

Dictionary of Literary Biography

Shmuel Yosef Agnon

(8 August 1887 – 17 February 1970)

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BOOKS: *Ve-Hayah he-Akov le-Mishor* (Jerusalem: Y. H. Brener, 1912; Berlin: Jüdischer, 1919); *Giv 'at ha-Hol* (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1919); *Be-Sod Yesharim* (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1921); *Sipur Me-Hamat ha-Metsik* (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1921); *'Al kapot ha-man'ul: Sipure ahavim* (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1922); *Die Erzählung vom Tora-schreiber* (Berlin: Marx, 1923); original Hebrew version published as *Agadat ha-sofer* (Tel Aviv: Omanut, 1929); *Der Verstossene* (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1923); *Polin* (Tel Aviv: Hedim, 1924); *Ma'aseh ha-meshulah me-erets ha-Kedoshah* (Tel Aviv: Kupat Ha-sefer, 1924); *Ma'aseh rabi Gadiel ha-Tinok* (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1925); *Tsipori* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1926); *Sipur ha-Shanin ha-Tovot / Ma'aseh ha-Rav Vêha-Orah* (Tel Aviv, 1927); *Kol Sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, volumes 1–6 (Berlin: Schocken, 1931–1935); volumes 7–11 (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1939–1952)—comprises volumes 1–2, *Hakhmasat Kalah* (1931), translated by Israel Meir Lask as *The Bridal Canopy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran, 1937); volume 3, *Me'az U-Me'atah* (1931); volume 4, *Sipure Ahavim* (1931); volume 5, *Sipur Pashut* (1935), translated by Hillel Halkin as *A Simple Story* (New York: Schocken, 1985); volume 6, *Be-shuvah va-nahat* (1935); volume 7, *Oreah natah la-lun* (1939), translated by Misha Louvish as *A Guest for the Night* (New York: Schocken, 1968; London: Gollancz, 1968); volume 8, *Elu Vê-Elu* (1941), selection translated by J. Weinberg and H. Russell as *A Dwelling Place of My People: Sixteen Stories of the Chassidim* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1983); volume 9, *Temol Shilshom* (1945), translated by Barbara Harshav as



Shmuel Yosef Agnon in London a few days after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, December 1966 (AP World Wide)

Only Yesterday (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); volume 10, *Samukh Vê-Nir'eh* (1950); and volume 11, *'Ad henah* (1952); *Bi-levav Yamim* (Berlin: Schocken, 1935); translated by Lask as *In the Heart of the Seas: A Story of a Journey to the Land of Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1948);

- Kovets Sipurim* (Tel Aviv: Keren Yisra'el Mets, 1937);
Mi-dirah le-dirah (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1939);
Pi Shenaim o me-Husar Yom (Tel Aviv, 1939);
Sefer Ha-Ma'asim (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941);
Shevu'ath Emunim (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1943); translated by Walter Lever as "Betrothed," in *Betrothed, & Edo and Enam: Two Tales* (New York: Schocken, 1966; London: Gollancz, 1966);
'Al Berl Katsenelson (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1944);
Sipurim ve-agadot (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1944);
Kelev Hutsot (Merhavyah: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1950);
Kol Sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon, 8 volumes (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1953–1962)—comprises volume 1, *Hakhmasat Kalah* (1953); volume 2, *Elu Ve-Elu* (1953); volume 3, *'Al kapot ha-man'ul* (1953); volume 4, *Oreah natah la-lun* (1953); volume 5, *Temol Shilshom* (1953); volume 6, *Samukh Ve-Nir'eh* (1953); volume 7, *'Ad henah* (1953); and volume 8, *Ha-Esh ve-Ha'etsim* (1962);
'Ad olam (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1954); translated as *Forever More* (New York: Schocken, 1961);
Tehilla, and Other Israeli Tales, by Agnon and others, translated by Lask and others (London & New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1956);
Pen-ishom ha-mavet (Tel Aviv, 1960);
Shene Talmide hakhamim she-hayu be'renu. Agadat ha-sofer, edited by Naftali Ginatton (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1967);
Sipure Yom ha-Kipurim, edited by Ginatton (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1967);
Sipurim: Yalkut le-vet ha-sefer ha-yesodi, edited by Ginatton (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1967);
Selected Stories of S. Y. Agnon [text in Hebrew, commentary in English], edited by Samuel Leiter (New York: Tarbut Foundation, 1970);
Shirah, edited by Emunah Yaron (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1971; expanded edition, 1974; expanded edition, 1978); translated by Zeva Shapiro as *Shira* (New York: Schocken, 1989);
Ir u-Melo'ah (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973);
Be-Hanuto shel Mar Lublin (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1974);
Lifnim Min Ha-Homah (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1975);
Me-atmi el 'atmi (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1976);
Yidische verk, edited by Dov Sadan (Jerusalem: The Yiddish Department, Hebrew University/The Council for Jewish Culture in Israel, 1977);
Pithe devarim (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1977);
Mivhar Sipurim, edited by Ginatton and Zvi Massad (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1978);
Korot Batenu (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1979);
Sefer Ha-Otiyot (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1983); bilingual edition translated by Robert Friend as *Agnon's Alef bet: Poems* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998);
Takhrikh shel Sipurim, compiled by Yaron (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1984);
Bi-demi Yameha: Ve-od Sipurim (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1991);
Kol Sipurav shel Sh. Y. Agnon, 9 volumes (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998–).
Editions in English: *Twenty-One Stories*, edited by Nahum Norbert Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1970; London: Gollancz, 1970);
A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories, edited by Alan L. Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (New York: Schocken, 1995);
Yafo Yefat Yamim: Leket mi-tokh Sipurav shel Sh. Y. Agnon / Jaffa, Belle of the Seas: Selections from the Works of S. Y. Agnon [bilingual edition], selected by David Sharir, translated by Barbara Harshav (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998).
- OTHER: *Das Buch von den polnischen Juden*, edited by Agnon and Ahron Eliasberg (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1916);
Moaus Zur: Ein Chanukkahbuch, edited by Agnon (Berlin: Jüdischer, 1918);
Sefer, sofer, ve-sipur: Sipurim 'al sofrim ve-al sefarim, edited by Agnon (Jerusalem, 1938; expanded, Jerusalem: Schocken, 1978); selections published as *Sifrehem shel Tsadikim* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1961);
Yamim Nora'im, edited by Agnon (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1938);
Atem re'item, edited by Agnon (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1959); translated by Michael Swirsky as *Present at Sinai: The Giving of the Law* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994).

Shmuel Yosef Agnon is one of the greatest modern Hebrew writers and an important prose writer of the twentieth century. Critics have described his achievements as singular and his art as universal. Dedicating himself to his craft, the self-effacing writer raised Hebrew literature to a global plane, blending authentic Jewish heritage with European sources to present instructive tales that posit a moral and legal conundrum reflective of the modern condition. He was a 1966 recipient (sharing the honor with Nelly Sachs) of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first granted to a Hebrew writer. His contribution to the Jewish state is manifested elsewhere than just in the literary realm. Annually, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism, hundreds of thousands of synagogue congregants cite the Prayer for the Welfare of the State of Israel, written in 1948 by Agnon together with Chief Rabbis Yitzhak Herzog and Ben Zion Uziel.

Agnon has been feted as one whose standing is akin to that of William Shakespeare in England; he has been memorialized on the fifty-shekel note as well as on the first commemorative banknote to celebrate Israel's fiftieth anniversary of independence. A Tel Aviv street bears his name, and on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of his birth, the Israeli Parliament convened a special session to honor the wordsmith. In 2002, when the National Yiddish Book Centre listed their one hundred greatest works of modern Jewish literature, Agnon's three novels occupied the fourth, fifth, and sixth places. In addition, his novels and stories appear frequently as compulsory reading in Israeli schools.

Yet, outside Israel, Agnon is virtually unknown. This obscurity is principally because of the formidable difficulties involved with translating his idiosyncratic and allusive Hebrew, which is bristling with wordplays and acrostics and interlarded with quotations, echoes, and references from a vast array of biblical sources. One of his translators, Hillel Halkin, remarked in a 1989 article by Matt Nesvisky that Agnon "was in a class by himself . . . there's so much going on in his language. To impersonate Agnon in English, a translator has to exercise his ingenuity to the utmost." The difficulty of getting across in English the full flavor and profundity of the Agnon prose may be one reason why the broad, lasting international appreciation accorded to other modernist giants has not been forthcoming, despite the Nobel Prize. Sharon Green notes also that Agnon's virtuosity lay in his ability to "hold in creative tension the Jewish religious tradition and the secular modern world, both of which he shows to be needed for Jews to thrive," and that "The dialectical tension in his work is probably the reason why many readers find his works enigmatic." Moreover, his highly allusive style, subtle turns of thought, and purposeful ambiguity pose an intimidating challenge to the reader.

