



SUNY PRESS, 2016

The guns converged on Hladik, but the men who were to kill him stood motionless. The sergeant's arm eternized an unfinished gesture. On a paving stone of the courtyard a bee cast an unchanging shadow. The wind had ceased, as in a picture. . . . He had asked God for a whole year to finish his work; His omnipotence had granted it. God had worked a secret miracle for him; German lead would kill him at the set hour, but in his mind a year would go by between the order and its execution.¹¹

In the very last line, Borges has Hladik is shot to death on March 29, at 9:02 a.m. Even though no evidence of a finished manuscript of *The Enemies* can be found, the prisoner dies satisfied: his life has been justified. Its justification has to do with immortality. Borges's statement is clear: a writer's *raison d'être* is to leave behind the better part of his talent, and to struggle so that that contribution is finished, even if only "ideally." It is clear, to me at least, that in the face of tyranny and death, the Argentine understood what Jews in Europe were about: faith, endurance, and posterity.



Another modern Jewish writer attracting Borges's interest, albeit with considerably less enthusiasm, was Agnon, aka Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (1887–1970). Their connection has been studied far less in his oeuvre. In the mid-sixties, Borges delivered a couple of lectures at the Instituto Cultural Argentino-Israelí in Buenos Aires, one on the *Book of Job*, the other on Spinoza. These lectures were eventually translated into English. A chance remark to Neal Sokol—included in *Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations* (2004)—in which I state that Borges never read Shmuel Yosef Agnon, prompted a Canadian friend, Carl Rosenberg, editor of *Outlook*, to send me, so as to correct my ignorance, a third,

significantly shorter lecture by Borges, previously unknown even to specialists. It was delivered at the same institution in 1967, approximately a year after Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize, which he shared with the German poet Nelly Sachs.

In "On Sh. Y. Agnon," which I hereby reconstruct in English (the Spanish transcription is awful), Borges mentions, in passing, Agnon's edition of the *Tales the Ba'al Shem-Tov*. He also refers to *Days of Awe*, which Schocken issued in 1965 in the United States, under the supervision of Nahum Glatzer, with one of those elongated subtitles more suitable for poetry slams than for libraries: "being a treasury of traditions, legends and learned commentaries concerning Rosh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur and the days between, culled from three hundred volumes, ancient and new." But as the nonbeliever he was—and even less of an enthusiast of religious rituals—Borges prefers *Contes de Jérusalem* (1959), which he read in the French rendition of Rachel and Guy Casaril. The anthology includes nine of Agnon's tales, among them "Forevermore," "Tehila," "The Whole Loaf," "Ido and Enam," and "Orange Peel: A Fantasy."

I begin with some considerations that run the risk of appearing digressive but which should take us to the essential theme: the personality and oeuvre of our great contemporary, Shmuel Yosef Agnon. My ignorance of Hebrew—ignorance which I deplore but which it's late to remedy it—has forced me to judge him through *Days of Awe*, about the Jewish liturgical year; and *Contes de Jérusalem*. I'll limit myself to the astonishment I've experienced in these volumes, the latter especially.

Let me ask a simple yet complex question, which is what all questions are: What is a nation? My first reaction is to offer a geographical answer but it would be insufficient. Instead, let us envision a nation as the series of memories stored at the heart

of a people. George Bernard Shaw was once asked: How much suffering is humankind able to bear? His answer was that the suffering of a single individual is enough and is also the limit. In other words, the limit might be an abstraction, although the suffering itself is real. And so, if misery is impossible to measure in collective terms, how might one define a nation?

To me there isn't a clearer example of a nation than Israel, whose origins are almost confused with those of the world entire, and who reaches us today after much misery and exile. A nation is made of the accumulated memory of successive generations. In itself, memory is often approached in a couple of ways: as a barren collection of dates, names and locations; and as a catalog of curiosities. But there's another approach neither endorsed by historians, nor by students of folklore: memory as experience incarnated in people. This, precisely, is what I find in Agnon.

Contes de Jérusalem ought to be read like one reads Dante: as a series of tales, at once tragic and humorous; and as a set of symbols. Agnon enables us to appreciate ancient Jewish tradition through a game of mirrors. In it he also invites to recognize the role of Hasidism. Unquestionably, the Hasidic tales compiled by Martin Buber and, in his early years, by Agnon too, left an indelible imprint on him. For instance, "Ido and Enam," filled with mystery, is the bizarre tale of a scholar who, in an act of revelation, sees ninety-nine words of an unknown language. Ninety-nine are also the names of God; the Tetragrammaton, which is the hundredth one, is infallible. Indirectly, Agnon recalls in his pages the legend of the Golem, made out of sand by means of words by a Cabalist in Prague's Jewish quarter.

