

THE SHTETL AND ITS AFTERLIFE: AGNON IN JERUSALEM

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Abstract: *This essay looks at both Buczacz, the Galician hometown of Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes, and Jerusalem, the adopted city/town of the writer who became S. Y. Agnon, modern Israel's most prominent Hebrew writer and only Nobel Prize winner. Like Jerusalem, the generic shtetl proved over time to be primordial, protean, and portable as a point of reference in Jewish culture and memory. Juxtaposing the "shtetl" as monolithic space with the "city" as heterogeneous space in sociological as well as artistic representations, I argue for a reading of several of S. Y. Agnon's major fictions that render Buczacz and Jerusalem as mirror images of each other. Finally, I gesture towards the ethical and political implications of this move for Agnon's readers and the citizens of Jerusalem.*

In what follows, I will offer a view of Jerusalem through the prism of the "shtetl." For Jews of Ashkenazic origin, the Jewish town seems to have been associated from its earliest iterations with the forsaken capital of their religious memory and imagination. Articulated in different cultural venues in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth centuries and analyzed extensively in scholarship of the last few decades, the "shtetl" has proved to be primordial, protean, and portable. Satire would vie with nostalgia as the topos of the "Jewish town" made its way through a century of attrition and catastrophe, finally yielding to the epic of settlement in Zion. Juxtaposing the "shtetl" as monolithic space with the "city" as heterogeneous space in literary and sociological representations, I will argue that a reciprocally nostalgic, anachronistic version of original, intimate, and exclusive space came to be imported into literary constructs of the shtetl and of Jerusalem in S. Y. Agnon's major fictions.

KEDEM AND THE NOSTALGIC INFLECTION OF JEWISH SPACE

Jews are not alone in encoding nostalgia for Edenic points of origin into their personal and collective stories;¹ still, it is notable that Jewish eschatology is built explicitly on a return to the remembered place of innocence and cultic sovereignty: "hadesh yamenu ke-**kedem**" (restore our days as **of old**). *Kedem*, which in Biblical Hebrew means "east," designates both place of origin—cradle of

1. A classic study of the nostalgic turn in autobiography is Richard Coe's *When the Grass Was Taller*, which describes childhood's paradise lost as a closed or sheltered world, an alternative dimension that becomes particularly compelling when something in the present intensifies the normal sense of loss and nostalgia. *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

Hebrew existence, once referred to unselfconsciously as the ultimate point of *orientation*—and time, the very first moment of time. As a time/place or chronotope, it references the beginning, that Edenic millisecond in collective mythical consciousness before the temptation and the deception, the discord and the punishment.²

That brief glimmer of utter innocence is the time/place to which the collective, weary with life and history, yearns to return. But the object of nostalgic projection is a site not only of temptation but also of danger: “mah she-hayah, hu she-yihyeh” (“that which has been is that which shall be,” Ecclesiastes 1:9) is as retrograde as it is forward-looking. It is this reflex that made the different forms of *shivah* or Return so intoxicating and complex, that accounts for the fact that so many pilgrims, over so many generations, really believed they *recognized* the soil and the air of *'Erez Yisra'el* when they disembarked in Jaffa or Haifa—and why they might have overlooked the real human beings who were inhabiting the land in the “meantime.” In S. Y. Agnon’s *Bi-levav yamim* (*In the Heart of the Seas*), published in 1934 but set in an unspecified time before the advent of political Zionism, the women who are about to leave their Galician hometown of Buczacz on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land assure each other that they have already “journeyed once before to the Land of Israel” (“haverti, kevar hayinu sham”).³

Nostalgia, then, was the engine of the entire journey long before it entered Zionist nationalist precincts. For Jews of Ashkenazic origin, the shtetl came to be regarded, almost from its earliest incarnation, as the default reality of the ultimate object of nostalgia, Jerusalem. As documented in story and myth, it was synonymous with the quintessential time/place called *goles* (exile). But the shtetl was not only *not* Jerusalem; it was, simultaneously, a miniaturization, simulacrum, or placeholder of the holy city and a sign of being *en route* to redemption in Jerusalem itself.

POLIN: THE POLISH SHTETL AS SIMULACRUM OF JERUSALEM

The Jewish town early took on the status of a holy place—referred to in official documents as *K. K. Ploni* (the holy community of Such-and-Such). In his work on the “literary image of the shtetl,” Dan Miron refers to the folk etymology

2. In the high holiday liturgy, *kedem* refers to primordial time: “ḥadesh yamenu ke-kedem”; in the wedding blessings recited under the marriage canopy, *kedem* appears as a place/time or chronotope: “Sameaḥ tesamaḥ re'im 'ahuvim ke-sameḥekha yezirkha be-gan 'eden mi-kedem,” suggesting the primordial harmony of lovers fresh with the joy of their divine manufacture in the Garden of Eden “from *kedem*.” See on this the work of Rachel Elijor, ed., *Gan be-'eden mi-kedem: Masorot gan 'eden bi-Yisra'el u-va-'amim* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2010). But see also Genesis 3:24, where a slight change of wording turns “gan 'eden mi-kedem,” the primordial Garden of Eden, into “**mi-kedem** le-gan 'eden” or *East* of Eden, the place to which Adam and Eve are banished after sinning in the Garden—suggesting that *kedem* can be both time and place, and that the place of exile is the very inverse of the Garden. See also Jonah 4:5, Micah 5:1.

3. S. Y. Agnon, *In the Heart of the Seas*, trans. I. M. Lask (New York: Schocken, 1947), 20; Hebrew: “Bi-levav yamim,” in *'Elu ve-'elu* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1971), 492.

realization,” Miron writes, “no reader of Sholem Aleichem’s Kasrilevke stories would imagine the town possessing a street named *dos kloyster gesl*. Indeed, no one could imagine the town as having a church, a priest, a church warden or any other vestige of organized Christianity. Young Sholemke Rabinovitz who lived near Voronke’s *kloyster gesl* must have been exposed to Christian ceremonies on a regular basis ... and yet one would not find even a trace of Christian culture or religion in the manifold projections of Kasrilevke throughout his oeuvre.”

Of course, Miron continues, the shtetl “was a tiny Jewish island in a vast non-Jewish sea.” The goyim, as we know, existed at the very least on the margins, in the liminal spaces where Jews and non-Jews interacted on market days, in their service functions as *goyim shel Shabbat* or in their intrusive appearances as representatives of the ruling powers, more or less benevolent, depending on how close was the next pogrom. But what is crucial for Miron is that “the literary Kasrilevke was depicted as an exclusively Jewish enclave, an unalloyed entity.... a *yidische melukhe* (a Jewish ‘state’) as a later master, L. Shapiro, ironically called the *shtetl* in a story which told the tale of its final disintegration and destruction.”⁸

This claim too contains more than a bit of hyperbole;⁹ we need go only so far as Tevye’s gentile son-in-law, Chava’s husband, to find the goy at the gates in Sholem Aleichem’s own carefully guarded universe. Even if at the end he is banished and the family circle is restored as a Jewish space, there are certainly breaches at the boundaries. But in a way that is the point: efforts to keep such spaces sanitized of all “others” persist even as they are doomed to fail the test of history.