More than anyone else, Agnon advanced the idea of creating not only a new literature in Hebrew, but a new culture composed of a synthesis of Eastern European traditions and modern Israeli norms. Agnon was an interpreter of Jewish life, serving as a cultural conduit between the subjective experiences of Eastern European Jewry and its historical national memory. He chronicled both the disappearing world of European orthodox Jewry and the emerging milieu of the Zionist pioneers, the majority of whom were revolting against the long-established tenets of that orthodoxy. Green maintains that the "uniqueness of Agnon is that he was able to capture the richness of traditional life, while at the same time he was absolutely clear sighted about the dangers such a life holds for Jewish survival in modern times."

Sources usually give Agnon's birth date as 17 July or 26 July 1888, but biographer Dan Laor puts the date

at 8 August 1887. Agnon was born Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes in the Jewish town of Buczacz in eastern Galicia, then part of Austria-Hungary (now Buchach, Ukraine), although in his Nobel acceptance speech he noted that he regarded himself as "one who was born in Jerusalem." He was born to a middle-class family of rabbis and scholars; his father, Shalom Mordechai Halevi, a qualified rabbi, worked as a fur merchant and was a fervent and educated disciple of the Hasidic rebbe of Chorotov. His presence was deeply influential on the boy: "All I know," Agnon maintained (according to biographer Laor), "I learned from my father." In his address at the state banquet delivered in honor of the Nobel laureates, Agnon revealed that he composed his first poem at age five out of longing for his father, who was often away. His father, together with a local rabbi, taught the boy Talmud as well as the teachings of the Jewish philosopher Maimonides. From his mother, Esther Farb, whose family belonged to the stream of Mitnagdim (a Jewish movement whose strict rationalism stood in sharp contrast to the emotive mysticism of the Hasidim), he acquired a knowledge of German literature. Agnon's drama is a blend of these divergent views.

While the shtetl was the universe of his childhood, where he was immersed in religious education, his work was shaped by the clashing forces of a transitional world. The period of Agnon's youth was a time of turmoil, when the pogroms in Russia following the assassination of Czar Alexander II in 1881 wreaked havoc on the Jews. Consequently, a considerable flow of Jews poured out westward to Europe, with a smaller stream choosing Palestine as their destination.

He decided to become a writer when he was eight and published his first poem in Yiddish when he was fifteen. Over the next three years (1903–1906) he produced about seventy literary works in Hebrew and Yiddish that were published in Galicia in journals such as *Hamitzpeh* and *Hayarden* (in 1977, the Hebrew University published the collection of stories and poems he composed in Yiddish during those years). In 1907, at age nineteen, he left the shtetl and came to Palestine as part of the great wave of emigration (known as the second Aliyah) and settled in Jaffa and Jerusalem. There, the budding writer served as the first secretary of the Jewish Court in Jaffa and was confronted with the contradictory confluence of Judaic tradition, the cosmopolitan Western culture of the twentieth century, and modern Hebrew literature. Temporarily jettisoning his religious habits during his first stay in Palestine, he published his first story, "Agunot" (Forsaken Wives), in 1908 in the journal *Ha-Omer*. Concerning star-crossed couples in Jerusalem, the tale displays the style of writing seen in the author's later work. The story not only enhanced his nascent reputation but also gave him his pseudonym, which he adopted

as his official family name in 1924: Agnon is taken from *agunot*, a term applied to women who have been abandoned by their husbands and are left in a state of limbo since they cannot remarry.

Critics have suggested that the name “Agnon” is aimed at braiding the author’s destiny to that of the Jewish people. Agnon perceived himself as trapped in a similar situation as the abandoned women—caught between different universes but belonging to neither, a fractured position dramatized in his writing. Baruch Hochman says that it is no accident that Agnon appropriated that name:

The very word is redolent of loss, but also of the infinite yearning and ineffable tenderness elicited by loss. All of Agnon’s work was to pivot on such feeling. First there was the sort of loss rendered in this tale: of loved ones torn away in the midst of life, by chance, by fate, by death or desire. Then there was historical loss: the submergence of the world of origins to which one’s feelings are bound, in the abyss of history. Finally, there was metaphysical loss: of transcendental objects of desire in the bewilderment of modernity.

Ruth Wisse proffers another reading: “The adoption of the Hebrew name suggests that the writer will always remain within the bounds of tradition but without full security, like that afforded a wedded spouse.”

Agnon repeatedly tied parts of his autobiography to the annals of Jewish history. For example, he liked to claim (inaccurately) that he was born on the Ninth of Av, the momentous date that marks the destruction of the two Jewish temples, as well as the supposed time when the future messiah will be born. Additionally, he connected the two occasions his house was wrecked (in 1924 by fire, and in 1929 by rioters) to the obliteration of the two temples. Similarly, in his fiction, one can discern semi-autobiographical aspects. Buczacz, his childhood town, serves as the backdrop in several stories, appearing under the fictional name of Szybuzs, which translates as “error” in Hebrew. Szybuzs functions as the all-purpose metaphor for the fading mythical space the shtetl once occupied in the diaspora.

In 1912 Agnon published his first novella, *Ve-Hayah he-Akov le-Mishor* (And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight), with the support of his friend, the writer Yosef Haim Brenner. The work was noticed by several literary specialists, and the aspiring writer was urged by Arthur Rupin, a major figure in the Zionist movement, to broaden his horizons in Berlin. In 1913 Agnon traveled to Germany, where for the next eleven years he gained a reputation as a litterateur, mainly because of his mastery of the German language and the impressive fiction he began publishing in Berlin. During his sojourn in Berlin, he served as a research assistant

to academics, gave Hebrew lessons, and worked for a publisher of Jewish-themed books, all the while attending lectures on philosophy and the social sciences.

During these restless years, living also in Munich, Leipzig, and Wiesbaden, he helped found the journal *Der Jude* (The Jew) and edited the *Juedischer Verlag* (Jewish Publisher). Embraced by the Jewish intelligentsia, in 1913, while in Berlin, Agnon met Shlomo Zalman Schocken, a self-made businessman and philanthropist who became an admirer of the young man and consequently financed the publication of his books. Schocken’s extraordinary support (in the form of a writing stipend) permitted Agnon to live free from financial worries and to concentrate comfortably on writing. Schocken Publishing, which still publishes Agnon’s work, relocated to Tel Aviv in the 1930s after the Nazis closed it down, and later the firm opened an office in New York. Schocken, together with Gershom Gustav Schocken, the editor of the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz* (owned by the Schocken family), organized the lobby that eventually led to the awarding of the Nobel.

When in the summer of 1916 Agnon was summoned for a medical checkup in anticipation of conscription into the Austrian army, he was horrified by the possibility of military service. He ingested a large number of pills and chain-smoked in an effort to make himself sick enough to avoid the draft. Dismissed by the medical board, he nevertheless was required to stay in the hospital for several months afterward.

In 1920 Agnon met and married Esther Marx, the feisty daughter of a well-to-do orthodox family that initially opposed the union, believing she was marrying a man below her status. The couple, who were married for fifty years (until Agnon’s death), had a son and a daughter, both born in Germany. In 1983 Agnon’s daughter, Emunah Yaron, gathered and edited letters that Agnon and his wife exchanged. The book, *Esterlain Yekirati* (Darling Esther), is a cornucopia of intimate details, shining a new light on the political situation in Jerusalem as well as Agnon’s longing for his wife and affection for his two children. The letters are written in the same lyrical prose one finds in Agnon’s stories.

