

## Agnon's *Kaddish*: Mourning for God<sup>1</sup>

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*In memory of my teachers and friends Frank Talmage ז"ל and Abe Pessis ז"ל*

ABSTRACT. In 1947 S. Y. Agnon responded to the daily bloodshed incurred in defense of the soon-to-be-declared State of Israel with a composition entitled *Introduction (Petiha) to the Kaddish: After the Funerals of Those Murdered in the Land of Israel*. Under the guise of a seemingly innocuous introduction to a prominently pious text lies a subtext that, in its artful and ironic weaves of the language of tradition, subverts the core *kaddish* text. Agnon's use of a classic rabbinic literary convention, the *petiha*, as its structural model is a striking example of his "revolutionary traditionalism." Agnon has reenvisioned a *kaddish* which straddles both the traditional world of Buczacz and the post-Holocaust embryonic Zionist state with language drawn from the former yet transfigured to meet the tragic dimensions of the latter. A new *kaddish* emerges out of a hermeneutic that has been identified as "mad midrash." □

### Wieseltier contra Agnon

In response to the daily bloodshed endured by the Jews of the soon to be internationally declared State of Israel, S. Y. Agnon was moved to compose an *Introduction (Petiha) to the Kaddish: After the Funerals of Those Murdered in the Land of Israel*.<sup>2</sup> The year was 1947 and the core liturgical expression of Jewish mourning could no longer be recited without addressing both the near annihilation of Eastern European Jewry (including Agnon's own hometown of Buczacz) and the endless human *qorbanot* which the fledgling Jewish homeland seemed to demand. The continuing losses experienced by the Jews called into question the viability of a prayer which exclusively glorifies God while ignoring those who are killed on His behalf. Agnon felt a particular urgency to rethink the *kaddish* when it was meant to honor those who perished in their capacity as "the guardians of His palace" on earth—the land of Israel. It was becoming apparent that Jewish national independence, the "consolation" for near annihilation, was merely more

<sup>1</sup>This article evolved out of a presentation to the Toronto Agnon Reading group. Thanks to Shoshana Ages and the group for affording me the opportunity to develop this thesis.

<sup>2</sup>S. Y. Agnon, *Petihā Le-Kaddish in Kol Sippurav shel S.Y. Agnon*, Vol. 6 (Tel Aviv: Schocken Books., 1966). For a brief history of when and where the *petihah* was originally published see Dan Laor, *S. Y. Agnon: A Biography* (Heb.) (Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 1998), pp. 394–95. It was originally published in the September 23, 1947 issue of the newspaper *HaAretz*.

of the same assault on the physical integrity of the Jews. Why should the “guardians” not abandon their posts? The “palace” was really a hovel and, worst of all, the royal occupant (“His”) had abdicated. What I will demonstrate is that Agnon’s new *kaddish* is a desperate attempt to salvage religious metaphors such as “guardians of His palace” from becoming languid clichés.

The impetus for my study of this small, yet intricate, text was Leon Wieseltier’s reaction to it in his masterful hybrid of scholarship and existential reflection, *Kaddish*.<sup>3</sup> His brief encounter with Agnon’s *kaddish* left him with a mixed emotional response of both admiration for its aesthetic quality and disdain for its misplaced focus and offensive choice of imagery. Wieseltier’s exploration into the roots and meaning of *kaddish* was limited to his own period of mourning.<sup>4</sup> Given his halakhically prescribed time constraints (eleven months), Wieseltier chose to leave his eventual readers with a series of seductive *roshe pera'iqim* (chapter headings) related to death and mourning in Judaism. *Kaddish* therefore challenges the reader in a number of ways. Firstly, there is simply the problem of reading and understanding highly technical, and often abstruse rabbinic material—a difficult, if not impossible undertaking for those not attuned to the nuances of the rabbinic tradition. Secondly, and more importantly, the reader is challenged to pick up where Wieseltier has left off, at times in an entirely different direction. My intent is to do so with his treatment of Agnon’s *Kaddish*. Initially I shared Wieseltier’s revulsion. How was it possible for Agnon to have profaned a moment of supreme spiritual reflection with an appeal to military triumphalism? However, the more I examined the text the more I began to be drawn away from this visceral reflex. It became evident to me that Agnon’s use of wholly inappropriate, indeed obnoxious and patent metaphors was an artful ruse intended to propel the reader along a path of increasing frustration and disgust. Those sentiments realize themselves in a total reorientation which subverts the immediate offensiveness of the traditional imagery Agnon has adopted. In the end the concerns expressed by Wieseltier are the very ones that are addressed and neutralized. Agnon’s *Petiha* results in a striking balance of orthodox conservatism and theological radicalism, thereby confirming his reputation as a “revolutionary traditionalist.”<sup>5</sup> His goal was to preserve the traditional *kaddish* doxology but not at the cost of silent resignation to innocent suffering. A quaint identification of

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<sup>3</sup>(New York: Vintage Books, 1988), pp. 22–24.

<sup>4</sup>This self-imposed limitation was made clear in Wieseltier’s remarks in a session I organized dedicated to *Kaddish* at the annual Association for Jewish Studies conference for 2002 held in Los Angeles.

<sup>5</sup>This is the epithet coined by Gershon Shaked to describe Agnon’s literary oeuvre in *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. J. M. Green, (New York: New York University Press, 1989). Especially pertinent for this study is his discussion of Agnon’s relationship to the Jewish tradition at pp. 23–39.

God with justice, goodness, and omnipotence was no longer acceptable. In addition, Agnon set out to revitalize an Aramaic prayer by rewriting it in the nascent Hebrew language of which he was a master.<sup>6</sup>

The full text is reproduced as follows:<sup>7</sup>

מלך בעל ודם שייצא למלחמה על אויביו מושיע חייבותיו להרוג וליהרג,  
ספק אודה את חייבותיו ספק אינו אודה את חייבותיו, ספק הם חלובים בעיניו  
ספק אינם חשויים בעיניו. ואפילו חשויים בעיניו חלובים בעיניו כבודנים,  
שכל היוצא למלחמה כולאך המות כרוך בלקבותו ומתכווה לו להרוג.  
פגע בו חץ או סיף או חרב או שאר כושי משהחית ונהרג מעבדיו אחר  
במקומו, ואין המלך מרגיש בחסרונו, שאומות העולם מרובים וזייסות שלהם  
מרובים. נהרג אחד מהם יש לו למלך הרבה כנגדו.

אבל מלכנו מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא מלך חפץ בחיים, אודה  
שלים ורודף שלום ואודה את ישראל עליו ובחר בנו מכל העמים, לא כפינו  
שאנו מרובים חשיה ד' בנו. כי אנו המעט מכל העמים. ומתוך אהבתו שאודה אתנו  
ואנו נעטים, כל אחד ואחד מעמנו חשוי לפניו כפינו עלם, לפי שאין לו הרבה  
להעמיד במקומו. נפקד חס ושלים אחד מ'ישראל באה פחת בגוינותיו  
של המלך ובאה תשית כח כביכול במלכותו יתברך, שהרי מלכותו חסרה לגיון  
אחד מלגיונותיו ונתמעטה חס ושלים גדולתו יתברך.