As I was rereading Miron’s essay, I suddenly recalled the weathered shrine to the Virgin Mary—which, I had discovered on my visit to my mother’s Polish “shtetl” Ostrovtsa (Ostrowiec nad Kamienna) in 2009, stands right next to the town’s public school; it was, however, never mentioned by my mother as she recalled her carefree childhood walks to *szkolny powszechny*. She was proud to

8. Miron, “Literary Image,” 2–3. And see David Roskies’s claim that “the shtetl, or Jewish market town of Eastern Europe, is arguably the greatest single invention of Yiddish literature ... a symbolic landscape so stable and internally coherent that it could register and absorb whatever tremors that history had in store. [And in America, the shtetl became] a covenantal landscape.” David G. Roskies, “The Shtetl in Jewish Collective Memory,” in *The Jewish Search for a Useable Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 40, 52, 57.

9. That this subject is more complex is demonstrated in stories and scholarship in which the Ashkenazic Jewish town is acknowledged as encompassing Christian as well as Jewish landmarks. See for example, the “church that looked out from afar” during Chmielnicki’s raids of the mid-eighteenth century in Asher Barash’s Hebrew story, “At Heaven’s Gate,” in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. Robert Alter (West Orange, NJ: Behrman House, 1975), 168. As Alter points out in his introduction to the narrative, the synagogue and church are in a kind of dialogue here and the Jewish martyr even takes on a Christ-like mien. Ibid., 160–64. See also Neta Stahl on the image of Jesus in Hebrew and Yiddish writing: *Other and Brother: Jesus in the 20th-Century Jewish Literary Landscape* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

have attended the public school, but her memory had more or less effaced the neighborhood's Christian landmarks.

It turns out, indeed, that such forms of effacement are not limited to literary representations. In the folk memory of generations of Jews from eastern Europe, the shtetl was their peculiar and proprietary form of life. If—as Elizabeth Herzog and Mark Zborowski claimed in their 1952 monograph on the shtetl—*Life Is with People*, the *people* one is referring to are all Jews (!). In her introduction written in 1995 for a republication of that first postwar anthropological study of eastern European Jewish culture, Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett noted the tremendous popularity of this volume as an early effort to evoke not the destruction of Jewish life, but its forms of civilization—and the implications of the choice of the shtetl as both quintessentially Jewish and self-enclosed:

Encapsulated in self-contained shtetlekh, the perfection of this hermetic world was sustained, [it was] argued, by isolation, hostility, and resistance to change. So palpable was this sense of the shtetl's hermetic seal that Elizabeth Herzog ... suggested that the researchers ask their informants "Were you ever curious about the world outside the shtetl? Did you ever want to go outside the shtetl and walk around?" At the same time, the shtetl lacked material reality. At one point in their discussions, Mark Zborowski ... stated that the shtetl can be of any size, since it was not a place but a state of mind, a comment that echoed Louis Wirth's classic statement that "the ghetto as we have viewed it is not so much a physical fact as it is a state of mind." "My shtetl' [the authors insist] is the people who live in it, not the place or the buildings or the street...."¹⁰

Even as the *yizker bikher* and more advanced scholarship by Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Samuel Kassow, David Roskies, Steven Zipperstein, Dimitry Shumsky,¹¹ and others, present a far more nuanced and complex version of the shtetl and other forms of Jewish life in eastern Europe, the evocation of monolithic, nostalgia-drenched memory persists. In many fictions written before and

10. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, introduction to the reissued edition of Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 62. See <https://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/liwp.pdf>. As Jonathan Boyarin pointed out in comments on an earlier draft of the present essay, "there's a real ambiguity here. Does Kirschenblatt-Gimblett mean that for the interviewees/informants, 'the shtetl lacked material reality,' or only for Zborowski and Herzog? Moreover, this is an interesting ambiguity that is subject to research, since the *Life Is with People* interview transcripts are available at the Museum of Natural History."

11. See, for example, Samuel Kassow, "Shtetl," in the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/shtetl#author>. And see Jeffrey Shandler, *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History*, vol. 5 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014). On urban Jewish spaces in eastern Europe, especially in Russia, see the ongoing work of Steven Zipperstein; on the Jewish beneficiaries of the imperial arrangements in eastern and central Europe, see the ongoing work of Dimitry Shumsky. For an exploration of the "shtetl" and other spaces as "homelandscapes" that belong to a peculiar brand of modernism, see Jordan D. Finkin, *An Inch or Two of Time: Time and Space in Jewish Modernisms* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), especially 44–92.

immediately after the Shoah, during the period before the Iron Curtain collapsed and access to real places on a real map became possible again, the shtetl remained more a state of mind than a material place accurately drawn in its geophysical properties.

Again: Sholem Aleichem. Those who made the journey to America in his masterful serial novel *Motl Pesi dem khazns*, written over the first fifteen years of the twentieth century, included virtually all the residents of Kasrilevke. A fire will consume what is left of the shtetl but that hardly matters, since the shtetl has, as it were, been transported to New York.¹² And there is more. Even in this most “American” of his stories, and most American of big cities, and even as the Yiddish “transcribed” by nine-year-old Motl is deliciously porous and polyphonic, peppered with Yiddish-inflected English words, the actual presence of non-Jews is rare. As Larry Rosenwald argues:

Motl’s vision resembles his creator’s. In “*Di vasershtub*,” a first version of the first section of the American part of Motl’s stories, Motl tells us that New York is bigger than Vienna, and that it is “a Jewish city. A city of all Jews. And speaking—what they’re speaking there is what they speak with us, what all people speak. **They speak in Yiddish.**” (Emphasis in original.) This is preposterous but revelatory. We feel Motl’s delight. He and his family are exiled from Kasrilevke by poverty and pogroms, wander from one unwelcoming European city to the next, seek refuge in New York, an ocean away from home. How surprising, how magical in fact, to think that the new city is just like the old town, is not New York but Kasrilevke, is not multicultural but exclusively Jewish, is not multilingual but exclusively Yiddish-speaking! But it isn’t.¹³

The same can be said of I. B. Singer’s story “The Little Shoemakers,” published originally in Yiddish in 1945 and appearing in Isaac Rosenfeld’s English translation in 1953; the narrative traces the transport of Abba Shuster’s family from their small town of Frampol, Poland, to Elizabeth, New Jersey as a kind of marching in place—the same ellipse that invites nostalgia to penetrate the metropolises of the New World.¹⁴

So it is not surprising to discover, when we move from fiction to “fact,” that even if a place like Ostrowiec—which had had approximately 30,000 residents after World War I, over half of whom were Jewish—is referred to in the *Yizker bukh* published forty years later in Israel as not only a shtetl but frequently, and

12. For a longer exploration of this story, see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 116–30.

13. Lawrence Rosenwald, “New York and Motl’s New York or the Rhetorical Geography of the Immigrant City” (Paper presented at conference on “Sholem Aleichem 1916–2016: Writing Place,” Tel Aviv University, May 5, 2016).