Although he had begun writing in Yiddish as a child, Agnon chose to write his major works in Hebrew, the ancient holy tongue that had been moribund for hundreds of years until revived and turned into a reemerging language by Eliezer Ben Yehuda at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In a 1995 *Buffalo News* article, Mark Shechner observes that to write in Hebrew in 1908 was “to draw one’s language and frame of reference from traditional liturgy and to envision a future based on sacred time and space in which Judaism would not be simply preserved but renewed and trans-

formed.” Unlike other pioneers of secular fiction, such as I. L. Peretz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Sholem Aleichem, and Isaac Babel, who turned to Yiddish, Russian, and German, Agnon elected for Hebrew because he wanted to write for a future nation that would be located in Eretz Israel (The Land of Israel) rather than in Europe or the United States. Agnon had been an ardent Zionist since he was seventeen, and championing Hebrew as the modern language of his writing corresponded to the philosophical tenets of Zionism and enlightenment, two movements that promoted Hebrew as the language of emancipation and argued for Western modernization as the road to rebuilding the Jewish nation.

Submerged in biblical and talmudic teachings, Agnon filled his works with pious folktales, Hasidic-like parables, Gothic romances, and stream-of-consciousness plots—reminiscent of European literature in the manner of Jorge Luis Borges and Bruno Schulz—that underscore the sufferings and history of the Jewish people. As a host of theorists have observed, Agnon’s whole output is crossed with references to Scandinavian, Russian, and French literature, pointing to the fact that he read widely and was conversant with European novelists such as Gustave Flaubert (whose virtues he exalted in correspondence), Miguel de Cervantes, Schulz, and Stefan Zweig. Yet, Agnon insisted in his Nobel acceptance speech that he was influenced primarily by “the Bible, Mishna, Talmud, Midrash and Rashi’s commentary on the Bible,” the next influences being “the medieval halachic commentators, Hebrew poets and philosophers led by Maimonides.” Certainly, Agnon drew much inspiration from Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, a master storyteller who paved the way for Agnon to write rabbinically themed tales in a secular world where every action carries symbolic overtones. He edited several wide-ranging anthologies of rabbinical texts, such as *Yamim Nora'im* (1938, Days of Awe), a cluster of folktales inspired by the Jewish festivals; *Atem re'item* (1959, Ye Have Seen), which brings together material extending from the Bible to the Hasidic scribes of the nineteenth century; and *Sifrehem shel Tsadikim* (1961, Book of the Righteous), selections from *Sefer, sofer, ve-sipur* (1938, Book, Writer, Story), a volume of Hasidic lore.

Straddling the worlds of the sacred and the modern as an orthodox Jew, Agnon often depicted religion as the only bulwark against the moral disorder of contemporary society. Gershon Shaked, who labels Agnon a revolutionary traditionalist, maintains that the revolutionary aspect can be attributed to the tendency in Agnon to show that the new social order sweeping through Europe was in truth a type of anarchy that disoriented the Jews. In a headnote for *Tehilla, and Other Israeli Tales* (1956), Israel Meir Lask explained:

Agnon’s stories of life a hundred years ago and more ago are shrouded in a mellow nostalgia, a family chronicle warmth similar to that of a grandmother telling the tales of her clan. The closer he comes to the contemporary scene, however, the less pleased with his subject matter he appears to be. His tales of life fifty years ago are marked by an almost photographic realism while when he comes to the present day a certain undercurrent of asperity can be detected in the apparent serenity that characterizes all he writes.

Agnon also did not refrain from criticizing an unchecked single-mindedness to one’s faith. One such example is *Agadat ha-sofer* (1923, The Tale of the Scribe). It concerns a pious Jewish scribe who devotes all of his energy to his craft and thus neglects his suffering wife, who remains childless. The story ends with the righteous man’s death, following that of his wife, though he manages to complete a Torah scroll in her memory. Alongside Agnon’s total identification with the yeshiva world, one can also detect a certain ambivalence that doggedly avoids superfluous sentimentality. One invariable element that informs the Agnon imagination is that an over-reliance on modern attitudes on the one hand, and an exclusive belief in the moral certainty brought forth by tradition on the other, can imprison as much as it can liberate.

Aloof and reserved, Agnon rarely sought the limelight and refrained from articulating his social and political views. He was intensely serious about his religion and vigorously defended the orthodox world against what he viewed as unfair attacks. Shortly before traveling to Stockholm to receive the Nobel Prize, he consulted rabbis as to whether or not it was appropriate for him to leave the Holy Land for the occasion. Concurrently, he retained close ties to the less religiously observant literary and scholarly communities. Yet, he did not shy away from disapproving of the religious community, especially when religious parties entered the political fray. He was disappointed that the Jewish experience was diluted and condensed to a simple political credo. Thus, his nationalist belief in the Greater Land of Israel according to the Bible stemmed from his religious philosophy and thinking rather than any political outlook. In fact, Agnon belonged to the Land of Israel movement, founded in 1967, which believed that the whole of the land of Israel included Western Palestine.

A coterie of Agnon experts believe that his strength lies chiefly in short fiction, a form that encases the midrashic sketch and the Hasidic yarns. Agnon’s lengthier opuses resemble his short fiction: the novels are structured as vignettes braided together thematically. *Sefer Ha-Ma'asim* (1941, The Book of Deeds) is a multistranded collection of twenty-one stories characterized by expressionism, Surrealism, and stream of consciousness that tell

of the anguished suffering of the Jews in Europe. The intensity of the plots led the critic Nahum Norbert Glatzer to observe (in his afterword to *Twenty-One Stories*, 1970) that Agnon “must have felt compelled to abandon the form of the well-composed tale for the experience of chaos.” Agnon’s stories chronicle and reflect an inward and reclusive mood, at times melancholic, embodied by a cast of forlorn intellectuals, neurotic husbands, and remorseful scholars and philosophers. These characters are rendered powerless by personal angst and sexual immobility. The affinity with Franz Kafka is unmistakable. Although Agnon denied any suggestion that he was influenced by contemporary writers (insisting he had never read Kafka, even though the latter’s collected writings sat on a bookshelf in Agnon’s study), Kafka’s signature elements of irony, dream-like sequences, and skepticism are much to the fore in Agnon’s writings, fused with his religious doubt. A portion of the author’s Nobel acceptance speech conveys the image of a solitary artist aloof and ignorant of present-day modes: “Some see in my books the influences of authors whose names, in my ignorance, I have not even heard, while others see the influences of poets whose names I have heard but whose writings I have not read.”

Also evident in the Agnon universe is Jerusalem; a systematic check of his works reveals that the name Jerusalem is mentioned 2,600 times. In many ways, Jerusalem serves as the central axis of Agnon’s life and canvas. When he arrived in Jerusalem in 1924, after spending twelve years in Europe, he rented a room and immediately headed for the Western Wall. Arriving at dusk, he covered his face and wept. David Patterson believes that amid Agnon’s anguished sense of exile and rupture from tradition, Jerusalem personified the one stable positive element, stating that in Agnon’s tales the city is “endowed with a personality of her own, and becomes a symbol for all that is meaningful and permanent and harmonious in life. It is as though the holy city alone contains the seeds which might restore that wholeness of spirit and oneness that are slipping through the nerveless fingers of our unhappy generations.” Seminal critics such as Baruch Kurzweil and Dov Sadan, who did much to enhance Agnon’s reputation, determined early on that Jerusalem was the soul and purpose in the Agnon canon, that it epitomized an absolute value within his world.

Agnon repeatedly declaimed his abiding love for Jerusalem, as in *Oreah natah la-lun* (1939; translated as *A Guest for the Night*, 1968): “My life and soul I shall give for you the holy city / Asleep and awake, you shall have my entire happiness.” Many of his tales and novels are set in the old city and depict Jerusalem in a loving, reverential fashion. In *Tehilla* (originally published in Hebrew in 1950 and translated in *Tehilla, and Other*

Israeli Tales, 1956), for instance, Agnon draws a direct parallel between the 104-year-old eponymous heroine, whose name radiates admiration (since it has biblical origins and means “praise”), and the city. Like Jerusalem, Tehilla is blessed with long life and embodies the supreme ideals of piety, holiness, and pride, usually associated with Israel’s eternal capital. The opening paragraph, although referring to Tehilla, can just as well be a paean to Jerusalem:

Now there used to be in Jerusalem a certain old woman, as comely an old woman as you have seen in your eyes. Righteous she was, and wise she was, and gracious and humble; for kindness and pity were the light of her eyes, and every wrinkle in her face told of blessing and peace. I know that women should not be likened to angels: yet her I would liken to an angel of God. She had in her, besides, the vigor of youth; so that she wore old age like a mantle, while in herself there was seen no trace of her years.

