles as a managerial and commercial class. The Jews were mostly town dwellers who stimulated the market economy by buying the peasants' surplus production and selling them manufactured goods they could not produce themselves. They practiced such handicrafts as tanning, butchering, candle making, haberdashery, and shoe making. They leased the rights to fish the rivers, harvest the forests and manufacture salt. A significant number of Jews made a living from operating rural taverns, where they dispensed to the peasantry liquor distilled from the lord's surplus grain. Situated thus between the Polish landowners and the Ruthenian peasants, the Jews were often perceived by the latter as agents of the former. In the great cataclysm of the mid-seventeenth century, the Khmel'nitski Massacres, in which hundreds of Jewish communities were decimated, Cossacks from east of the Dnieper River joined with Tatar bands to exploit the resentment of the Ruthenians against their Polish oppressors and their Jewish agents. After the Cossacks withdrew, the Jewish communities slowly rebuilt and a relatively stable commercial life was reestablished.

Ruthenian-Jewish relations do not receive much treatment in *A City in Its Fullness*, and when they are represented—see “The Partners” and “In a Single Moment”—the Jews are portrayed as displaying far more humanity than the Poles. It is rather the transactions between the Jews and their Polish overlords that compel Agnon's attention. Some of these noble families were fabulously wealthy and owned outright dozens of cities and hundreds of villages and trackless forests. Relations between these princes, dukes and counts and great Jewish merchants are portrayed in a number of stories, especially in “In Search of a Rabbi, or The Governor's Whim” with its intricate patterning of power relations. The moral of this epic tale is the baleful impact of the rulers' intervention in communal affairs on the disinterestedness of Torah study and rabbinic leadership. Other stories are concerned with staging encounters between

unusual Jews and high nobles, meetings that are as revelatory as they are unlikely to have taken place in real life. A great prince of the realm, sick with a wasting disease brought on by the commission of a terrible sin, ends up on the doorstep of the eponymous hero of “R. Moshe Aharon the Mead Merchant,” who not only cures him but becomes his friend. In “The Partners” a humble Jewish charcoal maker incurs the gratitude of the great Count Potocki for saving his life after he was separated from his hunting party in the forest. In these tales Agnon is concerned less with plot than with character. The Poles looked down upon the Jews for being merchants and tradesmen, for being town dwellers, for not being Catholics, and for simply being Jews. The social distance between the two groups, at least perceived by the Poles, was enormous. Through the freedom afforded by fictional reimagining, Agnon reveals the inner thoughts of both parties and evens the playing field.

In the 1770s, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth ceased to exist, and its lands were divided among Russia, Prussia and Austria. The southeastern borderlands, formerly called Rus, fell to the Austrian Empire, which renamed them the province of Galicia. This was a hybrid entity: A German-speaking administration dispatched from Vienna ruled over Poles, Jews and Ruthenians, three groups with distinct cultures and languages. The Polish nobility retained ownership of most of their estates but ceased to be a law unto themselves; they were now subject to a bureaucracy administered from afar. For the Jews, the changes were far reaching, and in the eyes of traditionalists, like the narrator of the stories in *A City in Its Fullness*, a great misfortune.

The *modus vivendi* worked out over generations between Jewish leaders and the Polish magnates who owned the towns in which they lived had left Jewish communities a substantial degree of autonomy. Deviance and disputes, whether religious or civil, were largely handled by Jewish courts, and this allowed rabbinic and community authority to maintain its sway. The shift from being inhabitants of privately owned towns and estates to being subjects of a multi-national empire was enormous, and Agnon’s stories attend closely to these changes. The enlightened absolutism of the Hapsburgs dictated that army service should be incumbent on all imperial subjects, the Jews being no exception. Despite objections to young men being ripped from their homes

and placed for prolonged periods in situations in which traditional observance could not be maintained, especially Shabbat and kashrut, each community was given a quota it had to fulfill. This turned out to be an invitation to communal corruption; the town's elders would pay the itinerant poor to fill the quotas or they would forcibly offer up young tradesmen in order to avoid the induction of Torah scholars or the sons of householders. The powerful and heart-rending story "Disappeared" gives an account of a tailor's apprentice who is subjected to this fate; ironically, the boy's army experience turns out to be much less damaging than the turpitude of the Buczacz community and the grotesque fate that awaits him afterward. Centralized taxation was another temptation to corruption. Encouraged by rapacious Jewish tax contractors, Vienna levied a punishing tax on the use of every single candle used on Sabbaths and at weddings. "Feivush Gazlan" is the affecting story of a local Jewish enforcer who is employed to stomp into homes on Friday evenings to ensure the tax has been paid and take action if not. Another, crucial change introduced by the Austrians is depicted in the two stories, alternate accounts of the same event, carrying the title "Yekele." The imposition of a centralized judicial system took away from the Jewish community its authority to adjudicate all but ritual matters. Yekele is a deviant youth falsely accused of theft, but because he has publically insulted the autocratic leader of the Buczacz Jewish community, his case is handed over to the authorities, and he ends up swinging from the gallows in a shameful public execution.

