

## Alan Mintz

"THE SENSE OF SMELL," a beguiling short narrative, provides a revealing glimpse into the contradictions of Agnon's self-conception as a modern religious artist, or, depending on one's point of view, as a religious modern artist. On the one hand, the story's narrator presents his vocation as a writer of stories as being continuous with the creativity of the sages and sacred poets of classical and premodern times; a Levite by birth, he views the prose fiction he writes as lineally descended—despite shifts and transformations imposed by history—from the Levitical songs sung in the Jerusalem Temple. The guarantor of this vertical continuity is the Hebrew language itself, whose sacred and revealed nature imposes a discipline of faithfulness upon its belated users. On the other hand, the modernist axis of the story is manifest in the self-conscious and even playful way the author creates the persona of the narrator and goes about manipulating the discursive forms of the story. The anachronistic style of the story and the grandiosity of the narrator's self-presentation open up a space of parody and irony that qualifies in subtle ways the sincerity of the narrator's religious vocation. Whether the story overcomes these contradictions or merely contains them is a difficult determination that likely depends on the stance of the interpreter in relation to the very issues of tradition and modernity raised by the work itself.

It should be noticed at the outset that the story breaks into two distinct pieces: chapters 1 through 3 and chapters 4 through 7. It is in the second, longer part that the actual story, such as it is, is told. This is the tale of criticism the narrator received for using a word in a particular grammatical construction and the eventual vindication that came his way by both natural and supernatural means. The first part, by contrast, has little directly to do with the tale and has no narrative of its own to offer. It serves rather as a kind of expository prologue that expatiates on three subjects: the glory and sanctity of the Hebrew language; the craven short-sightedness of scholars who write in languages other than Hebrew; and the factors that sanction the narrator's vocation as a writer of prose fiction. The purposeful heterogeneity of "The Sense of Smell" as a whole, as expressed in the disproportion between these two pieces, is part of the

story's playful modernity even as it mimics the style of earlier forms of writing.

One of those antique styles is already in evidence in chapter 1, "The Excellence of the Holy Tongue." (There is, to begin with, a sense of mock seriousness conveyed in the very notion of dividing a short short story into formal chapters with at times long descriptive titles.) Although the style is not immediately recognizable as belonging to a particular text or period, the rhetorical ingredients suggest the discourse typical of a pious savant. The chapter begins with an ostensibly learned distinction between the languages of the world, whose meanings are based on the conventions of human usage, and the Hebrew language, whose meaning is guaranteed by the divine revelation of the Torah. But the pretense to scholarly observation is quickly swept aside by a kind of rapturous catechism in which the narrator poses a series of rhetorical questions, all of whose answers underscore the primacy of Hebrew. Rather than presenting historical evidence for his assertions, the narrator adduces quotations from the Song of Songs and from the liturgy in a manner that amounts to a midrashic exposition. (Because the passage is not, in fact, a real midrash—although it allows the reader to experience it as such—it belongs to a category special to Agnon that Gershon Shaked calls the "pseudo-midrash.")

After describing Hebrew as the language that embodies the intimate relations between God and Israel, the narrator brings his exposition to an eschatological apotheosis that is surprising in the practicality of its logic. When the Messiah reveals himself—which will be sooner rather than later, asserts the narrator, because we live in the later generations of history—he will of course speak Hebrew, and we shall not be able to understand him—nor he us—unless now, in the present moment, we exert vigilance over our use of the sacred tongue, guarding it from impurity and keeping it clear and precise. The linkage between proper language usage and the messianic age, while entirely taken for granted by the narrator, may not seem so manifestly self-evident to us.

In fact, the narrowly pious and messianic temper of these arguments is likely to make the contemporary reader more aware of what is excluded than included. Most of the arguments for the revival of Hebrew as modern written and spoken idiom were based on a nationalist premise: a nation needs a language of its own as well as a land of its own, Hebrew is the national language of the Jewish people, Hebrew bridges the gap between the ancient people and the people reborn, and so on. For the narrator of

"The Sense of Smell," however, there remains only the single divine, revelatory, and messianic axis.