Agnon lived in the southern neighborhood of Talpiot for forty years, working from a small library-turned-office that is now a museum visited by tourists and the site of monthly lectures on his work. He followed a strict and spartan routine, rising early to say his morning prayers and then ascending the stairs to the private, tiny area where he toiled until noon. He would sometimes work all day and into the night. Near a stove, he stood at a polished wood podium writing by hand. Biographer Laor reports that Agnon stood to write, in order, as Agnon put it, “to grab the exact word I want from all those flying around the room.” Only after he was diagnosed with a heart condition in 1951 did he sit to work. For the serious and seasoned artist, writing was a craft of precision. Aharon Megged, a renowned Israeli writer, says that Agnon would get angry when someone criticized him. Seldom satisfied with his handiwork, he labored for months, even years, amending and substituting words and phrases in many versions, delivering the full flavor of his linguistic richness and own inimitable archaic Hebrew (sometimes tagged as “Agnonit” for its distinctiveness). Accordingly, there are in existence many manuscripts and widely disparate versions of his collected works, including one in eleven volumes (1931–1952) and another in eight volumes (1959–1962).

When Agnon worked, no one was allowed into the study, and his wife, Esther, had to ensure that there was absolute quiet. Laor records that the street on which Agnon lived was blocked off to traffic by the city council, while a sign hanging at the head of the street proclaimed to all passersby: “No cars are to enter. Agnon is Writing.”

A true lover of old books, he routinely patronized secondhand bookshops, purchasing rare editions (some-

times dating back to the seventeenth century) with money he steadily set aside. During his spell in Germany, he acquired old Jewish books for the private library of his patron, Schocken. Books and their traumatic loss figure prominently in the writer's life. In the summer of 1924, while he was still living in Bad Homburg, Germany, a fire consumed his large private library, including valuable manuscripts and "Bitzror ha-hayim" (In the Bond of Life), a nearly completed autobiographical novel whose publication was imminent. Also destroyed was a compilation of Hasidic legends that Agnon had assembled with his friend Martin Buber. The causes for the mysterious fire have never been explained (the fifty-shekel note that bears his portrait includes on the other side a précis of that event). Agnon, who was in the hospital for a hernia operation at the time, lost 4,000 Hebrew books. This disaster had a lasting impact on Agnon, who saw the fire as an omen. In the wake of this misfortune, he became convinced that his stopover in exile was too long, and in 1924 he returned to Palestine, where, as he revealed in his Nobel Prize address, he wrote "all that God has put into my heart and into my pen."

During the bloody Arab riots of 1929, his rented home in Jerusalem was invaded and looted. Although he had managed to save most of his cherished books and writings, once again thousands of volumes were ruined and damaged. Agnon wrote about this calamity in the 1941 tale "Me'oyev Le'ohav" (From Foe to Friend), a multifaceted, allegorical narrative about a mighty battle waged by a persistent wind (an all-purpose metaphor for the Arabs) and a determined settler who wishes to live in the suburb of Talpiot. Shattered, Agnon asked his friend, architect Fritz Kornberg, to design a new dwelling in Talpiot for him and his family, which was completed in 1931 and is now a museum. On the wall of Agnon's house remains an inscription that encapsulates his intense feelings about his home: "I have built myself a house and planted myself a garden." The feeling of homelessness, of losing one's dwelling, or simply not having a house where one can lodge, is a strong current in Agnon's work, serving as a metaphor for the precarious situation of the Jew.

The wandering, homeless Jew and his relationship with the world is at the heart of Agnon's first novel, *Hakhnasat Kalah* (1931; translated as *The Bridal Canopy*, 1937), a folk epic first published as a story in 1920, rich in scale and ambitious in its thematic perspective. Formally, *Hakhnasat Kalah* resembles a patchwork of stories within stories, separate pieces stitched together around the main narrative and bound by such themes as marriage, charity, generosity, the role of providence, and rootlessness. Often compared to Cervantes's *Don Quixote de La Mancha* (1605), Agnon's novel is concerned with

the travels of the Hasidic Reb Yudel and his companion Notte through the towns and villages of nineteenth-century Galicia as he attempts to find a dowry for his daughters. Welding fantasy and realism, the adventures of the two peripatetic principals and the characters they encounter, each with a vivid story to tell, allow Agnon to paint a mosaic of Jewish and Gentile life, replete with folk-like vignettes, tragic tales, and homiletical wisdom. Looming large throughout is the emphasis placed on unwavering faith in the creator, as shown by Yudel's piety and love for his fellow man. In a wider context, the novel is a meditation on the decline of religious life in Poland, utilizing a religious protagonist whose worldview is obtrusively at odds with his secular surroundings but who maintains throughout his simple faith in God. Yudel's fidelity is rewarded when upon his return, he finds a buried treasure, giving him the wealth to provide for his daughters.

In Hochman's words, a key element in the novel is "the search for a past, a probing into a once-upon-a-time way of life. In *Hakhnasat Kalah* Agnon is the literary archivist of Galician Jewry, the comprehensive preserver of a now destroyed civilization." Critics, dazed by the mighty stream of digressions and Jewish lore that clog the main plot, have now realized that Agnon, who included *Hakhnasat Kalah* in his collected works (the 1931–1952 *Kol Sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon*), intended this project to serve as a thematic and aesthetic index for his later creations. Scholars have argued that in this novel Agnon sought to show (early in his career) that his future landmark projects would be fundamentally different from what his literary forebears had done, in both Hebrew and European letters.

Sipur Pashut (translated as *A Simple Story*, 1985), Agnon's 1935 novel, is anything but simple; it is a social treatise that dramatizes the conflict of Jewish middle-class mores with European modernist ideas of religious and sexual freedom, as well as rebellion against indurate boundaries of behavior. At the same time, it is a perceptive social allegory melded with a character study of the dilemmas entailed in human existence and the sacrifices man must make to fit into a rigidly defined world. David Ghitelman writes that "*A Simple Story* is, in the order of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* or Andre Gide's *The Immoralist*, a complex and resonant meditation on the comforts of civilization versus its inevitable discontents."

Set in the first decade of the twentieth century in an East European backwater (the town of Szybuz), *Sipur Pashut* follows the life of Hirshl Horowitz, the only son of wealthy shopkeepers. He falls in love with Blume Nacht, his poor second cousin, who is sent to live with Hirshl's parents and work as a housekeeper following the death of her mother. Hirshl, a classic schlemiel who relishes the warmth of his middle-class family, is forced by his domi-

nant and overbearing mother, Tzirel, to repress his yearnings for Blume and marry the pre-matched, shallow Mina Ziemlich (daughter of a wealthy landowner). Hirshl's blistering affection for the woman who captured his heart, however, is not quelled but rather increases, resulting in restlessness, insomnia (he undertakes nocturnal walks hoping to catch a glimpse of Blume, only to see her vision at a lighted window), and eventually mental disintegration. The breakdown scenes are revelatory of an inner journey into the netherland of the psyche, coupled with chilling historical flashbacks to Jewish milestones of exile and destruction. Woven into the architecturally precise tale is a multihued portrait of the Jewish community in the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the dawn of the twentieth century, depicting the respite and success the Jews of Galicia benefited from under the tough czarist rule.

Aware of their son's pining, Hirshl's manipulative parents send him to a sanitarium at a distant city, relieved to learn that the townsfolk believe this move is a clever scam to help Hirshl avoid the draft. There, the frustrated young man is treated by Dr. Langsham, whose unconventional methods involve Freudian regressive therapy that takes the patient back to his childhood. Singing his patient nostalgic lullabies he remembers from the small Jewish village he grew up in and abandoned, the eccentric psychiatrist shows Hirshl that the only cure for the soul is a return to one's simple roots of Jewish spiritualism and living. As the novel draws to a close, Hirshl reconciles with his wife, rejoicing in parenthood and finding emotional and sexual contentment, seemingly embodying Agnon's affirmation of marriage as the bedrock of society.

What is the unsuspecting reader to make of Hirshl's final acceptance of the conformity to bourgeois existence? Is Agnon mocking a weak-willed character who, after being tempted by the chaos of thwarted, forbidden love, does not think for himself? Halkin, who first translated the book into English, views *Sipur Pashut* as an antimodernist tract, arguing that the conclusion of the novel ventures beyond the typical modernist aversion to bourgeois mores by suggesting that sexual desire is a destructive force and that middle-class values are what provide vitally needed constancy. By contrast, Robert Alter in *The New York Times Book Review* (22 December 1985) contended that there is "more irresolution in the novel" and that "to the end Agnon makes us painfully aware of the terrible price Hirshl pays for his final normality."