14. “Die kleyne Shusterlich,” *Tsukunft* 50, no. 4 (April 1945): 232–41. The story appeared in English as “The Little Shoemakers,” trans. Isaac Rosenfeld, in *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Viking, 1953), 523–44.

more accurately, as a *shtot*, it is *unzer shtot*, “our city”; it is sometimes remembered as ‘*ir ve-’em bi-Yisra’el* (a biblical phrase meaning a “mother city” or metropolis in Israel)¹⁵—once again, conferring a sense of elastic municipal boundaries but also of the exclusivity, homogeneity, and propriety of a small town. The place of purity persists, then, as an amalgamation of memory and imagination.

POLITES VS. IDIOTES

But the shtetl as I am invoking it in the Jewish imaginary is also a stand-in for any such social construct—the town or village, the kibbutz, the moshav—as opposed to the city as conceptually cosmopolitan, as the site of civil society and a plurality of others. The romantic yearning for, or organic connection to, “the land” is of course a factor, particularly in early Zionist imaginings. But something even more fundamental is at stake. What is overdue, then, is a—necessarily sketchy—definition of what I mean by “city.” Since this is a subject much researched, I will merely present here my working definition, based primarily on one of the more influential of contemporary urban theorists, and one of the exponents of the “spatial turn” in the last half century, Edward Soja. Soja excavates the Greek term *synoikismos*, or as he calls it, *synekism*, which contains the word *oikos* for “home” or “dwelling place”—and by extension, ecology, economics—and *syn*, which connotes “being together.” He develops Aristotle’s theory of *synoikismos* as a process of “political and cultural confederation around a distinctive territorial center: a polis, or metropolis.” Urban politics therefore involves the “creation of a civil society, concepts of citizenship and democracy ... the foundations of city-based ... civilization. Associated with this social and spatial process are many other terms that help to distinguish between the urban dweller or *polites*, a politically aware citizen, versus *idiotes*, the barbarian or rural resident, the source of Marx’s often misunderstood political comment about the peasantry and the ‘idiocy of rural life.’”¹⁶

What is important for our purposes is the heuristic distinction between the politically aware urbanite and his/her presumably “clueless” or, better, isolated and insulated, country cousin. Synekism, Soja argues, involves “living together in dense and heterogeneous urban regions” and it is this condition that, he claims, following Lefebvre, “is responsible for all social development.”¹⁷

15. 2 Samuel 20:19. See Robert Alter’s translation of this phrase, which appears only once in the Bible, as “a mother city” and his gloss on this phrase as signifying a “principal town.” *The David Story*, translation of Samuel 1 and 2 (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 326. Again, the eliding of small town and city is not uncommon in the memorialization of the shtetl as of the various metropolises of eastern Europe.

16. Edward Soja, “Writing the City Spatially,” *City* 7, no. 3 (2003): 273–74. The misunderstanding of Marx comes from a mistranslation into English, argues Hal Draper. The Greek term *idiotismos* designates a person “withdrawn from public concerns.” *Karl Marx’s Theory of Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 344–45.

17. “Human society, indeed all forms of social relations and social life, originate, evolve, develop and change in the materially real and socially imagined context of cities.” Soja, “Writing the City Spatially,” 275.

I bring this line of reasoning here to emphasize the dichotomy between rural and urban forms in the theory and imagination of human geography. Whether or not it is the case that most denizens of rural villages are politically unaware and most urbanites politically aware is less important than the perception in the literature I am examining. For purposes of simplification I am conflating “political” with “ethical” and arguing, in a Habermasian sort of way,¹⁸ that the city is the place of built-in ethical dilemmas because of its heterogeneity, its dynamism, and its presumption that civil society, or the “public sphere,” is the place where conflicts are adjudicated and rights protected—and, more importantly, that it is the place from which no one is excluded or labeled as an outsider, as barbaric, defiled, *mukze*. (This is of course an ideal that few if any societies, from the Greek *polis* to the American urban South, with their varieties of slaves and second-class citizens, have ever achieved, but it is at least a desideratum.)

This may seem to go against common sense; Jews, after all, like other minorities, have tended to thrive in urban contexts. Although there were Jews who joined or initiated farming communities or settled in small towns in America or western Europe, the vast majority of immigrants from the cities of Vilna, Warsaw, Odessa, as well as from the shtetlach of Poland, Lithuania, Romania, etc., made their homes in metropolises like the Chicago that Carl Sandburg was celebrating as the “stormy, husky, brawling ... Hog Butcher for the World ... City of the Big Shoulders ... City with lifted head singing / So proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning.”¹⁹ Why, then, in our nostalgic mode, do we often appear so uncomfortable with the heterogeneity of urban space? Why, to take a contemporary local example, does a Hebrew writer like Aharon Appelfeld, who grew up in cosmopolitan Czernowitz, in the Bukovina region of Romania, keep retreating, especially in his later work, to the *kefar*—usually a remote village in the Carpathian mountains—where Jews are connected organically to the land, to each other, and to God, while the contact with goyim is minimized and externalized?²⁰

18. See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

19. Carl Sandburg, “Chicago,” in *Chicago Poems* (New York: Holt, 1916). <http://www.bartleby.com/165/1.html>. Even before what has been called the “spatial” turn in sociology and cultural studies, there were many influential studies of linguistic and cultural polyphony in urban literature and specifically urban Jewish literature, including Murray Baumgarten, *City Scriptures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); and Hana Wirth-Nesher’s *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), followed by her *Call It English: The Languages of American Jewish Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). Alfred Kazin’s memoir, *A Walker in the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), generated, among other studies, a fascinating essay by Michael Cowan, “Walkers in the Street: American Writers and the Modern City,” *Prospects* 6 (Fall 1981): 281–311.

20. Appelfeld’s novel *Mayim 'adirim* (Great waters, 2011) is quite explicitly a “village story, with the fragrance of the soil, and *To the Land of the Cattails* (1986) is a novel that traces the return from city to village,” writes Elhanan Diler, who wrote a master’s thesis on the complex relation between autobiography and fiction in two of Appelfeld’s narratives (private communication). See

Although one is hard put to find irony in Appelfeld's renderings, the nostalgic gaze is often a much more complex one, and far from unidirectional. Walter Benjamin's rendering of Paul Klee's "Angel of History," whose head faces the "wreckage" of the past as his body moves inexorably into the future, is an example of what Svetlana Boym, in her study of nostalgia, calls the "reflective minds suspicious of the retrospective gaze ... a hybrid tradition of impure [or 'critical'] modernity" with its "temporal ambivalence and cultural contradictions."²¹ One can see this complexity in recent visual renditions of the *kefar*—the kibbutz, the moshav, or the village—in Israeli art; in the paintings of Elie Shamir and the photography of Adi Nes, the viewer is beckoned into a nostalgic gaze that is then undermined through irony and even a hint of the grotesque.²²

All of this brings me, finally, to (back to) Jerusalem and to my main argument, which is that this city, the ultimate object of collective nostalgia, has not decided (not in our time, but maybe never) whether it is a *city* or a *shtetl*. And here the literary imagination can, I believe, have either dire or liberating consequences for the political and ethical *praxis* in this space. The reason is fairly simple: *life as it is imagined in the village carries virtually no political responsibility*.