After the loving encomium for the Hebrew language in chapter 1, the polemical tone of the second chapter ("Against the Scholars of Our Generation . . .") comes as something of a surprise. The targets of the narrator's ire are the majority of scholars who write Hebrew badly or who write in another language altogether, in addition to those "stupid folk among the Jews" who doubt whether a "dead" tongue like Hebrew can ever be revived as a spoken language. Against these voices stands the narrator's conviction of the utter self-sufficiency of Hebrew. In the chain of textual tradition stretching from Scripture through rabbinic literature, he asserts, all the necessary linguistic resources are to be found in abundance.

The catch, however, is that it is only God's beloved to whom "all those treasures of the holy tongue" are revealed; without immersion in these sacred texts, this abundance is not vouchsafed. That the narrator sees himself as included in this circle of the divinely favored is made manifest in chapter 3. In this chapter, his religious stance is disclosed by the method of his argumentation. Although he discourses on the scholars of his time and their failures, the way he uses evidence is very different from the practices of the academy. For example, to make his point that Gentiles who write in Hebrew are to be preferred to Jews who write in other languages, the narrator adduces evidence not from history but from Scripture. Even though Balaam, the Moabite prophet who appears in the Book of Numbers, is held accountable for the deaths of 158,600 Israelites in the desert, he merits having a portion of the Torah known by his name and a quotation from his prophecy placed at the beginning of the daily liturgy because of the very fact that he uttered his oracles in the Hebrew tongue. The narrator's indifference to history is similarly evident when it comes to the reasons he gives for why some of the great works of medieval Jewish thought were composed in Arabic. While any literate reader might be expected to know something of the role of Arabic in the transmission of Greek philosophy, the narrator offers an exclusively messianic explanation. Such a reader will not find it easy to accept the presumption that such a work as Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* was written in Arabic solely because the Jews of the time were exhausted by the exile and needed to be pacified like children by being spoken to in "whatever language."

The distinctness of the narrator's voice, at times fervent and at times querulous, has been wholly recognizable in the declarations and judgments

he has uttered so far. Yet those statements have been directed toward others, and it is not until chapter 3 that he speaks of himself; and when he does so, he takes off in a new direction rather than continuing to engage either of the subjects he has just taken up: the paean to Hebrew and the denigration of its betrayers. Instead, with no warning, he presents the reader with nothing less than a rationale for his vocation as a modern Hebrew writer. It is a moment of stunning self-revelation, although the elliptical concision with which the revelation is presented makes it fleeting and cryptic. The whole chapter is no more than fifteen lines in the Hebrew, and within that brief compass, the narrator presents a sequence of shifts and transformations whose import is heady but whose inner logic is elusive. We have to work hard to supply the connections.

The narrator begins by explaining that the reason he forgoes the pleasures of the world and devotes himself to studying the words of the sages is so that these words will be "present to his lips." There is a presumed comparison between the narrator and the so-called sages excoriated in the previous chapter, who complain about the poverty of Hebrew as a modern language. Unlike them, he experiences no such insufficiency because he immerses himself in the Hebrew texts of the tradition. But instead of a metaphor of immersion, we are given a metaphor of ingestion. The narrator stores up the words of the sages in his belly, and through an unexplained process of absorption and incorporation, the words—now his own Hebrew words?—present themselves on his lips.

Yet the ascetic life devoted to textual study, a high and virtuous calling, turns out to be distinctly second best. The narrator is a Levite—like Agnon himself, the biographically minded reader might recall—and if the Jerusalem Temple still stood, he opines, he would be singing in the Levitical choirs in the Temple precincts. In the present moment while the Temple is still destroyed (the emphasis on the "still" underscores his messianist outlook), he contents himself with study as a compensation for the stilled songs that accompanied the Temple worship. At this juncture, we are still at a distance from the enterprise of writing fiction, and the threefold sequence that leads to this end unfolds with telegraphic brevity.