לפיכך אנו מתפללין ואומרים אחר כל מה מישראל יתגדל  
ויתקדש שלום רבא יגדל כח השם ולא יביא תשיות כח לפניו יתברך,  
ויתקדש בעולמות עברא כרצונו ולא נפחד על עצמו. אלא מהדר לאון  
קדושתו יתעלה. ומלך מלכותיה שיתגלה ודאה מלכותו בשלימות  
ולא יתמעט מזה חס ושלים. בחייכון וביומיון ובחיי דכל בית ישראל  
במהרה ובזמן קרוב, שאם מלכותו גלויה בעולם – שלום בעולם וברכה  
בעולם ושירה בעולם ותשיבחות הרבה בעולם ונחמה גדולה בעולם  
וישראל קדושים אהובים בעולם וגדולתו גדלה והולכת ומתבררה  
ואינה מתמעטת לעולם.

אם כך אנו מתפללים ואומרים אחר כל אדם שמת, קל וחומר  
על אחינו ואחיותינו הגאונים והנעלים בני ציון היקרים הרגו  
ארץ ישראל שגשף דמום על כבוד שבו יתברך ועל עצמו ועל  
ארצו ועל נחלתו, ולא זו בלבד אלא כל הדר בארץ ישראל הוא  
מלגיונו של מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא שהפקידו  
המלך שומר בפלטרוין שלו. נהרג אחד מהלגיון שלו אין לו  
כביכול אחרים להעמיד במקומו.

<sup>6</sup>Legend has it that the *kaddish* is recited in Aramaic, a language that is unintelligible to the angels, so as not to arouse their envy or indignation. See J. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition* (New York: Behrman, 1939), pp. 74–75. For an interesting criticism of this belief by a traditional medieval Talmudist see the rebuttal of a Baal Tosafot in his comments on the response of *yihei shmei rabbah* in B.T. *Berakhot* 3b.

<sup>7</sup>Thanks to Schocken Books for allowing me to include here the complete text of Agnon's original composition.



כפיכך אחיזנו כל בית ישראל, כל המתאבדים באבל הזה, נכוון את לבנו לאבינו שבשמים מלך ישראל וגואלו ונתפלל עלינו ועליו כביכול, יתגדל ויתקדש שמו, רבא בעלמא די ברא כרעותא וימליך מלכותיה ויצמוח פורקניה ויקרב משיחיה. וכן כל הפרשה כולה. ונזכה ונחיה ונראה עין בעין, עושה שלום במרומיו הוא ברזמיו יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל אמן.

When a king of flesh and blood goes forth to war against his enemies, he leads out his soldiers to slay and to be slain. It is hard to say, does he love his soldiers, doesn't he love his soldiers, do they matter to him, don't they matter to him. But even if they do matter to him, they are as good as dead, for the Angel of Death is close upon the heels of everyone who goes off to war, and accompanies him only to slay him. When the soldier is hit by arrow or sword or saber or any of the other kinds of destructive weapons, and slain, they put another man in his place, and the king hardly knows that someone is missing—for the population of the nations of the world is big and their troops are many. If one man is slain, the king has many others to make up for him.

But our king, the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, is a king who delights in life, who loves peace and pursues peace, and loves His people Israel, and He chose us from among all the nations: not because we are a numerous folk did He set His love upon us, for we are the fewest of all people. But because of the love He loves us with and we are so few, each and every one of us matters as much before Him as a whole legion, for He hasn't many to put in our place. When from Israel one is missing, God forbid, a minishing takes place in the King's legions, and in His kingdom, blessed be He, there is a decline of strength, as it were, for His kingdom now lacks one of its legions and His grandeur, blessed be He, has been diminished, God forbid.

That is why for each dead person in Israel we recite the prayer "magnified and sanctified be His great Name." Magnified be the power of the Name so that before Him, blessed be He, there be no decline of strength: and sanctified be He in all the worlds which He created according to His will, and not for ourselves let us have fear but for the superlative splendor of His exalted holiness. May He establish His sovereignty so that His kingdom be perfectly revealed and visible, and may it suffer no diminishing, God forbid. In our lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the whole house of Israel speedily and soon—for if His sovereignty is manifest in the world, there is peace in the world and blessing in the world and song in the world and a multitude of praises in the world and great consolation in the world, and the holy ones, Israel, are beloved in the world, and His grandeur continues to grow and increase and never diminishes.

If this is what we recite in prayer over any who die, how much the more over our beloved and sweet brothers and sisters, the dear children of Zion, those killed in the Land of Israel, whose blood was shed for the glory of His blessed Name and for His people and His land and His heritage. And what is more, everyone who dwells in the land of Israel belongs to the legion of the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, whom the King appointed watchman of His palace. When one of His legions is slain, He has no others as it were to put in his place.

Therefore, bretheren of the whole house of Israel, all you who mourn in this mourning, let us fix our hearts on our Father in heaven, Israel's king and redeemer, and let us pray for

ourselves and for Him too, as it were: Magnified and sanctified be His Great Name in the world which He created as He willed. May He establish His kingdom, may He make His deliverance to sprout forth, may He bring nigh His messiah, and so to the end of the whole prayer. May we be found worthy still to be in life when with our own eyes we may behold Him who makes peace in His high places, in His compassion making peace for us and for all Israel, Amen.<sup>8</sup>

Wieseltier reacted with repugnance to a central image of Agnon's *Petiha*, an "army of God," as a vehicle for sanctity. It smacks of the brutality, violence, and devastation that armies marching for the glory of God have left in their wake in the past. Wieseltier trenchantly asserts that "the metaphor has brought so much misery to the world."<sup>9</sup> In addition, he argues, the spiritual impulse is debased when expressed by militarism, "surely military life is the antithesis of spiritual life."<sup>10</sup> Wieseltier's visceral reaction to a metaphor of violence is entirely understandable on its own, but it signals the beginning of a journey which ends in the recognition that Agnon uses this image only for the purpose of subverting it. In fact, what will become evident is that Agnon shares with Wieseltier this very same revulsion for the use of the phrase, "army of God," as a spiritual metaphor. Finally, Wieseltier berates Agnon for heaping accolades on the king, in this case God, rather than his defenders (the Jews); "I am inclined to extol the Jews of the land of Israel for it; to admire the legions, not the king." Once again, the criticism belies an acute perception of Agnon's real agenda, one that actually redirects the original focus of the *Kaddish* from God to his people. Under the guise of a seemingly innocuous introduction to a prominently pious text lies a subtext that, in its artful and ironic weaves of the language of tradition, subverts the core text. My analysis will show that the *petiha* presents a concise paradigm of what Arnold Band has termed Agnon's style of "negotiating Jewish history." In this sense the text functions "as a mask hiding or modifying the author's bold or revelatory sentiments on religion or sensuality, or as a mediating barrier that allows the author to distance himself from too direct and immediate responses to the dynamic, demanding events of contemporary Jewish history."<sup>11</sup> Agnon's *petiha* combines the language of Jewish tradition together with the

<sup>8</sup>Trans. by Judah Goldin from the Hebrew in *The Jewish Expression*, ed. Judah Goldin (New York: Bantam Books, 1970), pp. 484–85. I wish to acknowledge both Bantam Books and David Goldin for their gracious consent to reprint this elegant translation. Wieseltier's rendition is not a complete translation of the entire composition.

<sup>9</sup>*Kaddish*, p. 23. The logic of this statement is unassailable when one thinks of the carnage committed in the name of God. One needs only mention historical manifestations of "armies of God" such as crusades, jihads, pogroms, Indian *dharmiklaras*, etc.