Nostalgia was accorded the status of a medical malady in the seventeenth century. Boym says that to the best of her knowledge, the "medical diagnosis of nostalgia survived in the 20th century in one country only—Israel. (It is unclear whether this reflects a persistent yearning for the promised land or for the diasporic homelands left behind.)"²³ I submit that it is for both—and that they are, essentially, the same thing: whether or not the "Jerusalem syndrome" is consensually

Diler, "Ha-sippur ve-ha-hayim: *Layish ve-Sippur hayim ke-'oto/otobiographiyah/graphiyah*" (MA thesis, Hebrew University, 2009).

21. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 29–31.

22. Israeli writer Yitzhak Ben-Ner writes with full nostalgia and pathos about the work of Elie Shamir, while hinting at the lurking darkness and revealing the constructed nature of the enterprise and its dystopic realities: "For me, Elie's work on and about our village preserves, beyond the sense of doom, or fear of it, everything that I seek in a homeland village: beauty, peacefulness, different scents, arms open to embrace and a shady green path leading me, the old man and the child, even in my contemporary writing, into the depths of the meaningful, exciting experience of homecoming, after so many generations.... I keep asking myself in desperation: how will this goodness be preserved? I want to protect this green tranquil island of industry, justice, understanding, companionship, and quiet love, which does not erupt in tedious words like I do in my love. How shall I protect it from the wickedness of the world beyond its circle—from insidious intrigues, incipient evil, and dissatisfied, irritable, and perverse bad temper? I see our sons returning from the army; the serenity that once veiled their eyes slowly becomes doubt, disquiet, tremors of confusion and uncertainty. The world is breaking through the flimsy defenses of village life. They are no longer the same boys; they are no longer boys at all. They mature too quickly and no longer have confidence in what was or what will be. The world outside has planted doubt, anxiety and unease in them. Tel Aviv, February 2009." <http://english.elieshamir.co.il/Articles/2009-06-29-19-53-40> (From *Rustic Sunset & Other Stories*, trans. Robert Whitehill [Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998]); <http://english.elieshamir.co.il/Articles/2009-06-29-13-16-37>.

23. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, 7, 6.

defined as a malady, in the popular and the literary imagination, the diasporic homeland and the Promised Land, in their distilled (Ashkenazic) form as the shtetl and as Jerusalem, become a *palimpsest of nostalgia*.²⁴

JERUSALEM ≠ TEL AVIV

While Israeli cities like Tel Aviv and Haifa have a history similar to that of Chicago, Paris, Dublin, or Buenos Aires, as inscribed by writers from Baudelaire and Whitman through Joyce, Benjamin, Sandburg, and Bellow to Meir Wieseltier, Yaakov Shabtai, Yehoshua Kenaz, Dahlia Ravikovitch, and Orly Castel-Blum,²⁵ Jerusalem remains just outside the clashing interface of romanticism and modernism, of urban choruses and cacophonies, encounters and solitudes. The Jerusalem/Tel Aviv dichotomy is more or less a given in Israeli discourse and has been refined as object of scholarship over the past few decades.²⁶

24. I am fully aware of the Ashkenazic bias in my remarks, and can easily imagine an alternative trajectory using a Mizrahi model of village life, and writers like Dan Benaya-Seri to illustrate it. Or, in the words of Jonathan Boyarin, “is rhetorical yearning for lost Cordoba (very much a heterogeneous late-medieval city!) ‘political’? Perhaps yes, and the argument would be well-served by contrasting nostalgia for conceived wholly-Jewish places (whether in Ashkenaz or elsewhere) to nostalgia for conceived past places of heterogeneity (Cordoba, Salonika).” And, to expand this reach even further, we might recall how a Palestinian Israeli writer like Anton Shammas demonstrates in *Arabesques* (Hebrew, 1986) a more complex, or in Boym’s terms “hybrid,” form of nostalgia for village life along with the heterogeneous encounters within the city, with its like-minded inhabitants as well as its inimical others. *Arabesques*, trans. Vivian Eden (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). What is important to me here is the template.

25. Dublin might be the closest to Jerusalem in terms of size, intimacy, ancient/modern linguistic surges, and political strife—if not the same historical depth—but in *The Dubliners* and *Ulysses*, Joyce manages to preserve the intimacy while foregrounding the urban cacophony of the “public square.” For a discussion of the poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch, see Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, *Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009). For a study of the prose of Yaakov Shabtai, see Hana Soker-Shwager, *Maḥashef ha-shevet mi-me’ onot ’ovdim: Yaakov Shabtai ba-tarbut ha-yisra’elit* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uḥad, 2007); for a study of the fiction of Yehoshua Kenaz, see Naama Tsaal, *Hem dibru bi-leshonam: Ha-po’etikah shel Yehoshua Kenaz* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2016). For an analysis of the wild prose of Orly Castel-Blum, see Karen Grumbach, who focuses on the urban setting in Castel-Blum’s novel, *Dolly City*: “Violence reigns in her city. And a strange city it is: dystopic, fantastic, phantasmagoric, nightmarish—Dolly City is unlike any other setting in Hebrew literature. At once Tel Aviv and every other city in the world, *Dolly City* recalls the alienating metropolis that is by now a familiar setting of modernist writing, at the same time adding terrifying new features to this landscape.” <http://www.dalkeyarchive.com/book/?fa=customcontent&GCOI=15647100218840&extrasfile=424FD8D9-1D09-67E0-43146B2D3595C513.html>.

26. From its inception, Tel Aviv was *not* Jerusalem. Much interesting work has been done in the past few decades on the spatial divide between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, dating back to the time when what came to be known as the “White City” wasn’t more than a few sand dunes outside Jaffa and a dream of something radically new. For an overview of the “spatial turn” and its effect on scholarship around Tel Aviv, see Barbara Mann, “Tel Aviv after 100: Notes toward a New Cultural History,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 93–110; see also her *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space* (Stanford, CA: Stanford

Designated even in biblical texts as a city or *'ir*, seat of both human and divine sovereignty from the days of King David, Jerusalem in its earliest incarnations is also gendered, like many cities in the ancient Near East. Elaine R. Follis compares Jerusalem to Athens, as both are more or less concurrently designated in the sixth to fifth centuries BCE as “divinely favored, the centers of their respective civilizations, close to the heart of the God of heaven,” even “regarded in figurative language as the daughter of that high god.”²⁷ So when destruction comes, it is easy to fall into tropes that personify female grief but also depravity. “‘Eikhah yashvah badad ha-‘ir rabati ‘am, hayetah ke-’almanah.” “How does the City sit solitary, that was full of people! How is she become like a widow,” is the way the book of Lamentations opens, and we visualize Jerusalem through Rembrandt’s eyes, her ruined buildings smoldering in the background as the prophet Jeremiah sits desolate in the foreground with his discarded instruments of prophecy scattered around him. But the text ascribed to Jeremiah is actually a highly graphic poetic dialogue between the poet/prophet and personified Jerusalem; unlike Rembrandt’s figure with his back turned to the destruction, this Jeremiah faces the city and ventriloquizes her speech. Represented as a sinful, deprived woman abandoned by her lovers, she also invokes the women who live within her “skirts” (1:9) as crazed with hunger, driven to devouring their own children (2:20; 3:10).