Agnon's talent was at its peak in *Oreah natah la-lum*, an unsettling, nightmarish account of the spiritual and material decline of European Jewry after World War I, as related by an unnamed narrator returning to his native town. The apocalyptic novel, first serialized in the

newspaper *Ha'aretz*, from 18 October 1938 to 7 April 1939, was inspired by Agnon's visit to Buczacz in 1930, after a sixteen-year absence, which provoked a Marcel Proust-like flood of childhood memories that constitutes one of the pillars of the work and explains the concatenation of the past and the present.

Upon his arrival at his hometown of Szybuzs, the hero discovers a community in decline, devoid of faith and ravaged by the war—the antithesis to the congregation of yore. As a teenager, Agnon had occasionally called his hometown "a city of the dead," and in *Oreah natah la-lum* this sentiment overhangs every scene and action. Agnon tips his metaphorical hat when his protagonist on arrival meets crippled watchmen and later a Jew-hating beggar, signifying the degradation of the place. Acute religious emptiness permeates diaspora life: the synagogues are almost barren, and those attending services do so out of routine, even presenting the guest with the key for the Bet Midrash (Jewish house of study), for which they have no further use. Starkly painful in tone and atmosphere, the tale records the despair Agnon felt and portends the desolation of Jewish life that followed. Nonetheless, the conclusion of the book is laced with optimism: prior to leaving, the narrator presents a newborn baby at a circumcision ceremony with a substitute key for the Bet Midrash. This hopeful message for the future is given added resonance in an essential scene in which the hero, now back in Palestine, finds the original key he thought he lost. Asserting that *Oreah natah la-lum* is Agnon's most important opus, Judith Romney Wegner writes that the novel constitutes an historical document of protest: "It is the author's testament to the inability of European Jewry to find an adequate replacement for the traditional culture that for centuries had sustained Jewish self identification and *raison d'être* in an alien world. Agnon bears witness to the disappointment of the *maskilim* (enlightened ones) who had hoped to forge a modern Jewish identity compatible with the Age of Reason, as well as to his own profound disillusionment with the failure of the *Haskalah* (enlightenment)."

Arguably Agnon's capstone, *Temol Shilshom* (1945, *The Day Before Yesterday*; translated as *Only Yesterday*, 2000) was the first of his novels to be located in Palestine, and although set during the second Aliyah, it was in fact written in the shadow of the Holocaust—evidenced in the interconnected motifs of death and rebirth it tackles. Alter explained in his 1985 review that Agnon dealt with the grim reality of the Shoah indirectly because of his fabulist proclivities: "he preferred to approach the menace of recent history obliquely, often displacing the raw terror of contemporary experience into various kinds of symbolic images and parabolic intimations that could be held at an intellectual distance." Alter adds that "the utter bleakness . . . of this novel's vision of man and God may

be, after all, a direct response to the nightmare of Hitler years.”

Temol Shilshom begins with a wish-fulfillment journey, proceeds with a series of picaresque adventures, dwells on love and loss, and finally ends on a tragic note. The buried themes of the book are about how often people fail to actualize their dreams and how bewildered they feel when they stumble against tragedy. Like many of Agnon's stories, *Temol Shilshom* deals with the twisted threads of life that expose fairy tales as mere fictions and show existence to be a whirlpool of dark, unfulfilled desires. Finally, it is about how the romantic images of places and ideologies rarely resemble their true state.

A reconstruction of early pioneer society, the novel is an insightful and sour critique of the Zionist endeavor that also examines the elegiac and dark undertow of human existence following the national and personal exile of the Jewish nation. Cosmic imagery, prophetic images, and apocalyptic messages abound as the novel seeks to reference and encompass the universal destiny and suffering of all people. The novel was recognized as such a gigantic achievement in world literature that in 1956 the critic Edmund Wilson, who compared Agnon to Kafka and Marc Chagall, publicly called for the author to be given the Nobel Prize, noting that “Agnon is a classic . . . one is ready to accept him as a true representative of that great line of Jewish writers that begins with the authors of Genesis.” The metaphysically loaded novel is a companion piece to Agnon's earlier tour de force, *Oreah natah la-lun*.

Temol Shilshom is the story of Yitzhak Kumer, a naive pioneer who travels from Galicia to Turkish-controlled Palestine, along with the massive wave of immigrants leaving the moribund world of the shtetl between the first decade of the twentieth century and the outbreak of World War II, intending to rebuild the Holy Land through backbreaking work. These pioneers were mainly secular idealists, intent on upholding the values of Jewish labor and resurrecting the Hebrew language. The dreamy-eyed Kumer, who left his Hasidic family in Szybuz for Zion, is impelled by the pioneer rhetoric and craves to plough its soil, make the desert bloom, and be revived by the place. An iconic emblem of the Zionist pioneers who strained to become the new Jews and build a new national Jewish home, he is also the quintessential schlemiel, denuded of self-reflection or will, hopelessly romantic and devoted to the doctrine that all of his fellow immigrants are brothers linked by a shared cause. Before long, the brutal economics of the times are exposed when Kumer, like his brethren, discovers that the Jewish farmers of the colonies prefer the docile Arab laborers, as they are cheaper and already familiar with working the land. It soon becomes apparent that the reality is far removed from the Zionist ideal as settlers strug-

gle to adapt to the cultural and social conditions of the harsh environment.

In response, Kumer settles in the bustling, secular Jaffa, where he becomes a peripatetic sign painter (painting is a metaphor in the book for the covering up of reality), while at the same time casting off the shackles of his religious upbringing. Despite eventually becoming a capable housepainter, Kumer lives with a recurring sense of failure for not working the land. In Jaffa, Kumer is agonized by the titanic choice between the secular and traditional worlds. With remarkable care for detail, and drawing on his memories of his own time there, Agnon paints Jaffa as a sensual, lively center, abrim with young lovers, would-be revolutionaries, writers, crooked politicians, and charlatans.

Over the course of his sojourn in Jaffa, the virginal Kumer meets and falls in love with Sonya Zweering, the seductive, dangerously sexual female figure who appears frequently in Agnon's corpus. For her part, Sonya treats the affair as a casual fling, whereas Yitzhak is so infatuated with the alluring female that he flagellates himself for not having done the honorable thing and married her. Crushed after Sonya capriciously ends their short-lived romance, Kumer moves to Jerusalem and into the arms of the virtuous Shifra, the only daughter of Reb Faish, an extreme fanatic of Me'ah She'arim who specializes in excommunications.

Jerusalem is the converse of Jaffa. It is a bastion of religious Jews and manipulative rabbis who are mostly anti-Zionists, enmeshed in shtetl-like surroundings. Amos Oz, in his 2000 collection of essays on Agnon, observes that Jerusalem is shown to be fossilized and empty, a portrayal filled with scathing barbs and irony. Still, Kumer is inveigled by Jaffa's charm, to which he comes back once more, but ultimately chooses Jerusalem. The return to Jerusalem also signals a resumption of his religious observance and an abandonment of his Zionist ideals. And although he marries Shifra, Kumer struggles to reconcile the spiritual vacuity of the present with the nostalgic image of the past.

Much of the drama of the novel comes from a subplot involving Balak, a dog on whose back Kumer, in an act of childish playfulness, paints the words “Mad Dog.” The stray animal, up until then a staid fixture on the streets of Me'ah She'arim, begins to suffer persecution by the inhabitants of the community, who heed the warning daubed on his fur. Pelted with stones, Balak is forced to flee his beloved neighborhood, where he scoured for kosher meat left by the butchers, and instead must eat disgraceful scraps from the Gentiles. The author imagines the dog's thoughts, as Balak comments on the people he encounters and the enigma of mankind, in a prose made up of different Hebrew architectonics. Whenever the narrative focus switches to Balak, the plot assumes a

Kafkaesque turn intermingled with magic realism. Balak, who wanders through the maze of Christian and Muslim quarters in the city, needs to call on all of his wiliness to survive the panic-seized residents. Soon, he emerges as a celebrated point of discussion in the diaspora, a cause for newspaper articles and debates and an object for various theories about his real import.