<sup>10</sup>*Kaddish*, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>"Negotiating Jewish History," in *Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon*, eds. D. Patterson and G. Abramson (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), p. 44. The only sustained discussion in the scholarly literature of Agnon's *kaddish* I have been able to find is useful only as a

consciousness of contemporary historical events which challenge the very possibility of legitimately turning to that tradition. The resulting phenomenon will be seen to be what Emil Fackenheim has termed "mad midrash," which is a product of this "impossible togetherness."<sup>12</sup>

### Excursus: Bringing Israel Back Into Focus

Instrumental to any understanding of Agnon's *Kaddish* is the recognition of a classic rabbinic literary convention, the *petiha*, as its structural model. The *petiha* may alternatively be a record of an introductory sermon to a weekly Torah portion,<sup>13</sup> a means of organizing multiple exegeses,<sup>14</sup> or a possible model for future sermons.<sup>15</sup> Whatever the case, the traditional structure originates in some unrelated verse and exegetically peregrinates to its ultimate proof-text, often via a parable (*mashal*) or string of parables.<sup>16</sup> Although it does not commence with a verse, Agnon's *petiha* follows this traditional route and concludes, not with the first sentence of the *kaddish*, but rather with an abridged form of the entire prayer captured by the opening and closing sentences. This slight variation of the *petiha* formula provides the first clue toward alleviating some of

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lesson in the dangers of applying this approach to Agnon without the requisite familiarity with the rabbinic tradition it demands. Gila Safran Naveh in her book *Biblical Parables and their Modern Re-Creation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000) devotes a chapter to Agnon's *Kaddish*. Although she identifies Agnon's technique of allusion to tradition, her entire analysis and conclusions are flawed for the following reasons:

1. Virtually every one of the over twenty references she cites is exclusively biblical. As far as I am aware, Agnon was by no means a Karaite, and any biblical allusion would be colored by its reception in the rabbinic tradition.
2. Every reference she cites bears no relevance to the language of the composition and is merely evidence of trite and all-pervasive biblical assertions such as "God declares the Hebrews are His people," for which countless other references could be cited. As a key to unlock the meaning of the strictly precise Agnonian formulation, these are irrelevant.
3. Finally, and most importantly, of all the scriptural citation she does produce, the only ones which are unmistakably explicitly alluded to are omitted (e.g., Deut. 7:7 and Numbers 14:14).

<sup>12</sup>*The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim*, ed. M. Morgan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), p. 332.

<sup>13</sup>See Joseph Heinemann, "The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim: A Form-Critical Study," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), pp. 100–122.

<sup>14</sup>See Richard Sarason, "The *Petihta* in *Leviticus Rabbah*: 'Oral Homilies' or Redactional Constructions," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 33 (1983): 557–567.

<sup>15</sup>See David Stern's discussion of the *Petihta* in his *Parables in Midrash* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 159–166.

<sup>16</sup>For a good sampling of *petihtaot* one can do no better than to peruse *Leviticus Rabbah* which is composed of some 126 *petihtaot* of various lengths and complexity.



Wieseltier's discomfort with a focus on God rather than Israel. The ultimate word in the composition is in fact "Israel," which aspires to a fully realized peace that emanates from heaven. However, what Agnon has done is not simply to cite the beginning and end of the *kaddish*, but to render the end the *raison d'être* of the whole prayer. The sanctification of the Name, normally taken to be the prayer's essence, is minimized. It tapers off to "and so goes the entire *parshah*" (or etc.), while Israel's current predicament and aspiration for peace are accentuated by a threefold supplicatory repetition of "and we shall be privileged, and we shall live (survive) and we shall see eye to eye." In Agnon's formulation the sanctification of God is for the sake of Israel and in fact is measured by Israel's fortunes. Agnon has transformed a prayer occasioned by death into one that anticipates life for the king's subjects. The entire prayer, contra Wieseltier's initial reaction, is now oriented toward the people rather than God.

The *petiha* comprises five major components through which Agnon struggles with and reenvisions the *kaddish*. The first is the classic parable or *meshal* which describes the relationship between an earthly monarch and his subjects when they are being marched out to battle. The second is the contrasting model of God ("our King, King of Kings") and Israel marked by the distinctive term "but" (אבל). The third, signalled by "therefore" (לפיכך), posits a general rationale for the recitation of *kaddish* based on the contrariety of earthly and heavenly kings. The fourth extrapolates by means of the classic rabbinic hermeneutical tool of *ad minori ad maius* (קל וחומר) to the current historical imperative for the recitation of the *kaddish* over those "fallen of the land of Israel." The denouement, prefaced by "therefore," mandates a radically reoriented *kaddish* toward a new intentional referent. Our analysis will now chart the progress of this literary pattern as it constructs its own daring theological edifice, while, at the same time, never losing its footing in rabbinic precedent.

Virtually every facet of the earthly king's *modus operandi* is offset by God's conduct as conceived in their affection for their respective subjects. The king's focus is on the external "enemy." His theatre is that of war. The service of his soldiers is based on compulsion ("sends out" מוציא) and their destiny, regardless of victory, is death ("kill or be killed" להרוג וילהרג). The king is wholly bereft of any moral qualities. He is motivated solely by a pragmatic sense of self-preservation, while God is characterized by love both for an ideal, peace, and for a nation, Israel. However, the use of the phrase "lover of peace and pursuer of peace" (אורב שלום ורודף שלום) shatters this idyllic representation when it conjures up its Mishnaic association with the biblical Aaron.<sup>17</sup> The phrase characterizes one who is able to resolve all social conflict and tension by means of mediation and without any resort to violence (or even legal channels for that

<sup>17</sup> *Abot*, 2:12

matter).<sup>18</sup> One pauses then and is left to wonder at the inadequacy of God in the face of the carnage of war when the phrase epitomizes a non-violent means to peaceful co-existence.

It is questionable whether the king "loves" (אָהַב) his troops or whether they "matter" (אַרְשׁוּב) to him in any respect. God, on the other hand, the supreme king, both "loves" Israel and finds that their welfare is indeed a grave "matter" for Him. Agnon then provides the underpinnings of that Divine love for Israel by drawing on the language of Deuteronomy 7:7 "for it is not because you are numerous among the nations that God has delighted (קָשַׁח) in you and chooses you for you are the fewest of all people." Agnon paraphrases, "and He chose us from among all the nations: not because we are a numerous folk did he set His delight (קָשַׁח) in us, for we are the fewest of all people." The current dire circumstances which prompted the *petiha* are aptly mirrored in its biblical precedent. Deut. 7:7 appears in the context of Israel's mission to occupy Canaan and expel its occupants, "the seven nations who outnumber and are stronger than you" (Deut. 7:1). Deut. 7:7 makes it absolutely clear that Israel does not share these latter traits of strength and numbers with its enemies. In fact, what guarantees their successful colonization of Canaan is an awareness of God's unadulterated love despite an utter lack of any pragmatic qualities.

