

WELL-HIDDEN TESTIMONY
A Study of "The Document" by S. Y. Agnon

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The article discusses an enigmatic story "The Document" (1932) from *The Book of Deeds*. It attempts to decipher the story by unfolding its various facets: the hidden meaning of the story's main scenes and their way of relating to one another; the ties between this story and other stories in *The Book of Deeds* ("Hefker" and "A Whole Loaf"); and the latent theme of the story, namely literary writing. The conclusion is that the early stories of Agnon's *Book of Deeds* (such as "The Document") might be perceived as a sort of a coded literary "diary," which accompanied Agnon's work in the early 1930s, setting forth his perplexity, inner struggle, and quest for right modes of writing.

Over the years, scholars and critics have persistently sought to decipher the enigmatic stories of *The Book of Deeds* by S. Y. Agnon. Some have attempted a single-principle approach aimed at embracing all of them. Y. Bahat explained these stories as following the mechanism of a dream;¹ A. Holtz saw them as "open parables";² B. Kurzweil, who as early as 1942 was the first to decipher an entire story of *The Book of Deeds* coherently by exposing latent, mostly Jewish symbols, suggested this approach as the key in reading the other stories in the book.³ All the experimental readings hold that these stories are to be perceived as non-realistic and should be read and interpreted accordingly.

Gershon Shaked distinguishes two sorts of non-realistic stories: those whose surface texture makes sense without penetration below it and those with a fairly thin texture, where the subtext makes sense of the text.⁴ Only a few of the twenty stories of *The Book of Deeds* are in the first group, in which the surface facts create a coherent and communicative sequence. Most belong to the second group, which are essentially non-communicative owing to their incoherence, the sharp breaks between their paragraphs and their high degree of non-causality and non-probability.

¹ Y. Bahat, "The Sentimental Dreamer," in S. Y. Agnon, *Hayim Hazzaz—Studies of Their Works* (Heb.; Haifa: Yovel, 1962), pp. 133–174.

² A. Holtz, "The Open Parable as a Key to *The Book of Deeds*," *Ha'sifrut* 4 (1973) 298–333 (Heb.).

³ B. Kurzweil, *Essays on S. Y. Agnon's Fiction* (Heb.; Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966).

⁴ G. Shaked, "Overt and Concealed in the Non-realistic Story," *Ha'sifrut* 3 (1971) 255–280 (Heb.); "Overt and Concealed in the Story," in *The Narrating Art of Agnon* (Heb.; Merchavya and Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1973), pp. 89–132.

Non-realistic stories differ from other genres of fiction in several characteristics. They are not set in definite geographical places or historical eras. Their plots do not develop causally or plausibly, and supernatural events may occur in them. The fictional world is presented elliptically and indistinctly. At times the narration locks onto seemingly marginal and trivial details, which become enormously inflated and distract attention from the main theme. Non-realistic stories create an impression of non-spontaneity and direct attention away from the reality-like world in them to the elements of the literary medium. Lastly, these stories tend to linguistic stylization rather than trying to imitate natural spoken language indicating some identifiable reality. All these characteristics are present in Agnon's story "The Document" in *The Book of Deeds*, although a "naive" reading can somewhat mislead the reader's perception of it.⁵

Time and place in the story are unidentifiable, and the plot is unacceptable in terms of cause and effect: the narrator (who is also the protagonist) presents himself at an office early in the morning, though his throat is sore and his whole body is aching. He hopes to settle his affairs quickly and return home, but instead he lingers there for three days and three nights. At first he is delayed because of his inability to approach the clerks: the dust in his throat prevents him from saying out loud what he has to say. He remains in this situation for two entire days. On the third day, when matters seem about to clear up, another difficulty arises: "something like conscience" stops him from declaring that he is a countryman of the new clerk. Meanwhile, in spite of his sore throat he smokes one cigarette after another. At this point he forgets what it was he went to the office for in the first place. In an unexplained and unexpected way, he meets a druggist whom he knew "before the war" and then a professor; the actions and very presence of these two in the office are not accounted for. In the end, the protagonist is pushed outside onto a "large balcony floating on endless ocean."

⁵ A. Band (*Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* [Berkeley and Los Angeles University: California Press, 1968], pp. 209–210) regards the story as dealing with a subject well known to Kafka's readers, the paralyzing effect of a bureaucratic society on the individual. In saying so, he treats the "surface" story as indeed representing the story's theme, although he compares it implicitly to Kafka's stories and even mentions its open ending as an indicator in the context of these stories. Still, towards the end of his discussion he again emphasizes the theme which he deems central: "The inhumane aspects of the bureaucratic society are emphasized dramatically by contrasting them to an over-sensitive narrator." N. N. Glatzer (*Twenty-one Stories, S. Y. Agnon*, ed. N. N. Glatzer [New York: Schocken Books, 1970], pp. 277–287) in his editorial postscript, likewise notes: "here the helpless individual, conscious of himself and his memories, aware of his surroundings, and there a mindless bureaucratic machine, moving automatically, blindly disregarding the petitioner" (p. 281).