After a while, the exiled animal sets out to avenge his fate on the man who marked him and who is responsible for all his anguish. In the end, the two heroes meet for the second and last time. The mongrel bites Kumer, who dies a grotesque death from rabies (even though the dog did not have rabies when Kumer labeled him). Agnon underlines the biblical leitmotiv of the binding of Isaac near the coda of the book, when the hero, like the biblical Isaac, bound with ropes, squirms in pain like a dog from the torturous agony of his disease. Kumer's catastrophic and disproportionate punishment, coupled with God's silence in the face of such violence, served as Agnon's literary reaction to the German atrocities taking place. Nonetheless, the resolution of the book offers optimism—in a crucial scene, set a day after Kumer's funeral, a life-giving rain comes down to end the excruciating drought that has eroded the sun-baked land.

There have been many interpretations as to what Balak stands for. On one level, he may be said to be Kumer's bestial alter ego, embodying the primal and repressed desires the hero does not dare articulate. On another level, he can be read as a modern-day Job, suffering from inexplicable cosmic injustice and determined to decipher the mysteries of his bitter woes (at one point, he mutters "where is heaven?"). And on still another, he may, as Oz suggests, represent the motifs of desertion and displacement as well as the eternal search for love and home.

While the narrative obviously leads in many different directions, one operating tenet is the parallel drawn between Balak and Kumer. Both pine for the past—Kumer for the home that he was raised in, bursting with the sweetness of tradition and daily observance, Balak for the kosher food of Me'ah She'arim. Both feel despairingly lonely. Both search for meaning in their particular universe. And both have been deceived by the trickeries of life. After all, rather than building the land and being rebuilt by it, Kumer is destroyed in the end.

Agnon received many prestigious literary awards. He won the Usshiskin Prize for *Temol Shilshom* in 1950 and the prestigious Israel Prize for his collected stories in 1954 and 1958, as well as the Bialik Prize for Literature bestowed by the city of Tel Aviv, in 1935 and again in 1951. In 1962 the city of Jerusalem made him an honorary citizen. Then, in 1966, came the Nobel Prize.

Agnon's supporters, including Shlomo Schocken and professor Hugo Berman, had campaigned for a

Nobel nomination for him in 1947, following the success of *Temol Shilshom*. Although this attempt and others failed, the publication in English of *Betrothed, & Edo and Enam: Two Tales* in the summer of 1966 coincided with a wave of international critical acclaim for his earlier work that contributed to his winning the prize.

In his Nobel presentation speech, Swedish Academy member Anders Österling lauded Agnon's reputation as the foremost writer in modern Hebrew literature, noting that Agnon is "endowed with remarkable gifts of humor and wisdom, and with a perspicacious play of thought combined with naive perception—in all, a consummate expression of the Jewish character." At the banquet held after the official Nobel ceremony, Ingvar Andersson of the Swedish Academy commented to Agnon: "We honour in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom."

At the end of his life Agnon was completely debilitated by strokes and died of a final stroke in the town of Rehovot on 17 February 1970. He was buried on The Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Since the 1970s, his daughter has been collecting and publishing his voluminous writings, something her prolific father was reluctant to do while alive. As a result, there are now more works in print than there were in the author's lifetime.

Shirah (1971; translated as *Shira*, 1989), Agnon's swan song, was unfinished at the time of his death and was edited by his daughter according to her father's instructions. Agnon had worked on *Shirah* for twenty-five years and left a tangle of related materials. With no ending vouchsafed in the original, two chapters were subsequently added in 1974 and 1978 editions as the designated conclusion. This intricately plotted, penetrating novel works on many levels in probing the most grand of themes: the nature of art; love and obsession; evil; death; and beauty. Beverly Fields adds that Agnon undertakes some of the most perennial European motifs: "among them Thomas Mann's concept of life as a disease of matter, with art as the ultimate disease, and the legends of Faust, Prometheus and the Wandering Jew." Fields also points out that the main character's name—Manfred Herbst—calls to mind George Gordon, Lord Byron's 1817 verse drama *Manfred*, conjuring up resonances of those legends.

Shirah tells the story of Herbst, a German-born history professor immersed in German culture, who teaches at the Hebrew University of the 1930s. While in the hospital where his wife, Henrietta, is giving birth to their third child, he meets Shirah, a sickly, mannish, and enigmatic nurse (whose name means "poetry") with whom he begins a brief affair that later develops into a tormenting, erotic infatuation when she disappears.

The novel astonished many for its overt pattern of secularism and candid descriptions of sexual obsession

and existential angst. There was wide-ranging amazement at the lack of admiration for the sacred world, and surprise at a central character's scorn for tradition. Agnon populates his pages with secular German immigrants whose cultural affiliations are to the German republic they escaped from, rather than to the devout and pious Jews of Jerusalem, where they have made their home. There is a wealth of social detail conveyed through Agnon's collage of eccentric characters, including madmen, prophets, and poets who roam the streets of the Rehavia and Talpiot neighborhoods. In the background is a skein of historical references (the independence underground movements, Arab terrorism) that imbues the personal patchwork with a political strand. Palestine is under the rule of the British mandate, and the tumultuous conflict between Arab nationalism and Zionist nationalism is a prominent theme, particularly when Herbst is shot and his daughter Tamara joins one of the Jewish resistance movements.

Herbst's inability to finish a book is fused with his search for Shirah, whom he finally finds as a patient in a leper hospital in the 1974 edition. The disquieting relationship offers Herbst no contentment. His morbid fantasies about Shirah lead to a creative and emotional block and prevent him from completing his book. (In a case of art imitating life, Herbst's passion for collecting and organizing books parallels Agnon's own fixation.) The 1974 ending is laden with parable: after being afflicted with leprosy himself, Herbst decides to remain and care for Shirah. In the 1978 version, he deduces Shirah's fate and confesses his infidelity to his wife. Alan L. Mintz argues that the primary reason why the novel was not concluded is that the dialectic between Shirah as an unattainable object of desire and an allegorical container for "art, eros, purity, spirituality can simply not be accommodated by the worldly resources of the novel as a genre."

The macabre elements of the narrative are symbolic. For instance, Herbst's main area of study is Byzantine burial customs, while Shirah is enfolded by images of disease and death. Alter has opined that the answer to Shirah's identity lies in her name, averring that Herbst's fixation is with a pagan spirit of poetry. A repeated symbolic and visual trope in *Shirah* is the hero's death wish and self-destructive sexual desire, fully articulated through an undercurrent of dreams that afflict the respected academician. Herbst leads a double existence, born out of a lust for the inexplicably fascinating nurse who shatters the married man's sterile routine and domestic boredom. Driven to escape his austere life with the dull but devoted Henrietta, the hero is dominated by a libido that erotically enslaves him to the bold Shirah. Above all, *Shirah* is at once an exploration of modern man's fascination with death and the crumbling moral structure of society. Both themes are ones Agnon investi-

gates with compassion and restraint, marshaling his customary novelistic devices of dreams and allusions while tempering his irony.

Hand in hand with his major novels, Agnon published about six new short stories every year, which were featured in the Hebrew daily *Ha'arets*. In 1995 Agnon's short fiction was showcased in a new translation of twenty-five of his stories into English, titled *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*. The representative sampling of moral fables, autobiographical sketches, and psychologically perspicuous delineations spotlights Agnon's scope, ambition, and his keen ear and eye, thus illustrating the reasons he is appreciated and remembered for his shorter writings. The deceptively uncomplicated tales are cleverly subversive and derisive of the writer's own cultural domain. Profound loss and the disruptive collapse of relationships touch many of the eclectic story lines. In "The Doctor's Divorce," a young physician is wracked with regret and suffering for the absurd jealousy that drove his wife away; in "The Kerchief," a narrator reminisces about the demise of his childhood naiveté, exploring memory through his mother's Sabbath kerchief; and in "Two Pairs," a precious *tefillin* (set of phylacteries) is destroyed in a fire. The volume also displays the same strain that was so significant in Agnon's novels: an enchantment with the village of his birth, which was annihilated by the Nazis. On a broad scale, the single, unified community of Buczacz was for Agnon an example of how all people could peacefully live together.

Another central aspect in *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories* is that the act of writing and reflection emerges as a recuperative, symbolic way to deal with the loss experienced by the characters. One striking occurrence of this theme is in the title story, in which the narrator stumbles upon an unpublished rabbinic commentary and attempts to send the manuscript from Buczacz to the national library in Jerusalem. The Yeshiva student saves enough pennies to post the book but later discovers that the manuscript, a touchstone for the intellectual traditions of the old world, never made it to the Holy Land. Yet, writing the story counteracts and compensates for the commentary that seems to be in continuous transit.