The male hegemony and intimacy that come with the engendered topos of Jerusalem have been written about extensively, by myself and others, but here I want to stress the ongoing political *and poetic* resistance in this city to the processes that have elsewhere made the modern urban context amenable to a plurality of others and otherness.

Although it is consistent with past iterations that modern Jerusalem, even (especially) before 1948 and after 1967, is represented in Israeli literature not so much in metropolitan terms as within the proprietary lexicon of “sacred space,”²⁸ there has been pushback from several prominent modern writers. Amos Oz in his early fiction and A. B. Yehoshua in his late novels have acknowledged Jerusalem as a quasi-political realm—though always haunted by specters of mythical others such as the Arab twins in *My Michael* (Hebrew, 1968) or the Arab/Jewish fight to the death on the Temple Mount in *Mr. Mani* (Hebrew, 1990). David Grossman and Haim Beer would refine these juxtapositions by exploring the ethnic neighborhoods of Jerusalem in the early years of statehood; later, they managed to provide ironic distance and peripheral or subterranean safe havens

University Press, 2006), as well as her *Space and Place in Jewish Studies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

27. Elaine Follis, “The Holy City as Daughter,” in *Directions in Biblical Poetry* (Sheffield, UK: ISOT, 1987), 173–84.

28. It is important not to forget that between 1948 and 1967, when East Jerusalem and the Temple Mount were out of sight and out of grasp, the messianic fervor that would take hold of Israeli politics after the Six Day War was dormant. See on this DeKoven Ezrahi, <https://profession.commons.mla.org/2016/07/13/literary-archaeology-at-the-temple-mountain-recovering-the-comic-version-of-the-sacrifice-of-isaac/>.

from the suffocating clash of religious claims—while continuing to probe the insanity at the core.²⁹

The poet Zelda Mishkovsky (“Zelda”), scion of an illustrious rabbinic family who lived much of her adult life in a tiny Jerusalem apartment, managed to escape the political pull of the sacred center by sanctifying space itself, combining the language of Hebrew mysticism with an Emily Dickinsonian regard for nature as purveyor of sanctity: “The moon is teaching Torah.”³⁰ Projecting away from the claustrophobia of a city ringed by walls and mountains, she imagines the seafarers and those who live on the seashore as porous to the wind and as able to “see eye to eye / the work of God / and sense His being / without our dividers and our diversions,” unfettered as they are “between the walls of the house, / between the walls of the street, / between the walls of the city / between the walls / of the mountains.”³¹

A number of poets and popular performers, from Yehuda Amichai to Yonatan Blumenfeld, created their own porous spaces in post-67 Jerusalem through ironic constructions and juxtapositions.³² Yet no voice was more prominent in the twentieth century than that of the writer who most consistently exhibited the problematics of representation of the city-that-is-not-a-city—the only author in the Hebrew language to have won the Nobel Prize, the quintessential citizen and storyteller of Jerusalem and arguably the greatest prose writer of modern Israel: S. Y. Agnon.

THROUGH AGNON’S LOOKING GLASS: BUCZACZ AND JERUSALEM

Like the author himself, Agnon’s narrator often assumes that the layers of Hebrew propriety over Jerusalem create a direct line between himself and his Levite ancestors who chanted their psalms on the steps of the temple. Agnon articulated this as an autobiographical “fact” in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, with the hubris that attends claims to ancestral privilege tempered by the humility of being only the latest link in the chain of transmission and having to transform sublime poetry into prosaic lines:

29. See David Grossman, *See Under: Love* (Hebrew, 1986), *The Zigzag Kid* (Hebrew, 1994), and *Someone to Run With* (Hebrew, 2000). And see Haim Beer, *Feathers* (Hebrew, 1979), and *The Time of Trimming* (Hebrew, 1987).

30. “Ha-yareah melamed Torah” or, in Marcia Falk’s translation, “The Moon Is Teaching Bible.” *The Specular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda* (Jerusalem: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 80–1.

31. “Ba-laylah ha-hu,” in *Shire Zelda* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uhad, 1979), 13–14, my translation. See also Leah Goldberg’s iconic poem, “Tel Aviv: 1935,” for a version of Tel Aviv as cosmopolitan and open to the horizon of metropolitan memories. http://www.kibutz-poalim.co.il/tel_aviv1935.

32. The most revealing and exhaustive exploration of Amichai’s poetics is Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016); for a study of Amichai’s poetics in relation to Jerusalem and the sacred center, see DeKoven Ezrahi, “Yehuda Amichai: Paytan shel ha-yomyom” (Yehuda Amichai: Poet of the quotidian), *Mikan* 14 (Spring 2014): 143–67. For a performance of Blumenfeld at a poetry slam, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBDF-IfNBuA>. And see also the Jerusalem poetry of Admiel Kosman.

In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.³³

Agnon ordained himself both recipient and conduit of this poetic tradition, albeit rendered in the default medium of prose. But the absence of a temple that renders Levite activity as a set of surrogates also liberates the writer to exercise privileges developed in two thousand years of diasporic creativity in diasporic spaces—even, it turns out, in Jerusalem.

Although he lived into the era of Jewish sovereignty, and long enough to see the city reunited with its sacred center (he died in 1970), Agnon largely avoided ethical-political discourse and dilemmas by rendering Jerusalem a version of that space where Jews may have been a majority but exercised no hegemony, thus eliding the points of inevitable friction between ethnic self and Other in the urban marketplace of ideas, of civic and commercial encounters. Like the imagined space of the shtetl, his Jerusalem is more or less devoid of Others, Christian or Muslim. When they do appear, it is as generic intruders: the British as more or less benign rulers, the “Arabs” as invaders.

The shtetlization of Jerusalem appears in Agnon’s writing before 1948. In *Tmol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*), published in 1945–46, the political dimension is represented satirically within the municipal bounds of Jaffa-Tel Aviv, where, in cafes and street corners, Zionist debates and public figures are showcased and parodied. That is, Tel Aviv, as burgeoning urban center, supports all the encounters and cacophonies of the modern city. There are in this weighty novel scathing representations of cultic life and internecine clashes in the religious districts of Jerusalem as well, and most critics regard Isaac Kumer’s decision to marry the modest Shifra and live in Me’ah She’arim as a retreat into that benighted world. My reading, however, parses Isaac’s retreat as different in kind—as, essentially, a return to the shtetl he left behind when he embarked on his Zionist journey and an attempt to make amends for having abandoned his father and his siblings to their poverty. But even more than that, it is a retreat into the Edenic place (his private *kedem*) identified with his mother, the primordial object of his nostalgia and isomorphic with Jerusalem in her personified form as the ultimate maternal figure.³⁴

33. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html.