This "plot" is obviously elliptical, the passages from one scene to another are in no way plausible, and much information is missing. In contrast to the omission of what seem to be important details, some trivial ones, such as the clock's hand moving slowly with a dead fly stuck to it or the over-detailed account of the narrator's illness, are greatly expanded.

The language of the story does not bring any natural spoken language to mind. It is stylized, allusive, mostly Mishnaic language, which can best be described as "Agnonic."

Stories of this kind are often referred to also as *meta-realistic*.⁶ Hillel Barzel, who also uses the term in his book, lists the following characteristics of meta-realistic fiction:⁷

- a) Excessive fictionality, breaking the boundaries between cause and effect by adding components which are mostly based on extreme fictionality.
- b) The excessive fictionality appears in symbolic or in allegorical forms, which represent a hidden essence whose meaning is to be sought outside the story.
- c) This underlying stratum is about a metaphysical entity. The unending discourse of the "upper" stratum with the underlying metaphysical stratum lends the story its meta-realistic character.
- d) The meta-realistic story leaves the reader puzzled.

However, Hillel Barzel's remarks characterizing meta-realistic writing do not suggest any concrete mechanism applicable to a process of deciphering stories like "The Document."

Interestingly, *The Book of Deeds* has never been discussed in a fully allegorical context, nor have its individual stories been interpreted systematically as allegories. By "allegory" we mean the literary mode extensively discussed by A. Fletcher, which seems to be closely relevant to our study.⁸ According to Uri Shoham, the long allegory (as opposed to the short apologue) is constructed as a dual-meaning symbolic act, a "quest" and a "combat"; it adheres to a ritual order, has a generative-demonic protagonist, and rests on a system (or set) of figurative-tropological images. All are entirely subordinated to a predetermined, single, central, concealed

⁶ The term was introduced into Hebrew literary criticism by Kurzweil, who borrowed the term F. Welch applied to Kafka's stories.

⁷ H. Barzel, *Meta-Realistic Hebrew Fiction* (Heb.; Ramat Gan: Massadah, 1974), pp. 11–23.

⁸ A. Fletcher, *Allegory, The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1964).

theme, which is the idea that operates the whole structure.⁹ The allegorical story is based on a teleological not a causal principle.

The characters are in fact abstractions of dominant qualities or essences which they are meant to portray. They are defined as generative, since they "produce" and "project," as it were, other characters, antagonistic or parallel in some way, who in fact are to be perceived as various inner aspects of the protagonist.¹⁰

Applied to a story like "The Document," the concept of Fletcher/Shoham allows it to be read differently from the ways suggested by earlier scholars who tried to decipher stories of this type in *The Book of Deeds*.

Although "The Document," which was published in 1932, is among the earliest stories of *The Book of Deeds*, it has attracted little attention by critics and scholars, and no coherent detailed interpretation of it has been presented so far. Except for one, scholars who have touched on this story concentrate on the first scenes.¹¹ They perceive the story as taking place in an office, but do not provide a satisfactory explanation for two prominent scenes in which the bizarre and sudden appearance of the druggist and the professor take place.

The reading suggested here tries to show that the key to deciphering the story lies on the one hand in discerning its various parts, and on the other in grasping how they interlock. To accomplish this, we must consider the signals transmitted by the story itself that disclose its latent and hidden significance. They are:

1. Polysemic words. Usually the "surface" story exploits only one meaning, the obvious one, leaving the rest to be uncovered.
2. Allusions which are purposely blurred to hide the immediate information they carry.
3. Connotations elicited by "overloaded" words.
4. Symbols originating in some other context which gain an additional and specific meaning in the story.

⁹ U. Shoham, *The Other Meaning: From the Allegorical Parable to the Para-realistic Story* (Heb.; Tel Aviv University: Katz Institute, 1982), p. 24.

¹⁰ U. Shoham, *The Other Meaning*, p. 29.

¹¹ See A. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*; N. Glatzer *Twenty-one Stories*; H. Barzel in *Between Agnon and Kafka—A Comparative Study* (Heb.; Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1972). In contrast to these scholars, A. G. Hoffman ("Inclusion and Exclusion: Three Stories" in *Between Exile and Return, S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* [New York: State University of New York Press, 1991], pp. 105–122) concentrates on the last part of the story as well as the first. But even she does not discuss the encounter with the druggist and omits other details of the story from her discussion.

5. Naming a character against a background of nameless characters.
6. Intra-textual allusions (to the author's other works).

To decipher the coded story, we shall carefully consider these signals, with application of Shoham's hypothesis on allegory. The third step will employ extra-literary materials to reveal the story's concealed significance.