However, the emphatic repetition of Israel's trifling size belies a seething resentment. What kind of a "love" is it that allowed the nation of Israel to be decimated down to the size which presented itself in the year 1947? The prolix underscoring of a depleted population cannot but impel one to brood over its root cause. The spectre of the Holocaust looms by definition. It is simply inconceivable that Agnon, himself a product of a now obliterated Eastern European community, could have been oblivious to it while rhythmically punctuating Israel's "fewness."<sup>19</sup> This sentiment is bolstered by the subtle incongruity between Agnon's incorporation of a love rooted in smallness and that love's original context. In Deuteronomy, that love, coupled with an oath to Israel's ancestors, are what motivated God to redeem the Israelites "from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh, king of Egypt." It is primarily what accounts for the liberation preceding the acquisition of a homeland in Canaan. Agnon, on the other hand, evokes it to curtail the ongoing slaughter that is the consequence of establishing a homeland

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<sup>18</sup>See *Abot de Rabbi Nathan*, ch.12:3. Aaron is portrayed as the master of shuttle diplomacy who is able to convince each side of a dispute that the other has conceded his position.

<sup>19</sup>There is a debate as to the depth of Agnon's commitment to the Holocaust in his writings. The opinions range from those like Moshe Granot, who claims that Agnon consciously set out to suppress the memory of the Holocaust, to Dan Laor, who builds the case for it as a very prominent theme. See Granot's *Agnon Without a Mask* (Hebrew), 1991. Typical of his stance is his comment regarding the story *The Night* which exemplifies the narrator's wish to "nullify the memory of the Holocaust . . . reflected in his entire oeuvre." See Laor, "Did Agnon Write About the Holocaust?" *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 22 (1992), pp. 17-63, quoted at p. 34.



within Israel. In terms of historical stages, God's "love" is one that was oblivious to the slaughter of millions and allowed for Israel's exaggerated reduction in size (Agnon is accusing God of quite literally loving the Jews to death). Yet it is called upon to enjoin a further reduction due to the irreplaceable nature of each individual Jew. The biblical "fewness"<sup>20</sup> was merely descriptive, and the biblical love liberated Israel virtually intact in terms of numbers. Agnon's invocation of the biblical incident is an indictment of a divine impotence that could not prevent mass slaughter. How then could He be expected to prevent those deaths involved in the current political struggle?

Though the relationship between a mortal king and his subjects and that of God and His are distinguished in terms of love, concern, and expendability, they are indistinguishable as far as the circumstances in which those relationships are manifest. The concrete reality of war to which the mortal king has sent his troops is the same reality that supplies the background for God's "love" for Israel. Despite the protestations of God's supreme concern for his people, one cannot but question why there need be the occasion for such concern. The systematic counterpointing of the features of the king with God's serves to foreground those that are left undisturbed. Why is it that God's "legions" (לִגְיוֹנוֹת) find themselves thrust into the same arena of the battlefield as that of the mortal king's "soldiers"? Both face imminent death and both do so on behalf of their respective leaders. The shared theatre of war, in which both the soldiers and God's legions are forced to operate, dulls the sharpness of the contrast.

The theological problem raised by the incongruity between a caring God and the ravages of war is accentuated by the intrusion of a supernatural element in the mortal king's perspective. Regardless of his sensitivity to the fate of his troops, they are considered condemned since "the Angel of Death is close upon the heels"<sup>21</sup> of everyone who goes off to war, and accompanies him only to slay him." Oddly, the king has sent his men into a domain that is dominated by forces beyond his control, forces, in particular, traditionally associated in the rabbinic tradition with God. The Angel of Death is, after all, an obedient agent of God.<sup>22</sup> What is he doing on the mortal king side of the

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<sup>20</sup>It is significant that the quantitative כָּטַט (small) is midrashically transformed into a qualitative admirable moral quality of humility on Israel's part. This may be indicative of Agnon's approach to God in defense of his people which is modeled on its biblical forerunner, whom the midrash presents as exemplary of this humility, also in defense of human life—Abraham on behalf of Sodom: "I am but dust and ashes" (Gen. 18:27). See *Talmud Bavli, Hulin* 89a as quoted by Rashi on Deut. 7:7

<sup>21</sup>For a rabbinic example of the expression "close upon the heels" כָּרֹךְ בְּעִקְבָיו, see B. T. *Berakhot* 60a which is in the context of a king, *shalom*, and a situation of impending danger.

<sup>22</sup>The classical Talmudic and midrashic tradition is not generally cognizant of the notion of angels who are sovereign in their domain and operate independently of God. For but one emblematic instance, see B.T. *Shabbat* 88b–89a where the Angel of Death and Satan are portrayed as members of a divine consortium. See also the discussion of B. J. Bamberger's *Fallen Angels* (Philadelphia, 1952) pp. 89–11 and his conclusion with respect to even later medieval sources who commonly speak of destructive

analogy? His appearance here disturbs the negative thrust of the earthly king's image since it is an amelioration of his responsibility for the inevitable slaughter that awaits his men. In fact this angel's insertion diverts the focus away from the figure of the king and directs us toward none other than God who is ultimately vicariously liable for the actions of his consorts.<sup>23</sup> Silence as to the imminence of the "angel of death" during war on the God side of the analogy creates an imbalance between the *mashal* and *nimshal* in terms of its point/counterpoint structures. Every element of the king's detachment from his troops is countered by God's passionate commitment to His troops as follows:

<u>King</u>	<u>God</u>
- to slay and be slain	- delights in life
- questionable love	- loves Israel
- questionable concern	- every one of us matters
- many	- few
- puts another man in his place	- He hasn't many to put in our place
- king hardly knows someone is missing	- He suffers a decline in strength

The omission of the angel of death reference under the God side of the equation suggests a point of intersection between the two which ends up in ascribing an insurmountable impotency to God. The angel of death, to whom the king has surrendered his men, is qualified by the instrumentality of death, "destructive weapons" (כלי משחית). Rabbinic tradition acknowledges a demonic force known as *משחית* (*mashhit*) that wreaks indiscriminate devastation, "for once permission has been granted to the *mashhit*, it does not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked."<sup>24</sup> Agnon's failure to correlate and neutralize this unbridled force may signify a lament over an anguished yet

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angels; however, they "are all creatures and agents of God, not rebels against Him. The successors of the talmudic teachers maintained without essential change the monistic position of their forebearers" (p. 145).

<sup>23</sup>For a talmudic legend which places the Angel of Death and his function firmly under the control of God, see the conclusion to R. Joshua b. Levi's ruse which has managed to disarm the Angel of Death. God demands the weapon's return to its rightful owner since "his creatures are in need of it" (B.T. *Ketubot* 77b).

<sup>24</sup>B.T. *Baba Kama* 60a. This is the rationale offered as to why the Israelites could not exit their home on the night of the final plague in Egypt. See also *Rashi* on Exod. 12:22. However this was somewhat inconsistent with the tradition that considered God to have personally carried out this final act. See for instance the Passover Haggadah and the *Mekhilta, Pisha* 11 on Exod. 12:12, and Nahmanides' struggle with it in his commentary on Exod. 12: 22,23.

limited God whose omnipotence is hampered by the very forces He has unleashed.<sup>25</sup> He loves and cares for his people, yet is helpless to shield them in time of need.