First comes the sadness that arises from the realization that of the great tradition of learning there is nothing left but a memory (*zikhron devarim*). The sadness causes his heart to tremble, and it is finally this trembling that leads him to the writing of stories. The term the narrator uses for stories is *sippurei ma'asiyot*, and it would be a mistake to take it unquestioningly

as a reference to modern fiction. If one is intent on reading “The Sense of Smell” as a story by Agnon about Agnon, thus conflating the author with the autobiographical narrator, then one arrives at that conclusion directly. Yet the term is, in fact, taken from the discourse of Hasidism and refers to allegorical narratives (as opposed to textual commentary and sermons) told by hasidic masters to convey esoteric religious meaning; it is closely associated with the tales told by Nahman of Bratslav. Consistent with his self-presentation so far, the narrator remains within the orbit of piety and does not identify himself with the enterprise of modern literature. Yet at the same time, he describes a trajectory of fallenness that passes from the sacred songs of the Levites through the textual erudition of the sages to the prosaics of telling tales.

As if to give us an illustration of this belated vocation, the narrator concludes with a parable; although the parable is familiar from the classical midrashim about the destruction of the Temple, it takes on new meaning in this context. In the midrash, the father’s palace is the Temple itself; in exile, the Jews sit in synagogues and study houses, fallen substitutes for the Temple, and tell of the glory of the destroyed sanctuary. In the way in which the narrator is appropriating the midrash, it is the postbiblical writings of the sages (Mishnah, Talmud, etc.) that correspond to the father’s house, and in the wake of the loss of that tradition the narrator sits in his hut (the impoverished house of fiction or stories, as it were) and tells (*mesapper*) of the glories that are no more.

It is the hut that serves as the thematic hinge between the story’s discursive introduction and its narrative proper. The hut is, of course, nothing other than a sukkah, and in “The Sense of Smell” the notion of the sukkah is used in three senses: as a humble temporary dwelling, as a traditional epithet for the Jerusalem Temple, and as the booth that Jews erect and take their meals in during the week of the autumn Sukkot festival. Although it is in this last sense that the sukkah is understood in the remainder of the story, the echoes of the transcendent, lost sanctuary are never wholly absent. This is part of a larger fundamental duality in “The Sense of Smell” that is never overtly resolved. The narrator presents himself as embarked on a mission of high seriousness whose stakes involve nothing less than the purity and integrity of the divinely inspired Hebrew language. At the same time, techniques of parody deflate the high drama of the episode and present it as a tempest in a teapot that ultimately draws attention to the grandiosity of the narrator’s self-conception.

The deflationary effect is chiefly conveyed through the story’s stylistic register and outward organization. The division of this short text into full-blown chapters with cumbersome titles that importantly summarize the matter of each chapter—all this evokes the tracts and controvertialist literature of the eighteenth century in Western Europe, and later, the *Has-kalah* in Hebrew literature. The deployment of grand rhetoric on behalf of a grammatical controversy about two words recalls such mock-epic works from an earlier period as *The Rape of the Lock* and *A Tale of the Tub*. The spat is given a mock-heroic elevation in which the conflict assumes the proportions of mortal combat. The carping grammarian lances the narrator with his pen, and the narrator swoons. “The Sense of Smell” could have been properly renamed “A Tale of Two Words.” Even though the incident that gave rise to the story had taken place just before the time of the writing and within the arena of modern novels and their serialization in newspapers—a scene from Agnon’s most secular novel *Sippur pashut* (A simple story) as excerpted in *Ha’aretz*—the language of the story is pointedly archaized. The figure of the narrator, moreover, resembles not the modern writer that Agnon was but a pious author from an earlier age. As Anne Golomb Hoffman has noticed, the narrator makes a point of referring to himself not as a *sofer*, a writer in the modern sense, but as a *meḥabber*, an older term for an author-compiler-redactor who has no pretensions to originality or artifice.

Chapter 4 summarizes the narrator’s dilemma. He cannot dismiss the grammarian’s attack because, in his eyes, the charge is far from trivial. For if he has, in fact, misused the verb in question by inventing a new grammatical construction, then he is indeed guilty of sinning against the divinely ordained properties of the Hebrew language as interpreted through the chain of tradition. The quest for vindication he now embarks upon, in fact, nearly ends in failure. The so-called experts he consults adduce opinions but no evidence, and the one obscure reference he is directed to does little to put his mind at rest. He is about to accept his guilt and recant, but at the last moment he is mysteriously rescued from the fateful act of erasure.