I shall now refer to "The Whole Loaf," a story about chance. It reminds me of Kafka, who is part of Jewish memory too. Agnon chronicles the infinite yet minuscule obstacles undergone by its hungry protagonist as he prepares for the Sabbath. Whereas Kafka was about the lack of hope, or else about a hope so remote it generates in us a terrible feeling of desperation, Agnon is patient: he waits because he's a believer. Indeed, one of the right decisions the Swedish Academy made recently was not to award its Nobel Prize to a writer of sadness and despair. Instead, it honored one who, like Bernard Shaw, also a laureate, is sensitive to tragedy but knows that a joyful conclusion to the human quest isn't altogether beyond us.

Another story in *Contes de Jérusalem* is about a country that could be any country. This one in particular is punished with a drought marked by an inexorably blue sky. Furthermore, enemies are always on the attack, the earth is barren and rivers are empty. The population is divided into two parties: on one side are the cover-headed, on the other the naked-headed. . . . The two parties are ready to destroy each other. Yet there's a single individual who is beyond any affiliation. He furtively leaves the city, praying for God to send a compassionate storm to stop the destruction. When the others find out, they excommunicate him. His sin: not to have alerted the authorities to his wishes. A decision is then made to have everyone build a huge tent for protection from the storm, which must be large enough to cover the entire country. A commission is established to decide what name to give to the tent. Alternative commissions take the responsibility of studying the etymology and orthography of the chosen name. As

the population wastes its energy in trivialities, God allows rain to fall—and the barren land is fertilized, just as modern Israel itself was fertilized. I hear a distant echo in Agnon's story of the Jewish tradition that says that every generation includes a total of thirty-six just men. By the way, this tradition was studied by Max Brod, Kafka's friend. Unacquainted with one another, these just men navigate the world and are replaced as soon as they die. Right now their dynasty redeems us.

Israel's memory is in Agnon—not an erudite but a living memory. He is known through a pseudonym; he didn't write for his own vanity. Somehow he knew he was the living memory of that admirable people to which, beyond the vicissitudes of blood, we all belong: the people of Israel.¹²

The interest in Agnon is part of Borges's admiration for Israel as a young nation. His relationship with the Jewish state was ambivalent at first, and only in later years—when he himself became an institutional luminary—did he soften his approach to it. It isn't that Borges was critical of Zionism. In fact, judging by his work, he seems to have had a limited knowledge of it. International politics didn't interest him in the least. He seldom talked about Theodor Herzl, nor even about Eliezer ben Yehuda, credited for the modern revival of the Hebrew language.

Borges visited Israel twice. The first trip came at the invitation of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. It was in recognition of his philo-Semitism, and in particular of his positive views on Israel. He had been active in the Casa Argentina en Israel-Tierra Santa, a project that sought to create an Argentine cultural center in Jerusalem. He also was the first to write in *Sur* (no. 254, September-October 1958). In the "An Autobiographical Essay," done in collaboration of Norman Thomas Di Giovanni, Borges stated:

Early in 1969, invited by
spent ten very exciting days
I brought home the convict
oldest and the youngest
from a very living, vigilant
of the world. Since my
been interested in Jewish
integral element of our so-
and during the Israeli-Ar
I found myself taking in
outcome was still uncertain
battle. A week later, I wr
Israel was, of course, still
of my visit. There, along
recalling these lines from

Over whose acres walk
Which fourteen hundred
For our advantage, on

Actually, there are a total
lection *In Praise of Darkness*
in his *Obras Completas*. I don't
rendered into English. Herein

Who shall tell if you,
In the lost labyrinth of
That is my blood? Wh
Where my blood and
It doesn't matter. I kn
Book that comprehens
By the red Adam, as v
And agony of the Cru
You're in the Book th
Of each face approach

Early in 1969, invited by the Israeli government, I spent ten very exciting days in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. I brought home the conviction of having been in the oldest and the youngest of nations, of having come from a very living, vigilant land to a half-asleep nook of the world. Since my Geneva days, I had always been interested in Jewish culture, thinking of it as an integral element of our so-called Western civilization, and during the Israeli-Arab war of a few years back I found myself taking immediate sides. While the outcome was still uncertain, I wrote a poem on the battle. A week later, I wrote another on the victory. Israel was, of course, still an armed camp at the time of my visit. There, along the shores of Galilee, I kept recalling these lines from Shakespeare:

Over whose acres walk'd those blessed feet,
Which fourteen hundred years ago, were nail'd
For our advantage, on the bitter cross.¹³

Actually, there are a total of three poems in Borges's collection *In Praise of Darkness* (1969). All were later included in his *Obras Completas*. I don't believe these poems have been rendered into English. Herein my versions. First, "To Israel":

Who shall tell if you, Israel, are to be found
In the lost labyrinth of secular rivers
That is my blood? Who shall locate the places
Where my blood and yours have navigated?
It doesn't matter. I know you're in the Sacred
Book that comprehends Time, rescued in history
By the red Adam, as well as by the memory
And agony of the Crucified One.
You're in the Book that is the mirror
Of each face approaching it,