The term incorporated to signify the diminution in the body of Israel is strategically introduced to advance this notion of God's impotence. Those "missing" from Israel are *niphqad* (נִפְקָד), whose root *paqad* has both positive and negative connotations.<sup>26</sup> Its most prominent biblical appearance is in the context of counting and, in particular, as part of a census of Israel. The biblical census, though, can only be conducted by a proxy enumeration of coins rather than individuals. The coins act as a "ransom" (*kofer nephesh*) "so that no plague may come upon them through their being counted (נִפְקָד)" (Exod. 30:12). The choice of this specific term was intended to evoke a sense of rampant and unrestrainable wave of destruction.<sup>27</sup> The term is also used to arouse indignation at the ironic contrast between the current state of affairs in 1947 Palestine and that elicited by its biblical context. A post-battle tally of the troops confirms that they have emerged intact "and not one of us is missing" (*niphqad*).<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>My reading of the *petiha* has Agnon transforming an occasion for the exaltation of God into one of complaint and wrestling with the possibility of a reduced Presence in the world. Agnon's strategy falls within a longstanding Jewish tradition of protest against God commencing with the Hebrew Bible itself. For the biblical roots of this tradition see Yohanan Muffs, "Between Justice and Mercy: The Prayers of the Prophets," (Heb.) in *Torah Nidreshet* (Tel Aviv, 1984), pp. 39–88. For the rabbinic tradition see Michael Stone, "Reactions to the Destruction of the Second Temple," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 12 (1981).

<sup>26</sup>The following are the range of meanings (not intended as exhaustive) for the term Paqad:

- (a) remember (Gen. 21:1; 50:24 Exod. 4:31; Jer. 3:16)
- (b) punish (Isa. 26:14; Jer. 6:15; Hos. 4:14)
- (c) avenge (Exod. 20:5; Hos. 4:9)
- (d) search (1 Sam. 20:6)
- (e) missing (1 Sam. 25:15; Isa. 34:16)
- (f) count (Exod. 30:12; Num. 1:3)
- (g) appoint (Gen. 40:4; Deut. 20:9)
- (h) commander (Exod. 38:21)
- (i) deposit (1 Kings 14:27)

<sup>27</sup>See Rashi, who attributes the "plague" to the forces of the "evil eye" which are dominant during a census. For the catastrophic consequences of conducting an individual census without *kopher nephesh* see 2 Samuel 24:1–10.

<sup>28</sup>Numbers 31:49. It is also noteworthy that censuses were frequently conducted for the purposes of military conscription (Numbers 1:2; Josh. 8:10; 2 Sam. 24:1–9; 2 Chron. 14:7) which accentuates the poignancy of the term within the concrete historical context of the war for the independence of the State of Israel.



There is a fourfold characterization of Jewish casualties, implied by this loss of *ligyonot*<sup>29</sup> (legions). It also assumes a plaintive tenor in addition to its heightened magnitude. The biblical census omitted one tribe from its national enumeration. The Levites were singled out as duty bound to the sanctuary, "do not count the tribe of Levi" (Num. 1:49). Because of its isolation in terms of the census, it was midrashically endowed with the particular title of *ligyon* as a term of endearment.<sup>30</sup> Both Rashi<sup>31</sup> and Nahmanides<sup>32</sup> specifically characterize them as the *ligyon* of the king. Their dedication to God exempted them from military duty. The Levite tribe, according to a prominent midrashic motif,<sup>33</sup> was excluded from the national census as a signal that they would be spared the fatal destiny of their brother tribes. While the latter perished in the desert, Levi was the only tribe to enter en masse into the land of Israel.<sup>34</sup>

Agnon's combined use of *ligyon* and *paqad* is a discordant one. He describes the current suffering and losses sustained in the battle for the liberation of Israel, and yet these terms' biblical and rabbinic connotations would have Israel immunized from such calamity.<sup>35</sup> The fact that the standard *nahem* (*comfort*) prayer, recited every Tisha B'Av, mourns the destruction of Jerusalem as a result of "swallowing up of *ligyonot*" (legions) augments the meaning of the sacrifice of current *ligyonot* in defense of Jerusalem. They are charged with the reversal of the desolation left in the wake of the original ravaging

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<sup>29</sup>The term is imported from its Roman context, e.g. *Esther Rabbah* 1:19; *Gen. Rabbah* 94:9. For other examples of rabbinic king/legion parables, see *Gen. Rabbah* 4:6; 5:6; 12:16; *Numbers Rabbah* 12:8. The adoption of the term for God's army subverts the brutality and inhumanity associated within its Roman context. See for example B.T., *Hulin* 123a where they are described as collecting scalps as war mementos.

<sup>30</sup>See *Bamidbar Rabbah* 1:12.

<sup>31</sup>Commentary on Numbers 1:49.

<sup>32</sup>Commentary on Exodus 30:12 and Numbers 26:57.

<sup>33</sup>See *Bamidbar Rabbah* 3:7; 2:11 and Rashi's second reason for their non-inclusion in the census on Numbers 1:49.

<sup>34</sup>Aside from the appropriateness of signing his full name which cites his father for this composition as the *kaddish* is the supreme act of filial remembrance, this may also explain the rare signature which includes his tribal lineage as a Levite, שמואל יוסף עגנון ברבי שלום מרדכי הלוי.

<sup>35</sup>Midrashically, the demographic ratio between Levi and the rest of the tribes is analogous to that between Israel and the nations, i.e., they were the smallest in number. See *Bamidbar Rabbah*, 5:2 — "Rob not the needy, refers to the tribe of Levi. Why does he call them needy? Because they were poorer in number than all the other tribes."

*ligyonot*. Their martyrdom, then, can only serve to reinforce the indictment against God's injustice or inaction.<sup>36</sup>

The emphasis on the irreplaceable nature of God's people escalates within the composition from "hasn't many to put in our place" of the second paragraph to "no others, as it were, to put in his place" at the end of the fourth. When the focus shifts from the general (all Jews, in diaspora or Israel) to the specific (Israel), the loss of Jewish life crushingly impacts on God's presence in the world. The finite resource of Jewish life within the land of Israel, when depleted, is irreplaceable. Ipso facto, God Himself is irremediably diminished. God's vulnerability in this specific context is potently conveyed by the realignment of *ligyon* and *paqad*. In this instance *paqad* appears in its sense of "appointing"<sup>37</sup> or delegating the "legions" of Israel to the position of "watchmen of His palace."<sup>38</sup> The Zionist pioneers are entrusted with divine security. As *shehiphqido* implies, they are personally handpicked by God. Their demise not only leaves God increasingly exposed, but the *niphqad* that communicates the "watchmen's" absence semantically mounts an assault on the integrity of His appointments (*hiphqid*). The *niphqad* has vitiated the *hiphqid*, calling into question God's omnipotency.

The prerequisite of domicile in the land of Israel, which qualifies one for the assignment as a "palace watchman", is adroitly couched by the phrase, "everyone who dwells" (*kol hador* כָּל הָדָר). This is reminiscent of the Talmudic formula which distinguishes those who reside in Israel from those who don't as analogous to those "who have a God" and those who don't.<sup>39</sup> The importation of this introductory formula, *kol hador*, in the circumstance of dwindling "palace watchmen" actually subverts the formula's original purport and collapses the distinction. Should the decline in the palace guard not be curtailed, then the palace will be overrun and the regal occupant forced to flee. Living in the land will be found to be wanting of a God, absent by virtue of indifference, rather than expressive of His presence.