34. For a more detailed exploration of these subjects, see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “Sentient Dogs, Liberated Rams, and Talking Asses: Agnon’s Biblical Zoo—or Rereading *Tmol shilshom*,” *AJS Review* 28, no. 1 (April 2004): 105–35.

Isaac finds a room and family comforts in the home of a woodcarver who “carves his figures and engraves images of Jerusalem on them and inscribes on them the name of Jerusalem,” and then exports these simulacra of the Holy City “all over the Diaspora.” Isaac sits in his adopted home and holds one of the woodcarver’s children on his lap, imagining his own siblings: “Isaac ponders to himself, My father and my brothers and my sisters live in Diaspora and I dwell in Jerusalem. Isaac looks all around, Am I really in Jerusalem? And in his mind’s eye emerges a host of early visions he had envisioned when he was in Diaspora. And two loves, the love of Jerusalem in the vision and the love of Jerusalem in reality, come and mate and give birth to a new love, which has some of the former and some of the latter.”³⁵ Jerusalem and the vision of Jerusalem entertained in the shtetl have “mated,” merged, in Isaac’s mind into that palimpsest of nostalgia I referred to earlier. The shtetl is not only the source of such dreams but also the simulacrum of Jerusalem—and, in the endless cyclical move of the nostalgic mind and diasporic practice, the souvenir simulacra of Jerusalem, of its holy places, made in *Jerusalem*, find their way back to the shtetl.

At the end of *'Oreah natah la-lun (A Guest for the Night)*, published six years earlier, on the eve of World War II but reflecting the ravages of World War I, the narrator peers through the keyhole as he prepares to leave the town of Shibush, the fictional version of Agnon’s birthplace, Buczacz. The lost world, encompassed within the orb of his eye, will be redeemed when the key is brought to Jerusalem and the shtetl itself implicitly restored. In the novella *Ha-siman (The Sign)*, first published in 1944, the narrator receives the news that his town (explicitly identified now as Buczacz) has been destroyed; it is, therefore, up to him to reconstitute his hometown within the confines of the beit midrash where he sits in Jerusalem: “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.”³⁶ This elegiac vision recurs in many of Agnon’s narratives written after 1948. It reflects not only his nostalgic penchant vis-à-vis his birthplace, which occludes the cosmopolitan aspects of Buczacz itself as well as the many years he spent in the metropolises of Berlin and Bad Homburg. Even more consequentially, this gaze reflects Agnon’s reluctance to engage the political realities and ethical challenges of contemporary Jerusalem.

That neither the author nor his various narrators were particularly interested in affairs of state, in statecraft, or in “civil society” in Jerusalem, we have already seen with reference to *Tmol shilshom*. But there is, eventually, the more tricky matter of borders and sovereignty. The armistice lines of 1948 established at

35. *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 557.

36. “Ha-siman,” trans. Arthur Green as “The Sign,” rpt. in Agnon, *A City in Its Fullness*, ed. Alan Mintz and Jeffrey Saks (New Milford, CT: Toby, 2016), 20–21. For an analysis of “A Guest for the Night,” “The Sign,” and the posthumously published story “Kisuy ha-dam” (Covering the blood), see Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “Agnon before and after,” *Prooftexts* 2, no. 1 (January 1982): 78–94.



Figure 1.

Agnon's Buczacz: the Great Synagogue and Beit Midrash. Colorized by the S. Y. Agnon Library at the Toby Press and used by permission.

least the *idea* of partition, of political and municipal boundaries in Jerusalem without Israeli hegemony over East Jerusalem and its holy sites—and of a resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. One way of avoiding this geopolitical challenge—and, I would say, the challenge of political sovereignty generally—is by placing narrated events in pre-48 Jerusalem, which Agnon does fairly consistently in narratives written between 1948 and 1967—often involving anachronisms that strain credibility. Elsewhere, I have explored such narratives as “Tehilah,” “‘Ido ve-‘Enam,” the novel *Shirah*, and the posthumously published “Li-fenim min ha-ḥomah,” and “Kisuy ha-dam”—and the historical problems that are circumvented by narrative sleight of hand; I will only allude to them here in order to highlight common threads in Agnon's representation of Jerusalem as anachronistic in time and diasporic in space. In these fictions, Jerusalem is “a protean whole that contains all its synecdoches—and is always larger than the sum of its parts—while remaining portable for ritualistic and poetic purposes.”³⁷

Generally speaking, political upheavals in the modern era do not determine Agnon's fictional timelines, and even the Holocaust and the birth of the State of

37. Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “S. Y. Agnon's Jerusalem: Before and after 1948,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society*, n.s., 18, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 140. In many respects the present essay is a continuation of that discussion. And for more general discussions of “diasporic” vs. sacred space, see DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage*.



Figure 2.
Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem. Courtesy of Jan Kuehne.

Israel are inscribed less as events than as continuous with processes already in place. At times this strains credibility considerably, as in the enigmatic story “*Li-fenim min ha-ḥomah*” (Within the walls), which traces the wanderings of two characters in the Old City of Jerusalem after 1948 and before 1967—when such access would have been impossible to Jews; when he finally acknowledges the hermeneutic problem he has created, the narrator says that he and his companion must have entered a dreamscape where “time was as it should be” and the “land was still whole and Jerusalem was not divided.”³⁸

Thus the problem of sovereignty is rendered irrelevant to Agnon’s Jerusalem; if anything, it is a detraction or distraction from “time as it should be” and the presumed literary license to enter such precincts.

Anachronism, like nostalgia, is a common reflex binding Jewish exilic habitations with Jerusalem. Moving back and forth in time, a practice sanctioned by the talmudic argument that “there is no early or late in the Bible,” is matched by the diasporic practice of moving back and forth in space, of creating simulacra of the temple, its practices and accouterments.

38. “*Li-fenim min ha-ḥomah*,” in *Li-fenim min ha-ḥomah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1975), 49, my translation.

NOSTALGIA, ANACHRONISM, AND MIMESIS

Agnon's representations of Jerusalem are, then, variations on several impulses bred in the Diaspora, all of which are connected with messianic projection and the elasticity of time and space: the nostalgic turn, the anachronistic reflex, and mimetic practice. Although they would seem to feed into either political messianism and/or secular forms of political utopia, it is precisely these that Agnon avoids.