First, the title: "The Document." The expectations aroused by this title seem to match the facts revealed at the beginning of the story: a person has to obtain a document for his relative. To do so, he rises early in the morning and presents himself at a gray office where he encounters several clerks busily writing in their ledgers. They ignore him, as they do all the other waiting people. The bureaucratic scene is quite familiar and evocative of similar scenes from other literary works.¹² The word "document" (*te'udah*) is perceived as meaning a piece of paper providing information or authorization. It seems perfectly related to the semantic field connected to the scene depicted. But in certain contexts the word has different meanings, such as "testimony," God's "written Testimony," "evidence"; it is also a term for the Torah and wisdom.¹³ Still other meanings are "mission," "designation," "aim," "purpose," and "task."¹⁴ According to the book of Ruth (4:7) this word also means "law," "order."¹⁵ Clearly, these meanings are related, directly or latently, both to the sacral and the secular world, which raises questions as to the "real" meaning intended by the title. Deeper reading of the story's bureaucratic process reveals other key words and terms, each with a quite surprising meaning different from the pseudo-neutral meaning in the "surface" story.

The word "chamber" (*lishkah*), for instance, which appears to mean "office," may in fact be read as an allusion to the Great Court which convened in the chamber of Hewn-Stone (*lishkat ha'gazit*) in the Temple of Jerusalem.¹⁶ This chamber was located in the middle of the Temple, and it

¹² This scene is the main detail on which Band relies when he mentions the resemblance between this story and Kafka's stories, where the bureaucratic setting has a prominent role. Nevertheless, in Kafka's stories—as well as here—this setting is not to be taken literally. Hillel Barzel also speaks of the "Kafkaesque character" of this scene (H. Barzel, *Between Agnon and Kafka*, p. 25), but the first to point out the resemblance between *The Book of Deeds* and Kafka's stories was Dor Saddam, as early as 1934. In a later essay (1958) he expresses his reservations about the extent to which Kafka's stories are able to account for the unique Agnonic phenomenon (see D. Saddam, *On S. Y. Agnon, Essays* [Heb.; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1967], pp. 29, 57).

¹³ See Isa 8:16.

¹⁴ See Ben-Yehuda, *Dictionary of Ancient and New Hebrew* (Jerusalem: Ben Yehuda, 1959).

¹⁵ See Even-Shoshan, *New Dictionary*, (Jerusalem: Kiriat-Sefer Ltd., 1992).

¹⁶ *m. Sanh.* 11:2.

is stated that "the chamber of Hewn-Stone is [situated] half in the sacred zone and half in the secular one" (*b. Yoma* 25a). Of the chambers "built in the sacred zone and open to the secular zone" it was said that "their inside is secular but their roofs are sacred" (*b. Pesah.* 86a), whereas "the chambers which are built in the secular zone and are open to the sacred zone—their inside is sacred" (*b. Yoma* 25a). These allusions thus focus on the seam between the sacral and the secular. Though not an unfamiliar theme in Agnon's works, it seems to be intimated and presented uniquely in our story.

The next signal transmitted by the text is the Officer in Charge (*ha'memuneh*). In the subtext this is to be understood as the title of the person appointed to observe and supervise rituals such as those in the Temple in Jerusalem.¹⁷ Here he is in charge of the "office," where "clerks" are also to be perceived as engaged in activities concerning sacred-religious matters, not bureaucratic-secular ones.

The clerks' ledgers, therefore, may allude to the following: "There are three ledgers: one of the thoroughly righteous, one of the very wicked, and one of the average" (*y. Roš Haš.* 57a). This citation draws attention to matters of introspection and of self-examination concerning religious obligations.

The phrase "parchments and ledgers" (*difteraot u'pinkesaot*) appears in the midrash.¹⁸ These items are mentioned as belonging to the craftsman, so that "he would know how to construct rooms." Metaphorically, "parchments and ledgers" may be manuals on doing things (such as *mitzvot*) in a certain manner. On the other hand, the builder could be understood as God the Creator, and these "parchments and ledgers" are His. The automatic writing of the clerks evokes the well-known mishnaic saying "The ledger is open and the hand is writing" (*m. 'Abot* 3:16), which relates metaphorically to matters of providence.

The cumulative connotations emerging from these allusions create a semantic field referring to the religious ties between a human being and a transcendental entity, or simply the ties between a man and God.

Given this, the narrator's rising early and presenting himself at the office should be considered not as a secular act in a bureaucratic context but as an act establishing contact between himself and the higher authority, which is represented by reductive metonymies. The narrator, for example,

¹⁷ *t. Seqal.* 2:14.

¹⁸ *Bereshit Raba* 1:1.

uses the word *kibbdah* (כיבדה), meaning "swept" as well as "honored," to describe the work of the cleaning woman in the office. This is his way of alluding to the real essence of the seemingly trivial office room.

Similarly, behind a seemingly "innocent" sentence like "Since I got up early and no one preceded me there, I was certain..." may be detected the words of Rabbi Eliezer: "I was never preceded by anyone in synagogue" (*b. Ta'an.* 67a), and the protagonist's ailment—"My throat was sore and my whole body was aching"—indicates a saying which mentions the malady as well as the remedy: "He who has a sore throat should study the Torah" (*b. Erub.* 54:1). The narrator's being choked (by dust) may attest to his unique situation, alluded to by the Talmudic saying "He who knows that thing and does not speak out shall choke" (*b. Mak.* 11a).