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<sup>36</sup>Eliezer Kalir, in a piyut composed for the occasion of the special reading of *parshah shekalim*; stylistically articulates the reason for singling out the tribe of Levi from the census as follows: נִפְקָד נִפְקָדוּ לְבָדוּ יָקָר שְׁלִישִׁי בְּתוֹכָם לֹא הִפְקָדוּ כִּי לְגִיּוֹן מִלְּךָ לְבָדוּ "the precious third within them was not counted for the king's legion must be independently counted" in *Siddur Avodat Yisrael*, eds., S. Baer and I.B. Levinsohn (Berlin: Shoken, 1867) p. 651.

<sup>37</sup>For a number of examples where *paqad* appears in this sense see Numbers 1:50; Isaiah 62:6. In modern Hebrew it is also used to designate a rank in the army or police force.

<sup>38</sup>For other examples of palace (פַּלְטֵרִין) within the context of king parables, see B.T. *Hagigah* 16a; *Sanhedrin* 38a; 91a.

<sup>39</sup>See B.T. *Ketubot* 110b and 111a generally for the supreme virtues of residing in the land of Israel, e.g., those who live in exile are considered as if they have committed the most heinous crime imaginable in Judaism, idolatry.

Paragraph two closes with a "diminishment" and "decline of strength" that God's "grandeur" and "kingdom" experience as a result of death. This acts as a lead into paragraph three which introduces the rationale for reciting the *Kaddish* with "that is why. . . ." It is a prayer which calls for a restoration of this divine depreciation and an injunction against the further erosion of His majesty. The prayer is not anthropocentric, "not for ourselves let us have fear." Rather, it expresses a theocentric concern for the integrity of "the superlative splendor of His exalted holiness." The "decline in strength" (*tashut koah* תַּשׁוּת כּוֹחַ)<sup>40</sup> must be remedied by a supplication which demands a bolstering of strength through the refrain "magnified be the power of the Name" (*yigdal koah hashem*).

This last aspiration recalls Moses' advocacy for the defense of Israel in the face of God's wrath ignited by the biblical scouts/spies affair. His argument climaxes with the perception of an impotent God that would gain widespread acceptance should the people be wiped out in the desert, "for He had no ability to bring the nation to the land promised them and therefore He slaughtered them in the desert" (Num. 14:16). Moses persuasively argues therefore that the moment calls for "may the power of the Lord be magnified." Many of the medieval exegetes take this to mean a plea for an emotional demonstration of "power," the power to quash anger and *din* with an overarching exercise of compassion and mercy (*rahamim*).<sup>41</sup> The evocation of this biblical affair in Agnon's *kaddish* reinforces the claim on God to halt the spiral of death taking place in the land of Israel in 1947 by way of an implicit *a fortiori* argument. The crime of the scouts was a rejection of Israel and a defeatist attitude which dismissed the possibility of ever wresting control of the land from the hands of superior forces.<sup>42</sup> If God's power were magnified by the preservation of those who would not have entered Israel, surely it would be exponentially magnified if those engaged in combat to maintain sovereignty over the land were guaranteed protection.

Agnon's reference to the hopeful sanctification of His name "in all the worlds which he created according to His will" alters the singular "world" in the original standard version of *kaddish* to the plural "worlds." Though this may allude to the kabbalistic

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<sup>40</sup>For an example of the rabbinic use of this phrase see B.T. *Berakhot* 32a which is pertinent to its usage in the *petiha*. Moses experiences a "weakening" which motivates him to force God to quell His anger and refrain from destroying His people.

<sup>41</sup>See Nahmanides, ibn Ezra, Rashba, Seforno and Hizkuni on Numbers 14:17 who all see the "power" being called for here as the exercise of control over the emotion (or the *sefira*) of anger by mercy and patience. See also the commentary to the *siddur* by R. Eliezer ben R. Yehuda (*Rokeah*), ed. Moshe Hershler (Jerusalem, 1992), Vol. II, p. 436.

<sup>42</sup>The protestation of the spies which declined engagement with the occupant nation of Canaan "because he is stronger than us" (Numbers 14:31) is midrashically transformed into a sacrilegious reference to God's feebleness by reading us (*mimenu*) as Him (*mimeno*). See B.T. *Sotah* 35a.



worlds that reflect hierarchical levels of reality,<sup>43</sup> Agnon's concrete historical concerns suggest a different allusion. One of the midrashic significations of God's final all-embracing assessment of this creation, "that it was very good" (*tov meod*), is a contrastive one—this world is good as opposed to all the other worlds which were created and destroyed.<sup>44</sup> The present creation is a product of successive experimentation, refined to the point of perfection, that enabled God to render this final evaluation. Perhaps divine judgment pronounced upon the completion of this progressive creation was premature. Though natural death may be beneficially concomitant to creation,<sup>45</sup> violent death and massacre are evidence of its imperfection. The variant plural "worlds" then poses a challenge to vindicate the original process by purging these imperfections. Otherwise the series of "worlds which He created according to His will" was a mere exercise in futility betraying anything but a "sanctification of the Name."

One more discrepant reference to the original *kaddish* in this paragraph serves to reorient its focus from God to man and the world. The inadequacy of language in the veneration of God is expressed by the *kaddish*'s transcendent description of Him "beyond all blessings, song, praise and comfort that are uttered in the world." Agnon inverts all this God-directed adulation to represent immanent worldly conditions. In addition, God's sovereignty is dependent on the world's proclivity toward these states of harmony, "for if His sovereignty is manifest in the world, there is peace in the world and blessing in the world, and song in the world, and a multitude of praises in the world and great consolation in the world and the holy ones, Israel, are beloved in the world." The sevenfold refrain of "in the world" (בְּעוֹלָם) acutely supplants the prayer's divine transcendence with a worldly immanence. Finally those words of homage (blessing, song, praise, consolation), whose original *kaddish* objective (God) eluded them, dissipated in the unattainability of their target. However, Agnon, by bracketing them with "peace" and "holy ones, Israel, are beloved in the world," achieves their containment within a palpable geopolitical context. Peace and the embrace of the Jews entrench a set of terms into attracting the very thing they had no hope of gaining proximity to, God's presence. Agnon's ironic and dissonant use of the *kaddish* and rabbinic traditions does not signal their endorsement. Instead, as Esther Fuchs and others have argued, Agnon's relationship to classical texts reveals "a deep seated consciousness of the troublesome and often inadequate answers provided by Jewish traditional sources to the

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<sup>43</sup>See for instance Gershom Scholem's discussion in *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1974), pp. 116–122.

<sup>44</sup>See *Bereshit Rabbah* 3:7; 9:2.

<sup>45</sup>See R. Meir's interpretation of *tov meod* as *tov mot*, i.e., even death is an essential constituent of creation (*Bereshit Rabbah* 9:5).

perennial questions of the existence of evil, the suffering of the righteous, and the tragic history of the Jewish people."<sup>46</sup>

The next paragraph draws its inference from a classic rabbinic hermeneutic tool the argument *de minore ad majus* or *qal vehomer*.<sup>47</sup> This logical technique shifts the focus entirely away from divine glorification to the supreme sacrifice of those individuals who have been killed for "His name, His people, His land and His heritage." Their deaths cast a much wider net impacting on virtually every component of Israel's unique triadic relationship in the world—God, nation, and land. The fourfold repetition of the divine third person reinforces God's dependence on this particular class of individuals whose deaths are bound up with all those ideals that manifest His presence on earth. Each death contributes to the gradual obliteration of that presence. Israel is often singled out in the Hebrew Bible as God's nation and "heritage" (*nahalah* נַחֲלָה; Deut. 32:9; Isa. 19:25; Joel 4:2), whose identification with God's share in the world figures prominently in Mosaic arguments to immunize Israel from God's wrath. Jewish deaths lend credibility to a view of divine powerlessness.<sup>48</sup> The repercussions for God and Israel are exacerbated by the nuanced resurfacing of the *lityon* metaphor apposite to the term *nahalah* which triggers the Levite analogy we have seen previously. The Levite allusion imports a reciprocity associated with *nahalah*—since the Levites were not apportioned any share in the land, they were compensated with God Himself as a substitute, "the Lord is their heritage (*nahalah*)" (Deut. 10:9; 18:2). The complementary relationship of Israel as God's *nahalah* and God as Israel's *nahalah* entwines the two in a veritable dance of death to the tune of the anguished cries of those fallen in 1947 Palestine. As I am arguing, Agnon's kaddish articulates a radical critique of God and traditional theodicy.