The first stage of the narrator’s rescue revolves around the figure of Jacob of Lissa, a rabbinical scholar active in Poland at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. While Jacob of Lissa is hardly an obscure figure, he is not one that would be immediately recognizable to the average Hebraically literate reader. The fact that his familiarity is limited to pious and scholarly circles is a further indicator of where the narrator

locates himself. The qualities the narrator admires in Jacob of Lissa also tell us as much about the former as the latter. In conversation with the scholar who was carrying the prayer book of the Sage of Lissa, the narrator expatiates on Jacob's rare commitment to the ideal of utility. Even though he was a master of sophisticated and erudite talmudic scholarship, the sage took the time to compile a useful and usable compendium of laws and customs related to prayer.

When later that night, the sage appears to the narrator in a dream, holding his prayer book open in his hand, what is remarkable is not the ghostly visitation itself but the narrator's confidence in recognizing the identity of the sage, whose likeness he has never before seen. He makes the identification on the basis of the radiance of the sage's face, which, he explains, God bestows on scholars as a reward for the privation they endure in their devotion to the study of Torah. The radiance is given to he who "darkens his face over study of Torah," and this phrase, unsurprisingly, is exactly the same one that the narrator uses at the beginning of chapter 3 to describe his own self-deprivation in the service of the study of Torah and the purity of the Hebrew language. The linkage between the narrator and the Sage of Lissa is further strengthened when, upon awakening, the narrator goes to his bookcase, takes the sage's prayer book in hand, and triumphantly discovers what he has been looking for: a passage in which the verb "to smell" is used intransitively. Although the providential prompting to consult the prayer book surely comes through the dream, the exact location of the exculpatory passage is marked by a slip of paper inserted by none other than the narrator himself, who, at some time in the unremembered past, had marked—and apparently absorbed—the verb in this unusual usage. The standing of the narrator is hardly diminished by this fact. Not only do the "righteous from paradise come to the author's aid," as encapsulated in the chapter's title, but their intercession serves less as a revelation of something unknown than as a catalyst for the narrator's recovered memory of his own scholarship.

The validation offered by the Sage of Lissa and his uncle Javetz (Jacob Emden) is pleasing to the narrator, but there remains a final and more exalted level of confirmation to be granted him. It is more exalted because it issues not only from an earlier link in the chain of tradition but from the greatest authority of that earlier age. The Sage of Lissa and his uncle may be great lights of the latter authorities, the *aharonim*, but Rashi is the greatest light of the earlier authorities, the *rishonim*. The story of how the

narrator is vouchsafed Rashi's approval of his intuitive use of the Hebrew language occupies the final movement of "The Sense of Smell." The earlier sections of the story concern the narrator's production of language as a writer and the responses it provokes from others. The final section concerns the consumption of the language rather than its production. We see the narrator in a private moment of communion with the text, and it is in that posture that he is given, as if by grace, the final consummation.

When the narrator awakes from his dream at the beginning of chapter 6, it is too late to go back to sleep and too early to recite the morning prayer. This time, between the states of sleeping and waking and night and day, is a liminal zone that is vulnerable to the unsettling vagaries of the imagination. The narrator takes the deliberate step of filling this interval with the recitation of psalms, a traditionally pious measure aimed at rescuing "dead" time from unwanted thoughts. The narrator frames his choice in terms of a substitution of one kind of language for another. Once the day comes with its social intercourse, one's lips will inevitably be "defiled by wicked chatter"; but now, while the "soul is still pure," he grasps the chance to infuse it with the discourse of the sacred. The posture of receptivity is the key here. Psalm saying is not "learning" in the traditional sense of an active engagement with the contradictions of a text in order to wrest new meanings from it. He is communing with the text and letting its words wash over him; he moves quickly and fluidly through dozens of psalms, pausing to consult Rashi's commentary only when he needs to.