The following story seems to take shape from all the disclosed details: The protagonist must obtain a document for someone (*te'udah*—with a significance that is not yet revealed in the story) as a matter of life and death. He sets out even though he is not well, and his ailment can be healed—as implied—by reflecting on (or studying) the Torah. The venue for accomplishing his mission is a kind of combination of courtroom and synagogue. Those in charge there are busy writing and poring over books and ledgers. In the subtext this kind of work is weighing people's deeds and classifying them as righteous, wicked, and average. This sorting is done automatically: "The clerks sat, their faces bent over their papers and their pens writing automatically, incessantly." This scene has obvious traces of satire directed at these "clerks," who appear as a celestial court. The satirical effect is further enhanced in a related scene, where the clock "ticked gloomily away. Its hand moved slowly, and a dead fly was stuck to it and moved along with it." The scene clearly indicates dragging lifeless things from past times into the present, bringing to mind arguments against the stiffness of orthodox Judaism, which clings to ancient rules.

The protagonist fails to establish communication with the clerks and with the person in charge (*ha'memuneh*). He attributes this to the "bureaucracy's" strictness and dullness as well as to his own "illness," which prevents him from speaking out his request.

Up to this point, the signal system does not necessarily limit the story to one specific interpretation: Is it a story criticizing established, Orthodox Jewish religion, or is it seeking to expose the tension between the protagonist and the world of tradition, stressing his own weaknesses? Or is neither of these the real core of the story? These bureaucratic scenes are those dis-

cussed briefly by scholars mentioned earlier, but a full interpretation of the story depends on reading further.

Continuing, we encounter a seemingly trivial factor, which in fact proves quite decisive for deciphering the story: the naming of one character where the others are nameless. The only name mentioned in the story is that of Nachman Hordenker, a new clerk who "on the third day" replaced a clerk who had died. The name Nachman Hordenker is not unknown in Jewish history: it is the name of one of the Baal Shem Tov's disciples who used to frequent his residence. His son married the Baal Shem Tov's granddaughter. This marriage produced a son, the famous Rabbi Nachman of Braslaw. Nachman Hordenker (died 1765) immigrated to Eretz Israel with a Hassidic group in 1764 and settled in Tiberias.¹⁹

The appearance of the new "clerk" is on "the third day," and since every detail in the story evidently functions as a code, we should consider the numbering of days accordingly. In Psalms (90:4) we find "For a thousand years in thy sight are but a yesterday": in the story a day does not mark personal time but a divine duration or a historical era.²⁰ The protagonist-narrator considers three historical eras, two of which are characterized by a kind of alienation between himself and the "authority"; but on the dawn of the third era, hope arises for a different kind of communication. This feeling of hope is a result of the new "clerk's" "clear spectacles over his good eyes," which mark his kind-heartedness and also enable him to see the other person clearly, and perhaps even to take notice of him.

Nachman Hordenker's name, of course, alludes to the Hassidic movement, whose emergence and expansion in the eighteenth century is perceived as a new era as well as a new phase in the spiritual history of Judaism. As is well known, the Hassidic movement represented a new and a unique aspect of Jewish religious perception: it emphasized the emotional elements in worshipping God, which were suppressed in traditional Judaism. The Hassidic movement tended to describe the relationship be-

¹⁹ A. Holtz notes that Nachman Hor[o]denker was the name of Rabbi Nachman of Braslaw's grandfather. He includes the name of Hor[o]denker with other names in a section entitled "Allegorical and allegory-like names," and adds that he merely lists the names without trying to decipher them (*The Open Parable*, p. 316). A. G. Hoffman ("Inclusion and Exclusion," p. 114) treats the fact that Hordenker is the grandfather of Rabbi Nachman of Braslaw as an indirect reference to the wondrous narrative capacities of Rabbi Nachman. I do not necessarily agree with this view, as is seen later in my discussion.

²⁰ Interesting in this context is N. Rotenstreich's notion about the lack of coordination between the protagonist's personal time and non-personal, objective time (N. Rotenstreich, "The Experience of Time in *The Book of Deeds*," in *Le' Agnon Shay: Devarim al Hasofer veSippurav*, eds. Dov Saddan and Ephraim Elimelech Urbach [Heb.; Jerusalem: Hasokhnut haYehudit, 1959], pp. 265-279).

tween humans and God as forming an integral whole. Emphasis was placed on the direct link through prayer: a process in which the human soul touched and united with the Divine.

Encountering Nachman Hordenker, the protagonist senses that he is about to have "the upper hand" because of his being Hordenker's "countryman,"²¹ but he does not make this fact public because of a "certain moral sense." The expression "have the upper hand" (ידו על העליונה) arouses several associations with talmudic tractates using this phrase or its contrasting variation (ידו על החזונה). A prevalent rule says: "He who makes a change has the under hand, as well as he who retreats from his word" (b. *'Abod. Zar. 7a*). The protagonist, who favors Nachman Hordenker for what he stands for, should be considered as "he who makes a change," since the Hassidic movement reformed some of the most deeply-rooted modes of worship. His being Hordenker's countryman does not simply mean that they hail from the same country but that they share some mutual values that make them understand each other as countrymen do.²² The protagonist is aware that he cannot gain the upper hand after all, so he attributes his refraining from speaking to a "certain moral sense."