Divine incapacitation, Jewish vulnerability, despair and an indignant refusal to simply parrot the traditional *kaddish* homage to God erupt in an epithet borrowed from Lamentations, "the dear children of Zion (*benei tsiyon hayekarim* בני ציון היקרים)" (Lam. 4:2). Lamenting the ravages of destruction, the narrator contrasts the former

<sup>46</sup>"The Ancestral Tale—An Ironic Perspective," in *Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*, eds. D. Patterson and G. Abramson, p. 130.

<sup>47</sup>For the technical aspects of this form of reasoning see Louis Jacobs, *Studies in Talmudic Logic and Methodology* (London, 1961) pp. 3–8. The expression *harugei erez yisrael* הרוגי ארץ ישראל itself conveys an ironic ambiguity about the source of the killing. The term *haruge* is most often used rabbinically for those condemned to death by state apparatus, either the courts (*haruge bet din*) or the monarch (*haruge malkhut*). Though the former conducts itself in compliance with strict evidentiary rules and detailed investigation, the latter is more spontaneous and can dispense with these rules. It could also refer to those unjustly executed by repressive foreign rule. Agnon's use of this term is suggestive that those deaths (God here is a "king") are more appropriately classified as the latter rather than the former. See B.T. *Sanhedrin* 47b; 48b; 63a *for bet din* and B.T. *Pesahim* 50a; *Baba Bathra* 10b; *Sotah* 48b *for malkhut*.

<sup>48</sup>See Deut. 9:26, 29.

dignity of the "children of Zion" who were "worth their weight in fine gold" with their present degenerate state of cheap earthenware.<sup>49</sup> With this phrase Agnon has imported the sense of an anomalous chapter in the book of Lamentations which stands out in its utter lack of direct address to or demand of God. The reference neutralizes the very essence of prayer as supplication and displaces adjuration with desperate exhaustion. One biblical scholar's characterization of the oblique message conveyed by the absence of addressing God in chapter 4 of Lamentations aptly captures the mood Agnon wished to engender in his *petiha*, "The survivor's strength, emotional responsiveness, and capacity to reach for help have shrunk and grown dim like the city's gold (4:1). Resignation and despair have triumphed over anger and resistance."<sup>50</sup>

*Lamentations Rabbah*, midrashically stimulated by the term "dear (*yaqar*) children of Zion," relates its meaning to a tragic situation set in the historical context of the Roman sack of Jerusalem. The dynamic between the two midrashic protagonists is instructive, for it corresponds to that which is operative in Agnon's composition. The Midrash relates as follows:

"R. Joshua b. Hananiah once went to the great city of Rome. He was informed that there was a [Hebrew] boy in the prison, kept there for an immoral purpose. He went and saw the boy who had beautiful eyes, a comely face, and curly locks and was used for a perverted practice. He stood at the doorway to test him, and cited this verse over him, *Who gave Jacob for a spoil, and Israel to the robbers?* (Isa. XLII, 24), to which the boy responded, *Did not the Lord? He against Whom we have sinned, and in whose ways they would not walk, neither were they obedient unto His law?* (ib.). When R. Joshua heard this he quoted over him, THE PRECIOUS SONS OF ZION, COMPARABLE TO FINE GOLD, and his eyes flowed with tears. He exclaimed, "I call heaven and earth to witness that I am confident he will be a teacher in Israel. I swear by the Temple that I will not move from here without ransoming him at whatever price they set upon him! It is said that he did not move from there until he had ransomed him at a high price; nor did many days pass before he became a teacher in Israel. Who was this boy? He was R. Ishmael b. Elisha."<sup>51</sup>

R. Joshua, like Agnon, observes an irreparably depressing scene of depredation. His response, like Agnon, is to cite a part of a biblical verse rife with despair and which offers a critique of a God who has allowed this desperate scene to materialize. The victim salvages God with his counter-citation which somehow redeems his own suffering

<sup>49</sup>The unusual Hebrew term for "worth their weight," *mesulaim*, imported into the *petiha* by virtue of its association with "dear children of Zion," is strikingly assonant with the current threat of the Moslems (*muslam*) and may have motivated Agnon's choice of epithets here.

<sup>50</sup>Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 59.

<sup>51</sup>*Midrash Eichah Rabati*, ed. S. Buber (Vilna, 1899), p. 143.



by causally legitimizing, however naively, his own fate.<sup>52</sup> Though inspired by an abiding faith, it is ultimately a tangible material sacrifice by R. Joshua that restores the victim to his rightful place in *Eretz Israel*. Agnon, likewise, is about to crown his *petiha*, by subtly transfiguring a quiescent deferential prayer into a provocative activist one.

The climactic paragraph addresses all of Israel in its nationally shared experience of tragedy and mourning, "all you who mourn in this mourning." The object of this mourning's contemplative direction is now identified as a father, a tribally concerned king and redeemer rather than an amorphous "king of kings of kings." Former distance evolves into relational proximity as part of a rallying cry for national unity in confronting a crisis. The *kaddish* is to be recited on God's behalf as well as on Israel's. Agnon then encapsulates the entire prayer with an extract from its commencement (Sanctification of the name; heralding of the messiah) and with one from its conclusion (comprehensive peace).

Bridging the two verbatim quotes from the traditional *kaddish* is the highly evocative phrase "with our own eyes we may behold" (*venireh ayin beayin* בעין בעין ונראה). This phrase radiates out and lands us in two biblical locales where the near identical phrase appears. Isaiah 52:8 prophetically anticipates a messianic era signalled by the celebratory roar of those who witness its redemptive achievement, "your watchmen raise their voices, as one they shout for joy. For every eye shall behold (*ayin beayin yiru* יראו בעין בעין) the Lord's return to Zion. Raise a shout together O ruins of Jerusalem for the Lord will comfort His people and will redeem Jerusalem." This allusive reference links the threads of all the motifs introduced by this closing paragraph. Mourning obliges comfort (*nhm*). A national consensus in mourning can only be neutralized by a united (*yahdov*) demonstration of joy. God is called upon in his capacity as "redeemer" (*goel*) and has Him manifest as a *goel*. Desperation demands prayer that is affirmatively acknowledged in Isaiah by the very instruments of prayer, voices (*qol*), and shouts (*raninu*).