Over time, the axis between Buczacz and Vienna turned into a grand avenue for modernization for those who sought it. Polish Jews living under the Russian Czar in the nineteenth century experienced mounting persecution and xenophobia on many fronts, but Jews living under the Hapsburgs gained rights as citizens of a liberal empire. The Austro-Hungarian form of Serfdom was abolished in 1848, and the Jews of Galicia were emancipated and given the vote in 1867. For a young man from Buczacz there was no bar to taking up residence in Vienna and attending university. The availability of these freedoms, along with the rise of socialism and modern nationalism in various forms, had a significant impact on Jewish life in Buczacz. But this is precisely the territory that *A City in Its Fullness* declines to explore. By ending the scope

of the stories just as these changes were arriving, Agnon underscored his desire to focus on the era before the eclipse and erosion of rabbinic and communal authority. He had already devoted two novels to what came afterward. *A Simple Story* (1935) takes place in Buczacz at the beginning of the twentieth century, and *A Guest for the Night* (1939) is set, also in Buczacz, in 1930. The difference between those two works and *A City in Its Fullness* lies not only in the time period represented. Although each is written in a different mode, both are novels, the quintessentially modern prose form, whereas *A City in Its Fullness* is a cycle of stories told after the manner of more traditional storytelling.

One of the seeming paradoxes of these stories is the pervasive mention of the Holocaust. If the stories are set in the premodern period, how can they know about the terrible fate of European Jewry in the twentieth century? The beginnings of an answer can be found in “The Sign,” a major story Agnon published in 1962. The story is told from the point of view of an Agnon-like narrator living in Jerusalem who hears about the final destruction of Buczacz’s Jews by the Nazis and their Ukrainian helpers on the eve of the Shavuot holiday in June 1943. The narrator puts off his grieving in deference to the holiday, but later that night alone in the synagogue he experiences a mystical visitation from the great medieval sacred poet Solomon Ibn Gabirol. In his presence, the narrator finally breaks down and expresses his anguish, and as a consolation the ghostly poet composes an acrostic hymn that will memorialize the name of the destroyed community. “The Sign” is a consecration story that dramatizes Agnon’s decision to devote himself to re-imagining the world of Buczacz. *A City in Its Fullness* is indeed a major response to the murder of European Jewry; but it charts a mode of response that is substantively different from what has come to be known as the literature of the Holocaust. Rather than seeking to represent the atrocities themselves and their effects on survivors and their children, Agnon’s Buczacz stories make the claim that the truest response to the Holocaust is to recreate literarily the fullness of Jewish life *before* that dark shadow was cast. So, while the terrible occasion for the telling is recurrently and explicitly marked in stories, it itself is not part of the narrative. The Holocaust is typically mentioned in the closing lines of a story as a kind of tragic coda that lies outside its narrative framework.

(Because of its importance as a “consecration story,” calling forth the author-narrator to be the scribe dedicated to the literary immortalization of Buczacz, we have chosen to open this collection with “The Sign.” In the Hebrew edition Agnon’s daughter opted to include the story—which had already appeared in a previous volume—as an appendix.)

The determination of what is in any given story and what is out necessarily draws our attention to the question of who is doing the telling. It is a truth worth recalling that every story is not just told, but is told by someone and from some point of view. Agnon, the historical personage who lived in the Talpiyot neighborhood of Jerusalem and whose likeness formerly appeared on the fifty-shekel bill, is such an indelible presence that readers are tempted to imagine him as the narrator of his stories. But it is a temptation to be resisted, and not just because the real Agnon would have relished having his readers fall into the trap. Over the course of his long writing career, Agnon had occasion to fashion a number of different kinds of narrators, although his favorite is admittedly close to himself. One of Agnon’s greatest achievements is taking the autobiographical persona of a middle-aged religious writer and submitting it to a corrosive irony. But when it came to *A City in Its Fullness*, Agnon had to invent a new narrator. Having determined that the stories would be set centuries ago, he could not make do with a narrator whose recall, even when extended by tales transmitted by parents and grandparents, could not journey back beyond the edge of modern memory.