Full acceptance of the Hassidic way seems impossible for the protagonist, since his "illness," namely his inability to pray, gets even worse "that day." The recurrent malady of the protagonist-narrator indicates that he did not apply the recommended remedy: "He whose throat is sore should study the Torah."

The first two stops on the protagonist's "quest" reveal his spiritual wandering, which has to do with all the variegated world of Jewish tradition, ancient as well as renewed. Still, he does not seem to have accomplished what he sought in any of them.

The next encounter of the protagonist takes place in a world with no clerks at all. Instead he meets a person whom he calls "a man" (later he is called "a druggist"). While passing from the "new clerk" to the "druggist," something seemingly trivial happens, but it is still narrated as seriously as

²¹ The narrator identifies Nachman Hordenker as a countryman of his "from his name and facial expression," thereby alluding to the geographical vicinity of the cradle of Hassidism in Galicia and the author's own birthplace in the same county. The narrator keeps hinting intentionally but obliquely at the affinity between himself and the actual author.

²² Agnon, as is well known, displayed great interest culturally and otherwise in Hassidism. He intended to co-publish with Martin Buber the *Corpus Hassidicum*, the manuscript of which was destroyed in the fire set to his house in Germany in 1924 (see Haim Be'er, *Their Love and Their Hate*, H. N. Bialik, Y. H. Brenner, S. Y. Agnon—*Relations* [Heb.; Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd., 1992], p. 222). Although this project could not be achieved as designed, Agnon dealt repeatedly in his works with Hassidic themes and edited an anthology of Hassidic stories.

any other facts in the story: "Suddenly I heard a noise and felt my left foot expanding in its shoe. I looked down and saw that the shoelace had snapped." In the original Hebrew text the shoelace is termed "strap" (רצועה), the word used for phylactery straps (רצועות של תפילין). It is a clear cut case of hiding a dominant, extremely important message behind reductive and trivial facts. The narrator's sense of relief on the one hand (carried by the Hebrew word, although the English translation gives only "expanding") and the strap's breaking on the other indicate his actual detachment from the world of tradition, which is metaphorically described here as confining his steps by binding him in straps—the synonym for *tefillin* (phylactery straps).

Meeting "the man" who was "sitting alone at a small table," the protagonist rejoices when he recognizes him as an old acquaintance whom he "knew before the war." This man offers the narrator a seat, to which the latter reacts disproportionately: "this gesture of humaneness made me haughty."²³ Haughtiness is the feeling opposite to the one he experienced before the clerks, where he stood "humbly and timidly." The change in the protagonist's situation seems to be satisfactory, but the papers surrounding the druggist are piled on the chair, and in fact there is nowhere for him to sit. Previously he was enthusiastic about the gesture of humaneness on the druggist's part. The Hebrew word is אנושיות, which means humanism, a value highly praised by the Enlightenment movement.²⁴

The obstacle here seems to be that the narrator cannot find enough room: the seat is already taken. The papers somehow replace human beings. The sweetness (symbolized by the chocolate) almost sensed by the protagonist proves to be partly an illusion. He suddenly realizes that he was wrong to think that he would get it all from the humanist-druggist, who supposedly is capable of providing a remedy.

The last encounter in the protagonist's quest is with a professor. The latter is researching some written papers in a manner showing just how narrow his field of scholarship is. He seems to lack interest in any values arising from the writings or in their true essence. He merely concentrates

²³ The English translation is "This gesture of compassion touched me," which ignores the most essential word of the passage, humaneness (אנושיות).

²⁴ Note in this context that the Jewish Enlightenment used the slogan "Be a human being when you go out and be a Jew within thy tent," emphasizing the first part of it. Reference to the Enlightenment explains the words "whom I knew before the war." It is recalled that the Enlightenment movement actually engaged in a cultural war against Hassidism, which was conceived by the Enlightened as the embodiment of all the worst in Judaism.

on the roots and letters of the words, his true aim being to establish a new interpretation as an end in itself.²⁵

The image of this professor seems to be a caricature of scholars in Jewish studies, the successors of the learned nineteenth-century German Jews (scholars of "The Wisdom of Israel," חכמת ישראל) who—in the narrator's mind—approached the ancient scriptures of Judaism in a dry, pedantic way. The professor is concerned with ancient Jewish sources, but he only sees dead letters, a subject for futile academic research. His statement that a particular letter in a particular word is not original, but an addition, and has to be uprooted and replaced by another sounds much like a metaphor for his own attitude to the ancient Jewish heritage, namely uprooting it and undermining its foundations.

This last encounter concludes the protagonist's so-called quest. But shortly before he is driven "outside" to the "large balcony floating on an endless ocean," he shares with the reader his thoughts about the professor's words:

The professor's pronouncement was clear to me and the word he was talking about was completely explained. [Yet, somehow it seemed to me that he was talking about the word *hefker* (lawlessness)]²⁶ In the meantime the day had cleared up, and I knew that in a certain spot near the edge of the table my acquaintance had left me a piece of bread—except that I couldn't tell where it was.