Preeminent author Oz, who holds the Agnon Chair at Ben Gurion University in southern Israel, believes that every Israeli author is connected to Agnon, who set the bar so high that most aspire to only once reach his marvelous heights. Oz acknowledges Agnon as one of his literary mentors, as do A. B. Yehoshua, Aharon Appelfeld, and the late Yehuda Amichai. This admiration is further proof that Agnon is still a father figure and mentor to scores of Israeli authors, exerting an irresistible influence on his successors.

Haim Be'er, author of a 1992 study of Agnon's relationships with two other Hebrew authors (Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Brenner), notes: "Agnon is the centre of our cultural discourse. His work is the most frequent subject of Hebrew literary research. He stands at the juncture of trends and conflicts which make up our life today—Jewish and Hebrew culture, tradition, faith and Jerusalem. Through Agnon, you can relate to a variety of themes." Arnold Band, one of the first critics to examine Agnon's fiction, contends that Agnon resists easy pigeonholing, that for some readers he was "the epitome of traditional Jewish-folk literature; for others, he is the most daring of modernists. For the older reader, Agnon conjures up memories of Jewish life in Eastern Europe; for the younger reader, he wrestles with the central universal problems of our agonized century." Anne Golomb Hoffman, in commentary for *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*, concurs: "Agnon's is a restless writing. . . . He has been read by some as a pious storyteller, by others as a modern ironist. He is both and more."

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1966 Nobel Prize in Literature Presentation Speech

by Anders Österling, Member of the Swedish Academy

This year's Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to two outstanding Jewish authors—Shmuel Yosef Agnon and Nelly Sachs—each of whom represents Israel's message to our time. Agnon's home is in Jerusalem, and Miss Sachs has been an immigrant in Sweden since 1940, and is now a Swedish subject. The purpose of combining these two prizewinners is to do justice to the individual achievements of each, and the sharing of the prize has its special justification: to honour two writers who, although they write in different languages, are united in a spiritual kinship and complement each other in a superb effort to present the cultural heritage of the Jewish people through the written word. Their common source of inspiration has been, for both of them, a vital power.

Shmuel Agnon's reputation as the foremost writer in modern Hebrew literature has gradually penetrated linguistic barriers which, in this case, are particularly obstructive. His most important works are now available in Swedish under the title *I havets mitt* (In the Heart of the Seas). Agnon, now seventy-eight years old, began writing in Yiddish but soon changed to Hebrew, which, according to experts, he handles with absolute mastery, in a taut and sonorous prose style of extraordinary expressiveness. He was only

twenty when he left his native town in East Galicia, where, as the scion of an old and respected family, he had been brought up in a scholarly tradition. He felt drawn to Palestine, where now, as an aged classical author, he can look back on the long struggle for national reestablishment, and where the so-called cultural Zionism possesses in him one of its finest creative champions.

Agnon's unique quality as a writer is apparent chiefly in the great cycle of novels set in his native town of Buczacz, once a flourishing centre of Jewish piety and rabbinical learning, now in ruins. Reality and legend stand side by side in his narrative art. *Hakhnasat Kalah*, 1922 (The Bridal Canopy), is one of his most characteristic stories, in its ingenious and earthy humour, a Jewish counterpart to *Don Quixote* and *Till Eulenspiegel*. But, perhaps, his greatest achievement is his novel *Oreah natah la-lun*, 1939 (A Guest for the Night), which tells of a visit to Buczacz, the war-ruined city of his childhood, and of the narrator's vain attempts to assemble the congregation for a service in the synagogue. Within the framework of a local chronicle we see a wonderful portrayal of destinies and figures, of experience and meditation. The lost key to the prayer house, which the traveller finds in his knapsack only after his return to Jerusalem, is, for Agnon, a symbolic hint that the old order can never be rebuilt in the Diaspora, but only under the protection of Zionism. Agnon is a realist, but there is always a mystical admixture which lends to even the greyest and most ordinary scenes a golden atmosphere of strange fairy-tale poetry, often reminiscent of Chagall's motifs from the world of the Old Testament. He stands out as a highly original writer, endowed with remarkable gifts of humour and wisdom, and with a perspicacious play of thought combined with naive perception—in all, a consummate expression of the Jewish character.

Nelly Sachs, like so many other German-Jewish writers, suffered the fate of exile. Through Swedish intervention she was saved from persecution and the threat of deportation and was brought to this country. She has since then worked in peace as a refugee on Swedish soil, attaining the maturity and authority that are now confirmed by the Nobel Prize. In recent years she has been acclaimed in the German world as a writer of convincing worth and irresistible sincerity. With moving intensity of feeling she has given voice to the worldwide tragedy of the Jewish people, which she has expressed in lyrical laments of painful beauty and in dramatic legends. Her symbolic language boldly combines an inspired modern idiom with echoes of ancient biblical poetry. Identifying herself totally with the faith and ritual mysticism of her peo-

ple, Miss Sachs has created a world of imagery which does not shun the terrible truth of the extermination camps and the corpse factories, but which, at the same time, rises above all hatred of the persecutors, merely revealing a genuine sorrow at man's debasement. Her purely lyrical production is now collected under the title *Fahrtins Staublose*, 1961 (Journey to the Beyond), which comprises six interconnected works written during a twenty-year creative period of increasing concentration. There is also a series of dramatic poems, equally remarkable in their way, under the joint title *Zeichen im Sand*, 1961 (Signs in the Sand), the themes of which might have been taken from the dark treasure house of Hassidic mysticism, but which, here, have taken on new vigour and vital meaning. Let it suffice here to mention the mystery play *Eli* (1950) about an eight-year-old boy who is beaten to death by a German soldier in Poland when he blows on his shepherd's pipe to call on heaven's help when his parents are taken away. The visionary cobbler Michael manages to trace the culprit to the next village. The soldier has been seized by remorse and, at the encounter in the forest, he collapses without Michael's having to raise his hand against him. This ending denotes a divine justice which has nothing to do with earthly retribution.

Nelly Sachs's writing is today the most intense artistic expression of the reaction of the Jewish spirit to suffering, and thus it can indeed be said to fulfill the humane purpose underlying Alfred Nobel's will.

Doctor Agnon—according to the wording of the diploma, this year's Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to you for your “profoundly distinctive narrative art with motifs from the life of the Jewish people.” We should be happy if you would consider this international distinction as a sign that your writing need not be isolated within the boundary of its language, and that it has proved to have the power to reach out beyond all confining walls, and to arouse mankind's sympathy, understanding, and respect. Through me, the Swedish Academy conveys its sincere congratulations, and I now ask you to receive the Prize from the hands of His Majesty, the King.

Miss Nelly Sachs—you have lived a long time in our country, first as an obscure stranger and then as an honoured guest. Today the Swedish Academy honours your “outstanding lyrical and dramatic writings, which interpret Israel's destiny with touching strength.” On an occasion like this it is natural also to recall the invaluable interest you have shown in Swedish literature, a token of friendship which, in turn, has found a response in the desire of our Swedish writers to translate your work. Offering you the

congratulations of the Swedish Academy, I ask you now to receive this year's Nobel Prize in Literature from the hands of His Majesty, the King.

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Agnon: Banquet Speech

Introductory remarks by Ingvar Andersson of the Swedish Academy at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, 10 December 1966:

Shmuel Yosef Agnon, Nelly Sachs—This year's literary Prize goes to you both with equal honour for a literary production which records Israel's vicissitudes in our time and passes on its message to the peoples of the world.

Mr. Agnon—In your writing we meet once again the ancient unity between literature and science, as antiquity knew it. In one of your stories you say that some will no doubt read it as they read fairy tales, others will read it for edification. Your great chronicle of the Jewish people's spirit and life has therefore a manifold message. For the historian it is a precious source, for the philosopher an inspiration, for those who cannot live without literature it is a mine of never-failing riches. We honour in you a combination of tradition and prophecy, of saga and wisdom.