The consummation of "The Sense of Smell" comes in the form of a textual reverie. The reverie is presented as a kind of contest between the realm of nature and the realm of the text. In the darkness before dawn, the two realms start out in sympathetic vibration; inside, the table lamp crowns every letter with light, while outside breezes and fragrances dance and waft without disturbing the quiet recitation of psalms indoors. At first light, the song of one bird is heard and then the song of a second bird; the two compete jealously at first and then join to sing in harmony "new songs, the likes of which no ear had ever heard." Although this music would ordinarily be irresistible, the narrator is at pains to point out that he had no trouble remaining absorbed in his recitation because the psalm he was reading "played itself like an instrument of many strings" and produced a "Song of Love, next to which all other songs are as nothing." The beauty of nature is thus ultimately absorbed and superseded by the greater beauty of sacred textuality in which the narrator has immersed himself. As he

consults Rashi for a gloss on verse 9 of Psalm 45, he is given the ultimate gift of having his suspect deployment of a Hebrew verb vindicated by none other than the greatest of the medieval sages.

Why Psalm 45? Most modern students of the Bible read Psalm 45 as a hymn written by a court poet celebrating the marriage of a young king. In the rabbinic reading followed by Rashi—and followed in turn by the narrator—the subject of the psalm is Torah scholars as a class. The praise of the young king's military prowess is transformed by Rashi into admiration for the scholar's intense acuity in learned debates. The pen of verse 2 becomes the sword of verse 4, and vice versa. Rashi's appropriation of the trope of militancy brings us back to the polemical premise of "The Sense of Smell" as a story. (There are, in fact, an abundance of intertextual connections between the psalm and the story that a fuller analysis would profitably bring to light.) As a kind of scholar-knight militant, the narrator repulses an attack by his antagonist and is confirmed in the purity of his faithfulness to the Order of the Holy Tongue.

For the sake of a single word of this holy tongue, the ultra-short concluding chapter worshipfully tells us, a holy man bestirred himself from heaven and the narrator was guided to his psalmic revelation. Yet the attentive reader knows that this is far from the whole story. The pious naïveté of the narrator's persona is progressively undercut by the self-referential nature of the narrative; it is he and no other who is decisively there as the recipient of revelation. This becomes a principled and critical self-importance when the narrator locates his belated vocation of storytelling as the last link in the great chain of authority and learning. The narrator's self-regard, it should be kept in mind, is contained within the larger authority of Agnon the author. This is a saving distinction. For in his capacity for self-ironization, Agnon reveals himself as one of the great modernists of our literature.

## [ IV ]

## MAN'S HOUSE

U. Z. Greenberg

HAROLD SCHIMMEL

Only he who returns to the village toward evening: to his trees good-  
in-all-seasons,  
To his portion of field which is a fruitful extension of his flesh  
And to his well which cools for him his water with a gleam  
Only he who returns at close of day to the village and not to the city,  
Walks as one who returns to a goal and not as an exile's walk to his  
inn; 5  
Walks on the trusted path, soft-to-the-step. For it's good:  
From dew, from sun, from breath of skies, from a bird's steps on it..  
With the rose-of-dusk in his ears, with heart beating as a bird at a  
window;  
Approaches a fence of twigs, opens its door to a white cottage,  
That one could almost hug . . . like an extension of his body. 10  
Whose roof is of straw, and has much of the feminine and a bird's nest.  
And blest darkness of night in a small window;  
Comes and opens his mouth and says hello inside to woman and  
offspring  
And sits down to eat the evening meal; and silence is there: as after  
strings  
And flutes that were silent. 15  
And sleeps there a night's rest, made good by many trees  
And the nectar of fields is in it. And the forest is near and the river— —

Only he tastes of the precious taste of man's true homeland.  
Which was every man's once upon a time in this universe,  
Before he set his foot in a shoe and covered his shoulders to the ends  
of his body 20

READING HEBREW  
LITERATURE

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CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF  
SIX MODERN TEXTS

ALAN MINTZ, EDITOR

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