This passage contains yet another code to be deciphered—an intra-textual one, which takes us to the very heart of the story. Notable words in this passage are *hefker* (lawlessness) and "piece of bread," alluding to two other well-known stories in *The Book of Deeds*, "Hefker" ("Lawlessness") (1945)²⁷ and "A Whole Loaf" (1933).²⁸

"A Whole Loaf" was interpreted, as noted, by B. Kurzweil in 1942. He states that "through all Agnon's works there appears the problem of a

²⁵ In his later story, "A Sense of Smell," Agnon interestingly writes as follows: "And why are some of the scholars blundering over their language? Because they make secular matters important and the words of the Torah subordinate" (English translation in: *A Dwelling of My People, Sixteen Stories of the Chassidim* by S. Y. Agnon, trans. Rabbi J. Weinberg and H. Russell [Scottish Academic Press, 1983], p. 140). These words are very much in line with matters still to be explained in our story.

²⁶ In square brackets I added my own translation of the words omitted by the translator. These seem rather important for the deciphering process of the story.

²⁷ The story was first included in *The Book of Deeds* in 1951.

²⁸ In Hebrew the synonym for "a piece of bread" (*prussa*) is *pat*. This word appears in the name of the story "Pat Shelemah," which was rendered "A Whole Loaf." Not entering a dispute about wrong or right translation, I confine myself to saying that there seems to be an obvious resemblance between the eagerness of the protagonist for bread in both stories ("The Document" and "A Whole Loaf"). See H. Barzel, "A Whole Loaf—The Story and Its Interpretations and Versions," in *Ch. N. Bialik, S. Y. Agnon, Study and Interpretation* (Heb.: Tel Aviv: Yachdav, 1986), pp. 293–307.

[religious] believing person who nevertheless has to fight himself."²⁹ The desperate pursuit of the whole loaf is explained by him as "greed of selfish desire,"³⁰ which totally contradicts his moral and religious obligations.

Arnold Band, who counters Kurzweil's interpretation, argues that the problem in the story is "far more complicated than the opposition of the material to the spiritual, and the outcome is not a partial return, but frustration."³¹ To his mind a whole loaf does not symbolize material values but spiritual ones, deriving from the context of Jewish law (halakhah), in which a whole loaf is mentioned. The passion for a whole loaf therefore represents the protagonist's "yearning for spiritual wholeness."³² The antithesis, according to Band, is "between life lived by the commandments, well defined and binding, and the vague yearning for wholeness and sanctity, a yearning with a definable object but no definite means of realization."³³

Hillel Barzel reads the story as a "bundle of events, emotions, thoughts, and reflections, which are delivered in the form of a story, about the essence of the Torah and about the attitude of a partially skeptical person towards its laws as well as towards its author." The core of "A Whole Loaf," according to Barzel, is sin and punishment; he somewhat follows Kurzweil in saying that the beginning and the ending of the story attest that it is worth avoiding the temptation of desire and preferring the Torah laws which are handed down from generation to generation.³⁴

Clearly, areas of "The Document" and "A Whole Loaf" overlap. One area is the obsession of the protagonist-narrator with spiritual discontent. Here our interpretation of "The Document" is close to Band's in respect of "A Whole Loaf"; the narrator's vaguely knowing about a "piece of bread" left for him by his acquaintance has to do with spiritual matters, perhaps even a certain yearning for things yet unachieved.

In his spiritual quest the protagonist examines one by one the options offered by Jewish historical culture over its entire range:³⁵ starting with

²⁹ B. Kurzweil, *Essays*, p. 88.

³⁰ B. Kurzweil, *Essays*, p. 94.

³¹ A. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, p. 189.

³² A. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, p. 190.

³³ A. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, p. 193.

³⁴ H. Barzel, *A Whole Loaf*, p. 304.

³⁵ In his analysis of the story "Hefker" G. Shaked contends, among other things, that the form of a journey in stories of similar structure in *The Book of Deeds* is a metaphorical embodiment of the soul or of a meta-realistic world: "The protagonist is not wandering from place to place but from one realization of feeling-web to another" (*Overt and Concealed*, p. 109). In our story, however, it seems that the inner-soul

traditional Torah-bound Judaism, which seems somewhat strict and alienated, he moves on through the heart-warming Hassidic experience, which is demanding in its own way, and thence to the openness, universalism, and humanism seemingly offered by the Enlightenment movement. He concludes with modern scholarship, which thoroughly investigates the roots of Judaism in a pedantic, academic manner, producing futile research. For a reason yet unknown he is not satisfied with any of these options. Each seems to lack something essential, which could be restored if borrowed from the other options, but this, of course, is impossible. That is why the narrator will end up still hungry and yearning for that "piece of bread," of whose existence he seems so certain.