More importantly, Agnon needed a narrator who did not condescend to this long-ago way of life but shared its mental world. He therefore created a kind of amalgam. The narrator would be a man of Buczacz whose attitudes and knowledge would ally him with the rabbinic classes of the age. He is a man, for example, who, despite his wariness of things mystical or ḥasidic, has no problem in describing how the Maharam Schiff, an eminent German Talmudist who died in 1644, could materialize at a circumcision feast in Galicia more than a century later. This narrator—a general construct whose voice takes on slightly different colorations in different stories—would not be an identifiable person with a name, and he would not be involved in the action of the stories. Despite being more of a device than a character, the narrator’s voice would nevertheless not be devoid of personality. His tics

and digressions indeed remind us of some of the habits of the autobiographically-infused narrators in Agnon's earlier fiction, although we should not be drawn to conflate the two. The new narrator's outstanding endowment is his omniscience. The action of *A City in Its Fullness* ranges over two centuries, and not only is the narrator at home in each of these periods but he knows all within them. He knows the exact fare paid by a scholar for a wagon ride between Buczacz and a neighboring town in the same way as he knows the thoughts of a charcoal maker as he tramps through the forest on his way to pray with the community in the Great Synagogue. And to preserve his reliability in the eyes of his readers, the narrator will make a big show of *not* knowing some inconsequential detail as if the admission of this lapse guarantees his status as a trusted chronicler. This is in fact not so different from the omniscience taken for granted by the great nineteenth-century novelists in the realist tradition; Flaubert takes for granted that he can tell us what is in Emma Bovary's heart. Yet because Agnon's narrator is speaking from an earlier time and from within a more traditional community, the sanction for his omniscience had to come from something more than "literature" or "fiction." Agnon found it in the precedent of the *pinkas*, the register or minute book kept by every Jewish community. Although this was usually a dry document tersely recording births and deaths, tax obligations, rabbinic appointments, and the like, it also included anomalous incidents worthy of note. This gave Agnon leave to appropriate the communal authority of the *pinkas* to create a credible position from which his narrator could speak.

To whom the narrator is speaking in *A City in Its Fullness* turns out to be not a simple matter. There are two transactions taking place simultaneously in these stories. On one level, the level dramatized within the stories themselves, the narrator speaks as if conversing with a like-minded audience contemporary to him in time. Just as he is a learned, believing Jew—with the *hauteur* and skepticisms of the scholarly class—he addresses listeners who share the basic assumptions of his worldview. On the second level, the level of the stories as published in *Haaretz* and elsewhere during the first two decades of the State of Israel, Agnon, who is what literary theorists call the implied author, is sending messages via his stories to a modern readership, one contemporary to *his* time. This

creates the conditions for ramifying ironies and intriguing complexities. Take, for example, Miriam Devorah, the musically gifted wife of a ḥazzan in the story “The Ḥazzanim,” set in the early eighteenth century. She has a dream in which she sees herself dressed in white vestments leading the congregation in prayer on Yom Kippur. From her dream she deduces that she must have been a man in a previous life and because of a sin unknown to her she has been reborn in the body of a woman. This thought throws her into a spiral of melancholy that leads to her early death. In the narrator’s telling of the story, set squarely in its time and place, it needs hardly be said that there is no awareness of psychoanalysis or gender theory. The narrator understands the hapless Miriam Devorah’s condition through the kabbalistic concepts of demons and transmigration of souls that were widely held among Polish Jews at the time. And he, the narrator, assumes these ideas are shared by his readers even as he elaborates their nuances. But Agnon’s readers reading the story in the second half of the twentieth century in modern Hebrew surely possess a different set of explanatory frameworks within which to make sense of Miriam Devorah’s plight. This kind of dual patterning is one of the enriching features of *A City in Its Fullness* and must have been counted by Agnon as a compensation for having to give up the autobiographical persona he had earlier used to such good effect.

This volume is a selection of twenty-seven representative stories from the 140-plus Hebrew stories in *A City in Its Fullness*. Indeed, many of the selections in this volume are more properly considered as novellas. But lest that seem like a paltry number, it is worth explaining that a number of the stories in the Hebrew volume are very short, and many of them are less stories in the sense of fiction as we now use the term than ethnographic reports about the practices and customs of Jewish life in Buczacz. It is in fact the size of the volume (724 pages) and the presence of this historically informative material, although fascinating in its own right, that put off earlier Hebrew readers from exploring it in depth and discovering the full-fledged stories that are as brilliant as anything Agnon ever wrote. The present collection includes those stories, and although they are relatively few in number, they have greater heft than many of the shorter units and actually represent slightly less than half of the original volume. There is a major absence worth noting.

One of the great stories of *A City in Its Fullness* is “The Parable and Its Lesson,” which tells the story of a descent into the Underworld to free a young bride from abandonment. A translation of the story by James S. Diamond, accompanied by a critical essay by myself, was recently published by Stanford University Press as a separate volume. It should be thought of as part and parcel of the current project.