The other reference projects us once again into the spies affair, where it assumes an entirely different tenor as part of a spirited debate with God. Moses, as we have noted previously, argues that extreme punitive measures by God would invoke a pervasive negative perception of God's capacity. The argument is bolstered by noting the widespread report that God is "beheld, with their own eyes" (*ayin beayin nireh* נראה בעין בעין) by the people of Israel. Rather than evidence of God's love for his people, their deaths implies His powerlessness in their regard. Agnon's allusion also imports the

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<sup>52</sup>See Alan Mintz's perceptive analysis of this midrash who notes the irony "in the superiority of the boy's knowledge and faith to that of the Rabbi. It is the boy, innocent in his own deeds who is afflicted by God in an unspeakable way; yet it is he who knows that his suffering is not meaningless and random and who is willing to accept responsibility for the sins of his people" (Ch. 2 of *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* [Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996], p. 69).

Midrashic accentuation of Moses' insolence by its play on the phrase *ayin beayin* assonantly resonating with "balanced"; "What is the meaning of, 'Face to face'? R. Aha said in the name of R. Simeon b. Levi: Moses said: 'Lo, the Attribute of Justice lies on evenly balanced (כַּמְעוּרֵי) scales; Thou sayest, "I will smite them with pestilence," but I say, "pardon, I pray Thee"' (Num. XIV, 19). He [Moses] said further: 'The matter is evenly balanced; we will see, who will prevail, "Thou O Lord" or I.' R. Berekyia said: God said to him: 'By your life, you have nullified My [will] and yours prevails.'"<sup>53</sup>

### Wieseltier cum Agnon: A Realignment

Agnon's *kaddish* is an example of what Emil Fackenheim has described as "mad Midrash," an impossible affirmation of both a Jewish past and future informed by a sacred tradition. The image of a God who weeps over his own excessively devastating reaction to his children's misdeeds and then finds comfort in their continued formulaic pronouncement of *yihei shemeih rabbah*<sup>54</sup> is adapted by the *petiha* to the current Jewish condition. By lamenting the powerlessness of God and the creeping erasure of His presence that escalates with each death, a protest is registered against the manner in which divine providence is exercised, or indeed, abdicated. The fledgling Zionist state must not be allowed to become simply another venue for the relentless suffering and slaughter experienced by the Jews of Europe. Agnon composed an introduction to *kaddish* that was consistent with the redemptive/restorative thrust of the pre-State Zionist enterprise. The midrashic madness that permeates it results from a paradoxical assault *on* and *affirmation of* the tradition at the same time. For Fackenheim, "the mad midrashic Word turns into a *Kaddish* for all the victims of the anti-world"<sup>55</sup> by restoring to God His power. Agnon's transformation of the *kaddish* then has, in effect, brought the mad midrash hermeneutic home to its most natural environment, the *kaddish* prayer itself.

Israel's destiny, Agnon is asserting, can only be realized by the initiative of its people, even when that initiative militates against the very will of God. The Mosaic model positions the Jews as the spearheads of their own redemption thereby overpowering divine fiat. Agnon has reenvisioned a *kaddish* which exposes a divine vulnerability that has God receding into the background while man advances to determine his own future. The new *kaddish* straddles the traditional world of Buczacz and the post-Holocaust embryonic Zionist state with language drawn from the former yet transfigured to meet the tragic dimensions of the latter. Both Agnon's and Wieseltier's allegiances to their learned pasts were too strong to allow for the option of simply breaking away and forging a path *de novo*. The future may be, in Wieseltier's words, a

<sup>53</sup>*Bamidbar Rabbah*, 5:13.

<sup>54</sup>B.T., *Berakhot* 3a.

<sup>55</sup>*Supra*, n.10, p. 333.

"succession of antecedents,"<sup>56</sup> but it is necessarily so, not sufficiently so. Both desperately sought comfort in the *kaddish*, but not to be comfortable. Both engage the biblical and rabbinic traditions to recast the *kaddish*, but not in order to perpetuate its traditional mold. In Wieseltier's case the task was to liberate the *kaddish* from its mythic overlay as a prayer for the dead and repatriate it to its intellectual origins in study and learning. In Agnon's, it was to frustrate the theocentrism of the *kaddish* so as not to blaspheme the memory of the "watchmen of the palace" as well as those prevented by a concentrationary universe from ever having taken up their posts as "watchmen."

The restoration of the world envisioned at the conclusion of the *kaddish* can only be realized by the "legions" who are charged with the defense of the divine "palace." The road which Fackenheim traces between two characters of Elie Wiesel's novels, another master of the mad midrash hermeneutic, is precisely the road traversed by Agnon's *petiha*. One has been killed in the Holocaust and one in the battle for independence. It is a road that,

leads from the final Kaddish for Leib the Lion in *The Gates of the Forest* to the final argument with Gad, the Israeli officer in *A Beggar in Jerusalem*. Leib has fought against, but has been killed by, the Holocaust when it murdered his people. Gad is killed only after having helped save the state which is the heir of the murdered people. The Kaddish for Leib can do no more than restore to God a crown and sceptre that have little power and majesty so long as the world remains unrestored. Gad helps restore the world—or at any rate, what after the antiworld has become its indispensable center—when he helps save the Jewish state, the heir of the exterminated Jews, from being itself exterminated.<sup>57</sup>

In this sense, though there is no explicit mention of the Holocaust, Agnon offers a *kaddish* that is a bridge between the old world and the new. He has preserved a liturgical formula whose essence is commemorative by subverting its formulaic character. Alan Mintz has recently argued that Agnon's response to the Holocaust did not consist of "lamentation, martyrology, theodicy, or conventional forms of consolation but the recreation in words of what is lost in fact."<sup>58</sup> Although Mintz is referring to Agnon's epic retellings of his hometown and eastern European roots, the *petiha* can now also be considered an integral part of this enterprise. As I have argued, the *petiha* is precisely an attempt to emancipate the *kaddish*, the quintessential "conventional form of consolation," from its "convention." By doing so Agnon retrieved another classic expression of a world that was "lost" and that was itself in danger of being "lost."

What is also "maddening" about Agnon's *kaddish* is that it is uttered on God's behalf as well as man's, and yet any prayer's ultimate address is God Himself. He draws

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<sup>56</sup>*Kaddish*, p. 294.

<sup>57</sup>Michael L. Morgan, ed., *The Jewish Thought of Emil Fackenheim* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987), p. 334.

<sup>58</sup>Alan Mintz, *Translating Israel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 109.



His strength from His people and His presence in the world is a product of their restorative success. Agnon orchestrates an inversion of the initial emotive response elicited from Wieseltier. Its passionate indignation is intended to subside and be supplanted by an indefatigable admiration for the “legions” rather than the “king.” By establishing a kind of intertextual discourse between Wieseltier’s and Agnon’s *kaddish*, as I have done, the nature of their respective enterprises comes into sharper focus. Agnon has provided the structural model by which to categorize Wieseltier’s *Kaddish*—the *petiha*. The final text remains the same, yet it is now infused with some six hundred pages of intellectual and emotional engagement with a rabbinic past to which he is hostage. His *petiha* renders his filial obligation a “homecoming”<sup>59</sup> and the *kaddish* becomes an acceptable vehicle for mourning. Conversely, Wieseltier’s emotive response was the catalyst toward an understanding of Agnon’s *kaddish* as a mad midrash. The result is an endorsement of a familiar, halakhically prescribed text as an expression of mourning, but one that is now both confrontational and restorative.

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<sup>59</sup>*Kaddish*, p. 496.

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