Agnon's tradition-saturated yearning for proximity to the sacred is accompanied by a built-in eschatological indifference to national boundaries and the earthly exercise of power. His ambivalence towards that very power seems mitigated by certain public acts, such as his signing the Manifesto of the Movement for the Greater Israel after 1967 and composing the Prayer for Peace, which includes a reference to the State of Israel as "the beginning of our redemption"—though both acts, when scrutinized, were tempered by Agnon's abiding suspicion of Jewish hegemony.³⁹

There remain at least two other texts in the Agnon canon that would seem to contradict my claims that the shtetl is paradigmatic Jewish space, and that the two focal points of Agnon's life and writing, Buczacz and Jerusalem, reflect each other in their relative isolation and carefully constructed homogeneity: *'Ir u-melo'ah* (*A City in Its Fullness*) and *Perakim le-sefer ha-medinah* (*The Orange Peel and Other Satires*). Both collections of stories have recently been published in English translation, edited and introduced by Jeffrey Saks and Alan Mintz. I would argue that close scrutiny reveals, however, that these texts also reflect the nostalgia, anachronism, and mimesis that are at the heart of Agnon's fictional project.

In his foreword to the translated volume of the posthumously published collection of stories of Buczacz, *A City in Its Fullness*, Mintz reinforces the prevailing practice of referring to Buczacz as a shtetl; he traces three stages in the

39. As I argued in "S. Y. Agnon's Jerusalem," "although Agnon agreed to write the official prayer for peace (*Tefilah li-shelom ha-medina*) for the newly constituted State, one suspects that he did it more for the satisfaction of being inducted as one of Israel's *paytanim*, those poets who grace the prayer books of the generations, than for any political relevance" (140). For an account of Agnon's contacts with various religious and political leaders about this text, see Dan Laor, *Haye Agnon: Biyographyah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998), 406–8. And see Laor's report that Agnon "deliberately refrained from approaching the stones of the Kotel" after 1967, which could be understood either as reverence for or ambivalence about proximity to the sacred. *Ibid.*, 611. Hillel Cohen points out that Agnon's ambivalence towards political claims to the Temple Mount came as early as the riots of 1929: "The writer S. Y. Agnon, who was close to Rabbi Kook, was *not* one of those who inflamed the situation, although he certainly did not try to calm things down. After the riots erupted, Agnon felt he had made a terrible mistake" in not trying to assuage the nationalist fervor. "When I attended the Va'ad Leumi (Jewish National Council) plenum for the first and last time in my life," he wrote to prominent Reform Rabbi Judah Leon Magnes, "and I observed the heroism bug that had infected the heroic speakers, I wanted to yell out: lay your hands off this. But by nature I am the reticent type and every day I have regretted not having stood in the breach." <http://972mag.com/what-the-1929-palestine-riots-teach-us-about-todays-violence/112830/>. I have edited the English translation somewhat. For the source of Agnon's ambivalence and even remorse, see his letter to Magnes in *Me-'azmi 'el 'azmi* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976), 144.



Figure 3.

Buczacz town hall. <http://faqindecor.com/>. Used by permission.

representation of the Ashkenazic town in modern Hebrew literature: in early fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, “the shtetl had been figured as a place of spiritual exhaustion and communal venality.” After the Shoah, however, “the vector of judgment was reversed in the abundance of memorial volumes for destroyed communities, which tended to present an idealized picture of a vanished way of life.” What Agnon added to this over decades of compiling the profile of his hometown was, Mintz argues, “a variegated vitality bubbling up from an organically Jewish life ... [constituting a project with] epic

ambitions.” These stories spanned the period from the middle of the seventeenth to the middle of the nineteenth century, before processes of modernization and nationalism would combine to “erode[] the authority that the Torah and the community exerted on the everyday lives of Jews.”⁴⁰

The very fact that the Hebrew title is “*‘Ir u-melo’ah*,”—“A City in Its Fullness”—rather than *‘ayarah*, which would denote the shtetl and small-town Jewish life, is itself telling, and justifies the common critical eliding of these terms. “I am building a city,” Agnon wrote to Baruch Kurzweil in reference to this text.⁴¹ City or town? Metropolis or shtetl? Indeed, the elision is widespread: Buczacz, like Ostrovtsé, is referred to by former Jewish inhabitants on the “virtual shtetl” section of the website of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw interchangeably and unselfconsciously as *unzer shtot* (our city) and *unzer shtetl* (our shtetl).⁴² Before the Shoah, Buczacz had around 15,000 inhabitants, about half of whom were Jews. “The city [sic] was Buczacz, and it was located very far from Zion in both time and place,” continues Mintz.⁴³ I am arguing that, like many comparable places in many other imaginative evocations, this city is not only not “far from Jerusalem”—it is actually often synonymous with Jerusalem/Zion. But in order to maintain the anachronistic premise of homogeneity without straining credibility to its limit, Agnon had indeed to retreat to a premodern template—or, as in the case of *Guest for the Night* and “The Sign,” to a post-catastrophe fantasy of restoring the shtetl in Jerusalem.⁴⁴

The final counterexample would seem to be *Perakim le-sefer ha-medinah* (Chapters from the book of the state), published in English as *The Orange Peel*, after the title of one of its stories; it is a collection of political satires that reflect a number of institutions of *ha-medinah* (the state) without giving it a name or specific geopolitical status—although it is generally assumed that the reference is to the Israeli state-in-the-making. The text comprises chapters written and published separately in the early 1940s, to which an introduction and last chapter were added

40. Mintz, foreword to S. Y. Agnon, *A City in Its Fullness*, xvi.

41. Mintz, foreword to *A City in Its Fullness*, xx.

42. See <http://www.sztefl.org.pl/en/city/buczacz>. See the elision between city and shtetl in Y. L. Peretz’s Hebrew poem “Shtetl,” or “Ho-‘ir ha-ketanoh.” Translated in Finkin, *An Inch or Two of Time*, 185–194. For comprehensive studies of Buczacz, see Omer Bartov, “The Voice of Your Brother’s Blood: Buczacz, Biography of a Town,” in *Jewish Histories of the Holocaust: New Transnational Approaches*, ed. N. Goda (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 105–34; and his forthcoming volume by the same title, *The Voice of Your Brother’s Blood: Buczacz, Biography of a Town* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017).