Miss Sachs—About twenty years ago, through the Swedish poet Hjalmar Gullberg, I first learned of your fate and your work. Since then you have lived with us in Sweden and I could talk to you in our own language. But it is through your mother tongue that your work reflects a historical drama in which you have participated. Your lyrical and dramatic writing now belongs to the great laments of literature, but the feeling of mourning which inspired you is free from hate and lends sublimity to the suffering of man. We honour you today as the bearer of a message of solace to all those who despair of the fate of man.

We honour you both this evening as the laurel-crowned heroes of intellectual creation and express our conviction that, in the words of Alfred Nobel, you have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind, and that you have given it clear-sightedness, wisdom, uplift, and beauty. A famous speech at a Nobel banquet—that of William Faulkner, held in this same hall sixteen years ago—contained an idea which he developed with great intensity. It is suitable as a conclud-

ing quotation which points to the future: "I do not believe in the end of man."

Agnon's speech (Translation)

Our sages of blessed memory have said that we must not enjoy any pleasure in this world without reciting a blessing. If we eat any food, or drink any beverage, we must recite a blessing over them before and after. If we breathe the scent of goodly grass, the fragrance of spices, the aroma of good fruits, we pronounce a blessing over the pleasure. The same applies to the pleasures of sight: when we see the sun in the Great Cycle of the Zodiac in the month of Nissan, or the trees first bursting into blossom in the spring, or any fine, sturdy, and beautiful trees, we pronounce a blessing. And the same applies to the pleasures of the ear. Through you, dear sirs, one of the blessings concerned with hearing has come my way.

It happened when the Swedish Chargé d'Affaires came and brought me the news that the Swedish Academy had bestowed the Nobel Prize upon me. Then I recited in full the blessing that is enjoined upon one that hears good tidings for himself or others: "Blessed be He, that is good and doeth good." "Good," in that the good God put it into the hearts of the sages of the illustrious Academy to bestow that great and esteemed Prize upon an author who writes in the sacred tongue; "that doeth good," in that He favoured me by causing them to choose me. And now that I have come so far, I will recite one blessing more, as enjoined upon him who beholds a monarch: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, Who hast given of Thy glory to a king of flesh and blood." Over you, too, distinguished sages of the Academy, I say the prescribed blessing: "Blessed be He, that has given of His wisdom to flesh and blood."

It is said in the Talmud (Tractate Sanhedrin 23a): "In Jerusalem, the men of discrimination did not sit down to dine in company until they knew who their companions were to be"; so I will now tell you who am I, whom you have agreed to have at your table.

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem. In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at

night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.

(Out of respect for the time, the rest of my words will be read in translation only.)

I belong to the Tribe of Levi; my forebears and I are of the minstrels that were in the Temple, and there is a tradition in my father's family that we are of the lineage of the Prophet Samuel, whose name I bear.

I was five years old when I wrote my first song. It was out of longing for my father that I wrote it. It happened that my father, of blessed memory, went away on business. I was overcome with longing for him and I made a song. After that I made many songs, but nothing has remained of them all. My father's house, where I left a roomful of writings, was burned down in the First World War and all I had left there was burned with it. The young artisans, tailors, and shoemakers, who used to sing my songs at their work, were killed in the First World War and of those who were not killed in the war, some were buried alive with their sisters in the pits they dug for themselves by order of the enemy, and most were burned in the crematories of Auschwitz with their sisters, who had adorned our town with their beauty and sung my songs with their sweet voices.

The fate of the singers who, like my songs, went up in flame was also the fate of the books which I later wrote. All of them went up in flame to Heaven in a fire which broke out one night at my home in Bad Homburg as I lay ill in a hospital. Among the books that were burned was a large novel of some seven hundred pages, the first part of which the publisher had announced he was about to bring out. Together with this novel, called *Eternal Life*, was burned everything I had written since the day I had gone into exile from the Land of Israel, including a book I had written with Martin Buber as well as four thousand Hebrew books, most of which had come down to me from my forebears and some of which I had bought with money set aside for my daily bread.

I said, "since the day I had gone from the Land of Israel," but I have not yet related that I had dwelt in the Land of Israel. Of this I will now speak.

At the age of nineteen and a half, I went to the Land of Israel to till its soil and live by the labour of my hands. As I did not find work, I sought my livelihood elsewhere. I was appointed Secretary of the Hovevei Zion (Lovers of Zion) Society and Secretary of the Palestine Council—which was a kind of parliament-in-the-making and I was also the first Secretary of the voluntary Jewish Magistrate's Court. Through these offices it was my privilege to get to know almost every Jewish

person, and those whom I did not come to know through these offices I came to know through love and a desire to know my brethren, the members of my people. It is almost certain that in those years there was not a man, woman, or infant in the Land of Israel whom I did not know.

After all my possessions had been burned, God gave me the wisdom to return to Jerusalem. I returned to Jerusalem, and it is by virtue of Jerusalem that I have written all that God has put into my heart and into my pen. I have also written a book about the Giving of the Torah, and a book on the Days of Awe, and a book on the books of Israel that have been written since the day the Torah was given to Israel.

Since my return to the Land of Israel, I have left it twice: once in connection with the printing of my books by the late Zalman Schocken, and once I travelled to Sweden and Norway. Their great poets had implanted love and admiration for their countries in my heart, and I decided to go and see them. Now I have come a third time, to receive your blessing, sages of the Academy.

During the time I have dwelt in Jerusalem, I have written long stories and short ones. Some have been printed; most I still have in manuscript.

I have already told how my first songs came out of longing for my father. The beginnings of my studies also came to me from my father, as well as from the Rabbinical Judge of our town. But they were preceded by three tutors under whom I studied, one after the other, from the time I was three and a half till I turned eight and a half.

Who were my mentors in poetry and literature? That is a matter of opinion. Some see in my books the influences of authors whose names, in my ignorance, I have not even heard, while others see the influences of poets whose names I have heard but whose writings I have not read. And what is my opinion? From whom did I receive nurture? Not every man remembers the name of the cow which supplied him with each drop of milk he has drunk. But in order not to leave you totally in the dark, I will try to clarify from whom I received whatever I have received.

First and foremost, there are the Sacred Scriptures, from which I learned how to combine letters. Then there are the Mishna and the Talmud and the Midrashim and Rashi's commentary on the Torah. After these come the *Poskim*—the later explicators of Talmudic Law—and our sacred poets and the medieval sages, led by our Master Rabbi Moses, son of Maimon, known as Maimonides, of blessed memory.

When I first began to combine letters other than Hebrew, I read every book in German that came my way, and from these I certainly received according to the nature of my soul. As time is short, I shall not compile a

bibliography or mention any names. Why, then, did I list the Jewish books? Because it is they that gave me my foundations. And my heart tells me that they are responsible for my being honoured with the Nobel Prize.

There is another kind of influence, which I have received from every man, every woman, every child I have encountered along my way, both Jews and non-Jews. People's talk and the stories they tell have been engraved on my heart, and some of them have flown into my pen. It has been the same way with the spectacles of nature. The Dead Sea, which I used to see every morning at sunrise from the roof of my house, the Arnon Brook in which I used to bathe, the nights I used to spend with devout and pious men beside the Wailing Wall—nights which gave me eyes to see the land of the Holy One, Blessed be He—the Wall which He gave us, and the city in which He established His name.

Lest I slight any creature, I must also mention the domestic animals, the beasts and birds from whom I have learned. Job said long ago (35:11): "Who teacheth us more than the beasts of the earth, And maketh us wiser than the fowls of heaven?" Some of what I have learned from them I have written in my books, but I fear that I have not learned as much as I should have, for when I hear a dog bark, or a bird twitter, or a cock crow, I do not know whether they are thanking me for all I have told of them, or calling me to account.

Before I conclude my remarks, I will say one more thing. If I have praised myself too much, it is for your sake that I have done so, in order to reassure you for having cast your eyes on me. For myself, I am very small indeed in my own eyes. Never in all my life have I forgotten the Psalm (131:1) in which David said: "Lord, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty; neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me." If I am proud of anything, it is that I have been granted the privilege of living in the land which God promised our forefathers to give us, as it is written (Ezekiel 37:25): "And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children forever."

Before concluding, I would say a brief prayer: He who giveth wisdom unto the wise and salvation unto kings, may He increase your wisdom beyond measure and exalt your sovereign. In his days and in ours may Judah be redeemed and Israel dwell in safety. May a redeemer come to Zion, may the earth be filled with knowledge and eternal joy for all who dwell therein, and may they enjoy much peace. May all this be God's will. Amen.

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