But the yearning for wholeness is not the only force driving the protagonist to set out on his quest. As told in the story, he has mistaken the word mentioned by the professor for the word *hefker* (lawlessness), in which one letter seems to him to be substituted for another.³⁶ This word directs us to the story "Hefker."³⁷

Surprisingly, there are some evident affinities between "The Document" and "Hefker." For example, in "Hefker" the narrator also speaks about his sore throat (which, as recalled, is a code indicating his inability to pray). He is brought before what appears to be a court, in which the "judge" is reminiscent of the "clerks" and "the man in charge" in "The Document." This person appears to the protagonist like a clerk too, behaving in much the same way as the clerks in the earlier story. There also seems to be a marked alienation between this "clerk" and the protagonist: the clerk writes ceaselessly, ignoring him, and his face lacks any expression.

But it is the ending of the story "Hefker" that enlightens us about the significance of the word *hefker* in "The Document." The ending of "Hefker" is about breaking boundaries between sacred and secular: an old man who trills his voice seemingly in prayer is uttering "words of obscenity to the tune of the prayer." When the protagonist reproaches him, he answers, "I am not from the government and you also, my friend, are not from the government, so what do you care?" In "The Document," the word *hefker* emerges when the protagonist describes what the professor does to

quest does not represent "various stages of the protagonist's development" as Shaked says, but various stages of the spiritual and cultural development of Judaism, which—as will be argued later—are options among which the protagonist has to choose.

³⁶ It may allude to a certain Mishnaic tractate that indeed replaces one version of the word for another: *hevker* instead of *hefker* (הַבְּקֵר = הַבְּקֵר; *m. Pe'a*, 86:41).

³⁷ The story was published thirteen years after "The Document" but was probably written earlier. Agnon did not always publish his works immediately after completing them, as we now know.

the holy scriptures. The latter's deeds are much the same as the old man's in "Hefker": he approaches holy scriptures in an entirely secular manner. In other words, the protagonist-narrator points at a major dissonance between form and content.

This seems to be an important issue in the protagonist's spiritual quest, in which he tries to find the right thing to grasp, and so, we may add, to "save" nothing less than his own "life." We recall that he sets out because of his "unknown relative" of whom he knows only that his very life depends on acquiring what he has asked for. It brings to mind the Talmudic saying אדם קרוב עצמו ("a person is close to himself," *b. Yebam. 25b; Sanh. 9b, 25a*); the word "close" and the word "relative" are the same in Hebrew—*karov*. The unknown relative appears to be no other than an allegorical projection of that part of the protagonist's soul that feels a yearning, which has to be satisfied in a way as yet unknown. In fact, all the characters encountered by the protagonist may be considered projections of various aspects of his self (like the characters in the other stories of *The Book of Deeds* that are in the form of a quest, among them "A Whole Loaf" and "Hefker," which, as indicated, have close ties with "The Document"). The protagonist is what Fletcher (and Shoham) would call a generative-demonic hero, since he generates and projects all the other figures in the story, while his general behavior is compulsive and obsessive (for example, staying three days and nights at the office, not eating or sleeping, waiting for a document). The characters in the story are designed to contradict each other, presenting a confusion of conflicts of the inner self.

For all that, we must still ask what the predominant theme or idea is that operates all these factors and makes sense of them.

In an essay published in 1968, Mordechai Shalev observed that the prevailing theme of *The Book of Deeds* is in fact the literary work of the protagonist-author.³⁸ Shalev seems to find a recurring pattern in most of these stories as follows: the protagonist's literary activity constantly meets hostile factors which threaten it, contradict it, or at least delay it. This interruption of his work forces him to go out; and when out, he somehow encounters his ancestors' world and the world of working-class people, who engage in physical labor, in contrast to his work. These confrontations drive him back to his own work in a sort of a circular way; he returns to the starting point.

³⁸ M. Shalev, "The Portrait of the Protagonist as an Author in *The Book of Deeds*," *Ha'aretz* Sept. 22, 1968 (Heb.).

Shalev's view is interesting and challenging, although his hypothesis does not apply automatically to all the stories of *The Book of Deeds* as he claims. Moreover, some of the stories that do seemingly fall into the supposed category do not dwell on the contrast between literary work and physical labor or even between engaging in literary work and meeting the demands of the ancestors' world. Some of these stories are clearly concerned with the protagonist's search for the right literary way.

The theme of writing is alluded to again and again in our story: starting with the preliminary meaning of a document as a written paper, moving on to the clerks and their writing in notebooks and ledgers, thence to the papers surrounding the druggist, and concluding with the words and letters that occupy the professor's mind when writing his research papers. Regarding his own literary work as the latent theme of the story, the narrator seems to be trying to cope with a crucial question: what should be his literary work's core? Should it appear in a sacred disguise, drawing on the holy scriptures of his ancestors, or should he choose to follow the pattern of those who reformed and rebelled against the established scriptures? Is the way chosen by secular Jews, such as the Enlightened, drawing on European models, the right choice? Or will it end in futile writing detached from any live and meaningful context?