43. Mintz, foreword to *A City in Its Fullness*, xx.

44. It is telling that Saks and Mintz decided to introduce the volume *A City in Its Fullness* with the story “The Sign” which had, as we noted, already appeared first in 1944 and then in the 1962 collection *Ha-‘esh ve-ha-‘ezim* (*A City in Its Fullness*, 1–30). The story not only reinforces the anachronistic, elegiac version of the town/city of his birth, which characterizes so many of Agnon’s stories of Buczacz, and of Jerusalem—but, like *Guest for the Night*, presupposes the resurrection of the one in the other.

in 1950 when the text was published as a whole.⁴⁵ (It may be that the Kaddish for the fallen at the end of the text was also added in order to mitigate the satiric nature of the stories themselves.)⁴⁶

What is most significant about these stories, when compared to the satires familiar to Western readers from Aristophanes through Swift, and to Yiddish and Hebrew readers from S. Y. Abramovitch through Hanoch Levin, is that they are not exercises in antiutopian social-political vision; that is, one cannot derive the “utopia” by inverting the dystopic descriptions of human foibles. There is messianism here, but it is not political messianism. One might argue, as Hannan Hever does, that the principle of “deferred messianism” is so central to Agnon’s theological vision that Zionist institutions and politicians cannot even approximate it.⁴⁷ I would go even further to argue that for this writer the default “utopia” exists only in the “mind of God” and is therefore not only deferred but also inscrutable. Adumbrated in the opening paragraph of his earliest, “signature” story, “‘Agunot,’”⁴⁸ the vision of a perfect world as a perfectly woven prayer shawl gives way to the imperfect human world that commences when one thread inevitably comes loose—Agnon’s own poetic version of Eden (*kedem*) lost. With perhaps only one exception, Agnon avoids any vision of sustained harmonious human coexistence in historical-political time: the exception is the lost world under the benign aegis of Emperor Franz-Josef, as recalled in a number of fictional and nonfictional passages.⁴⁹

45. *Samukh ve-nireh*, first published in 1950 (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1971), 250–89. English: *The Orange Peel and Other Satires* (including all the stories from *Perakim le-sefer ha-medinah*), trans. and foreword by Jeffrey Saks (New Milford, CT: Toby, 2016).

46. Laor relates that Agnon was accused of “nihilism” vis-à-vis the new state in his *Perakim le-sefer ha-medinah*. Laor, *Haye Agnon*, 433. It is possible, therefore, that the Kaddish for the fallen at the end of the text was added to make some amends, so close to the War of 1948, for the satiric texture of the prose. *The Orange Peel and Other Satires*, 171–73.

47. See Hannan Hever, “‘Perakim le-sefer ha-medinah’ me-’et Shay Agnon,” *Mikan* 14 (March 2014): 168–99.

48. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman call “‘Agunot’ Agnon’s ‘signature story.’” Introduction to *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*, by S. Y. Agnon (New York: Knopf, 1995), 3–34.

49. Arguably the most dramatic instance of the elegiac version of the world under the protection of Franz Josef comes in *Tmol shilshom*, as Isaac Kumer is on the train traveling through the imperial realm en route to Palestine: “And so Isaac sits and rides through the realm of Austria, that same Austria that rules over eighteen states, and twelve nations are subject to it. One and the same law for the Jews and for the people of the land, their well-being is our well-being, for the Emperor is a Gracious King, he protects all who take shelter with him, Jew and non-Jew alike. Her earth is lush and fertile and the produce of her land is greater than the needs of her inhabitants. . . .” *Only Yesterday*, 20.

And see Agnon’s “Apologia” at the end of the volume *Ha-’esh ve-ha-’ezim* (which includes the story “Ha-siman”)—where the author recalls the benign Galician world under the protection of the “Austrian Empire” and before “*Tisha be-av tar’ad* [August, 1914], when the Great War began,” out of which have come all our “subsequent disasters”: ספר תכלית המעשים מיועד היה לספר מעשי אחינו שבגליציה בזמן שהיו שריים בצלה של מלכות אוסטריה ומעין מנוחת שלום היתה שם עד לאותו תשעה באב שנת תרע”ד שהתחילה בו המלחמה הגדולה שממנה התחילה הפורענות שמהלכת על כל הדורות ובכל הארצות עד שירחם המרחם על עולמו ויאמר לצרותינו די. *Ha-’esh ve-ha-’ezim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962), 336.

What is significant here, of course, is that Agnon doesn’t locate the beginning of the apocalyptic

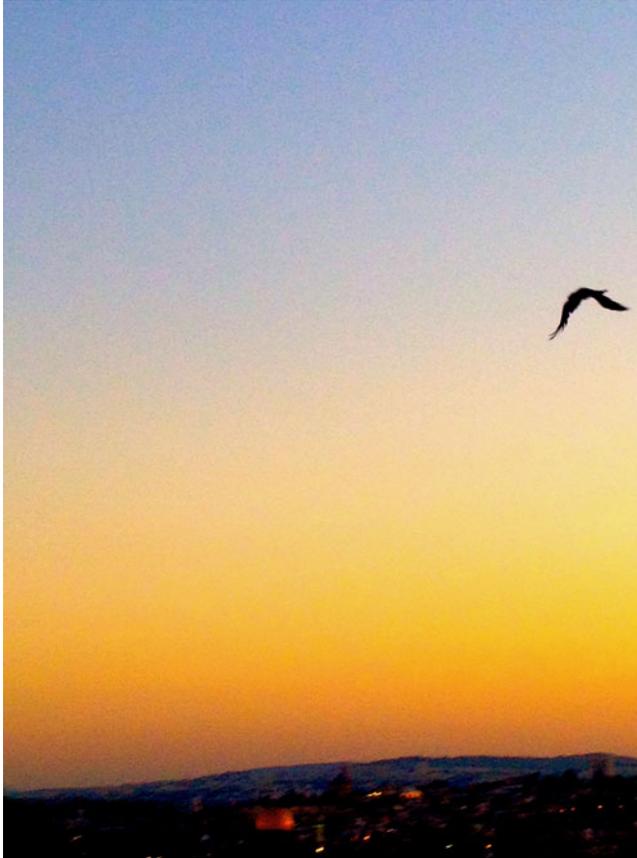


Figure 4.
Jerusalem's Old City from Mt. Scopus. Courtesy of Jan Kuehne.

So one can conclude that although Agnon's satire lies in the realm of inevitable human imperfection, including but not limited to the imperfection of Jewish politics and the Jewish state, his representations of the Jewish town—Buczacz or Jerusalem—managed to create a shield against the incursions of politics and power. That is, through whatever poetic acrobatics, Agnon enlarged upon the dispensation that Jews might have enjoyed or imagined that they enjoyed in their

era in the Shoah or in World War II, nor does he see a utopia in any blueprint of Jewish sovereignty; it is the reign of Franz Josef that comes close to the heavenly blueprint whose emblem in his oeuvre is the divine prayer shawl, and it is the tsar's death that constitutes the loose thread.

small towns from grappling with the ethical dilemmas that come with political sovereignty and urban cacophonies.

There is surely a danger in resting on Agnon as synecdoche for Jewish Israeli discourse generally—particularly since, as we have seen, there are other writers engaged in more complex encounters; and because Agnon himself struggled more than is commonly acknowledged with the dangers of mixing religion with power anywhere, and went to such lengths vis-à-vis Jewish sovereignty in the Holy City as to create significant problems of credibility in his own fiction. But if the “shtetlization” of Jerusalem in Israel’s most iconic writer seems to shield its inhabitants from the temptations, dangers, and opportunities of exercising or sharing sovereignty in multiethnic spaces, it also feeds the collective self-image of the city’s Jewish residents and diminishes the possibilities for political resolution. If and when the citizens of Jerusalem decide that theirs is a city and not a shtetl, we will all have come a long way towards solving one of the world’s most intractable political and human conflicts.

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