James S. Diamond, the translator of “A Parable and Its Lesson,” was supposed to continue on to translate all the stories in the current volume. Sadly, in April 2013 he was killed by a car while standing near the home of a friend in Princeton, New Jersey. He had prepared draft translations of several of the stories, and those have been completed and edited by Jeffrey Saks. Other translators were invited to step in to complete the task. *A City in Its Fullness* is dedicated to Jim’s memory.

The stories here are presented in the order in which they appear in the Hebrew edition of *A City in Its Fullness* (with the exception of “The Sign,” discussed above). Agnon’s principles of organization are several, including following a general chronology of historical events in which the tales unfold. The stories depicting life under the Polish nobles before the partitions of Poland come before the stories of life under the Austrian rulers. The early sections of the book are devoted to a guided tour of the main sites of Jewish life in Buczacz. That tour also extends to a taxonomy of occupations connected to the community: rabbis, ḥazzanim, gabbaim (lay heads of the communal apparatus), lomdim (full-time scholars), and shamashim (synagogue assistants).

Listing those occupations provides an opportunity to state an editorial preference visible in the texts of these stories: the scarcity of italicized terms. In the case of the present volume, the convention of placing foreign-language terms in italics would result in distracting and unsightly pages studded with words in special fonts. This would undermine the goal pursued here of naturalizing Agnon into English. Take, for example, the terms ḥazzan and shamash. Rendering these terms as “cantor” or “sexton” or “beadle” provides no solution because such words are already strange in English and produce no yield in understanding. The choice made in these pages has been to generally use unique Hebrew terms and not to set them apart graphically. The terms are explained in a glossary at the end of the volume, and after first consulting it for an

Foreword

unfamiliar term, the reader will see each term gaining contextual meaning the more it is used.

A similar approach has been followed when it comes to annotation. Because Agnon has created a Judaically erudite narrator who addresses a similarly erudite audience, most references go unlabeled or unexplained in the text. Either the identity of their origin is taken for granted or the contemporary reader/listener would have not experienced a need for a precise identification. It goes without saying that most English readers—and for that matter most Israeli readers nowadays—do not catch these references. The aspiration here has been to even the playing field for the English reader without peppering the pages with footnotes. Major references are indeed supplied but they appear in a special section of annotations at the end of the volume. Terms or quotations that are candidates for glossing or explication are not flagged by special markings in the body of the text. They can be found referenced by page number in the section at the end, and it is the reader's choice in any given instance whether or not to seek them there. Generally, when quoted as such, biblical verses appear in italics; which is not the case when a biblical phrase makes its way into the speech of the narrator or a character in a story. In addition, we have appended a chart with historical information on the rabbis that served in Buczacz overly nearly four centuries, many of whom are featured throughout the stories in this volume, as well as some population statistics of the town.

One editorial choice requires explanation. The names of many characters in these stories are preceded by "R." This convention, corresponding to the Hebrew letter *reish* with an apostrophe, indicates an honorific title that could include one of the following: *rabi*, *rav*, *rabeinu*, *rebbe*, *reb*. Some of these titles refer to a man with rabbinic ordination or scholarly status, while the simple *reb* can at times denote any male adult. Rather than trying to parse out each occurrence, the decision was made to gather them all under the sign of "R." and—with the exception of instances where the specific title is significant to the story—let the context suggest its inflection.

When it comes to the spelling of place names, readers and editors have to be tolerant of a certain degree of chaos. For every town in Galicia there are at least three names: Jewish/Yiddish, Polish and Ukrainian, and

sometimes a separate German spelling. The classic example is the great city of eastern Galicia that is variously named Lviv (Ukrainian), Lvov (Yiddish), Liwów (Polish), and Lemberg (German). The general preference here has been for the name as used by Jews among themselves. The problem is that because Yiddish is written in Hebrew characters and pronounced differently according to regional dialects, there is no agreed-upon spelling of the Jewish place names in Roman characters. The most that can be hoped is that the spelling of these villages, towns, and cities will approximate Agnon's intent. (The spelling and pronunciation of the eponymous town that is the subject of these stories is similarly embroiled. Buczacz is the Polish spelling and the most widely used.)

Finally, there is the perennial challenge of translation itself. The differing approaches to rendering Agnon's unique Hebrew were discussed in the introduction to *The Parable and Its Lesson* and will not be repeated here. James Diamond devised a stylistic register that privileged a high modernist idiom while preserving a trace of Agnon's distinct lyricism, and that is the model that has been followed here. There was the added challenge of accommodating the voices of a number of different translators. It is to be hoped that both Agnon and his English readers will be well served by the care taken to make this collection as seamless as possible.

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