The story seems to reveal the chaotic state of mind of a writer who, so to speak, stands at a crossroads baffled by some extremely important decisions he has to take. No less than the essence and nature of his writings, these decisions will also determine his identity and image as a writer both in his own eyes and in those of the public. No wonder, then, that he must seek the *te'udah*: He ponders God's written Testimony, as well as his own designation, his mission, his purpose, and his task, for they are all encapsulated in this one Hebrew word.

Recently, Dan Miron pointed out in his essay that in the early 1930s Agnon underwent a kind of an artistic-spiritual crisis, which drastically changed the tonality and meaning of his literary work.³⁹ Miron attributes this change to psychological as well as ideological and aesthetic causes.⁴⁰ The turning point, he argues, concerned Agnon's self-image as a writer and his own definition of his designation within the domain of Hebrew literature. Between completing *The Bridal Canopy* in its final version (1931) and

³⁹ D. Miron's book *Le Medecin Imaginaire, Studies in Classical Jewish Fiction* (Heb.; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 1995), was published in 1995, but the article "The Doctor Needs a Remedy," (pp. 161-235) was written in 1994, as indicated in the book.

⁴⁰ D. Miron, "The Doctor Needs a Remedy," pp. 201-202.

finishing writing "A Simple Tale," which was published in 1935, Agnon was trying to re-assess the models for his future writing. Miron establishes this notion not only by examining the obvious gap between these two novels and by reading relevant passages from Agnon's letters, but also by employing psychological suppositions as to Agnon the person and the writer.

In this context, we should add that these stories of *The Book of Deeds*, which were published in the early 1930s, might be perceived somewhat differently than they have been. Bearing in mind that Agnon looked to Flaubert as a model writer,⁴¹ it is not unreasonable to assume that he also did what Flaubert did when writing *Madame Bovary*. Flaubert kept a diary in which he revealed the pressures and distress he endured while struggling with his novel. In much the same way it is plausible to view Agnon's first stories of *The Book of Deeds* as chapters in a sort of a coded literary "diary" which accompanied his work at that stage, setting forth Agnon's perplexity, inner struggle, and quest for the right modes of writing. These odd, dream-like stories can be otherwise described as a "cellar," containing the things that could not be presented "upstairs."

Our esoteric confession-like story (like similar ones in *The Book of Deeds*) had to veil its truths precisely because of the remarkable affinity established between the protagonist-narrator and Agnon, the actual author. Introducing himself as a fairly skeptical modern person who lacks faith and lives in immanent discontent, the narrator hints at his seeming disapproval of the displacement of tradition from his life as well. In fact, his spiritual discontent is not to be understood as criticizing the actual essence of the various cultural facets presented here as options to choose from. This discontent is aimed at his own inability to choose the right option, the one that would best serve his literary work. He is thus caught between two contradictory worlds, neither of which he finds fully appealing or satisfying as an exclusive framework for his own literary writing. At the time this confession-like story was written, the situation appeared insoluble, hence the open ending with its surrealist (as well as metaphorical) scene: "I was pushed outside and found myself standing on a large balcony floating on an endless ocean."

⁴¹ D. Miron, "The Doctor Needs a Remedy," pp. 207-208.

WORD FOREIGNNESS IN MODERN HEBREW¹

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This paper focuses on the linguistic criteria that distinguish Hebrew words from foreign ones in modern Hebrew. Three major criteria play a principal role in determining the differences between the words: phonological, syllabic, or morphological. The phonological criterion involves foreign consonants and allophonic structure, violation of constraints on Hebrew consonant clusters, and violation of Hebrew stress patterns. The syllabic structure depends on word length and deviation from syllabic Hebrew word structure. The morphological criterion is the most complicated one and involves word class, violation of Hebrew stress patterns in inflection and derivation, the ending *-a'ot*, and orphanhood, which refers to the isolation of a form within the morphological Hebrew system.

Some aspects of the generalizations have been described previously by Weiman. Changes that occurred in modern Hebrew since 1950, as well as certain inaccuracies in Weiman's analysis, may account for some of the differences in his analysis from the one presented here. This paper not only focuses on all of the factors involved in modern Hebrew loan words, but it can account for the distinction between loan and Hebrew elements.

Although the discussion is linguistically oriented, it bears on psychological reality as well. A first attempt at showing that the linguistic criteria supply the necessary means for determining the perception of foreignness will be conducted.

1. INTRODUCTION

The German linguistic literature distinguishes between *Lehnwörter* (loan words) as a historic phenomenon and *Fremdwörter* (foreign words) as a contemporary and concurrent phenomenon. *Lehnwörter* are old loan words that were entirely assimilated into the grammatical system of the absorbing language and are no longer regarded as foreign. *Fremdwörter*, on the other hand, enter the language in their foreign form without being adjusted grammatically or phonologically to the absorbing language.² Although the distinction is important and holds in principle for Hebrew as well, there is no clear-cut difference between *Lehnwörter* and *Fremd-*

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² P. Von Polenz, "Fremdwort und Lehnwort," in *Fremdwort Diskussion*, ed. P. Braun (W. Finkverlag: Munchen, 1979), pp. 9-32; A. Werner, *Terminologie zur neuen Linguistik* (Tübingen: Neimeyer, 1974), p. 129.