

“AT THE OUTSET OF THE DAY”: MYSTICAL ASPECTS OF CLOTHING AND BOOKS IN THE WORK OF S. Y. AGNON

Nitza Davidovitch
(University of Ariel)

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Abstract: The story “At the Outset of the Day” by S. Y. Agnon is short, but contains many meanings. It is a story about a father whose daughter’s dress burns to ashes, and who throughout the story attempts, unsuccessfully, to cover her nakedness. As the article shows, the story can be defined as symbolic, with a connotative level open to interpretation as well as biblical foundations and symbols that express its hidden level.

Introduction

“At the Outset of the Day”¹ is a story about a Jew whose home is destroyed by his enemies. He flees with his young daughter and arrives at a city on the eve of Yom Kippur, one hour before dark falls. At the synagogue, his daughter’s dress burns to ashes, and he goes in search of something to wear. In Jewish tradition, Yom Kippur is considered the holiest day of the year, a holiness manifested in human departure from worldly conduct. On this day Jews do not work, and spend the day fasting and praying. Historically, Yom Kippur centered around the Temple, when special rites would be enacted. This was the one day of the year in which the High Holy Priest was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, the most holy place within the Temple.

A custom traditionally attributed to Yom Kippur was the search for a bride. The Mishna says, “Israel had no greater days of joy than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur. On these days the daughters of Israel would go out... and dance in the vineyards...”² On Yom Kippur eve it was customary to hold a final meal, as it says in the Bible: “From the evening of the ninth day of the month until the following evening you are to observe your Sabbath,”³ and the Sages learned from this that “whoever eats and drinks on the ninth day – is considered as if he had fasted on the ninth and tenth.”⁴ In addition, it is custom-

¹ S. Y. Agnon, *At the Outset of the Day*, in: S. Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, New York 1970, 252-260.

² Mishna, *Ta’anit*, 4:8.

³ Leviticus 23:32.

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate *Yoma* 86a.

ary to account for all one's deeds. One main custom on Yom Kippur is to confess one's deeds before God and recognize them. Accordingly, Maimonides defines Yom Kippur as a "time of repentance": "Yom Kippur is the time for repentance for every individual and for the many, and it marks the final pardon and forgiveness for Israel. Therefore, all are obligated to perform repentance and confess on Yom Kippur."⁵

It is customary to wear a white shirt or a white dress as a symbol of purity (this, according to the Mishna, was also the custom of the girls in Jerusalem in Rabbinical times). White is the color of cleanliness, purity, and also simplicity. The custom may originate from the white clothes of the High Holy Priest, used only for his work on Yom Kippur. Another symbol is that on this day the Jewish people wish to be like angels, and for this reason they wear white. In some communities wearing dark clothes is banned on this day, particularly among those leading the prayers. Agnon guides our attention to the special time in which the story is placed, the eve of Yom Kippur – the time between the preparations for this day and the day itself, the time between the sacred and the secular.⁶

Reading the story in stages:

1. Presentation of the explicit – realistic – level of the text and the factors that challenge the realistic level of the story.
2. Construction of the symbolic level, supported by an array of Jewish sources and textual foundations.
3. Mystical aspects in Kabbalist tradition.
4. Spiritual-ethical meanings and the relevance of the story.

In this paper we will focus on the different stages:

1. **The explicit level and the factors that challenge it:** The plot's time, place, protagonist, and main theme.
 - **Time:** "After the enemy destroyed my home," "The Day of Atonement... that holy festival comprised of love and affection, mercy and prayer."⁷ The afternoon prayer. The last meal before the fast.
 - **Place:** The synagogue. The women's section.
 - **Climate:** Cold, despite the fire ("A cool breeze swept through the courtyard"⁸).
 - **The characters:** The father and the daughter.
 - **The main plot:** The father's failed attempts to cover his naked daughter, rendered so by the fire that burned her dress (the wind pushed the memorial candle against the daughter's dress).

⁵ Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuva* 2:7.

⁶ R. Elijor (2012), Kippurim, expiation, purity and impurity: The well of the past and the abyss of oblivion, in: J. L. Kraemer, M. G. Wechsler (eds), *Pesher Nahum: Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature from Antiquity through the Middle Ages Presented to Norman (Nahum) Golb*, Chicago, IL, 37-56. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/7255753/kippurim_full_version.

⁷ S. Y. Agnon, "At the Outset of the Day."

⁸ *Ibid.*

Several elements weaken the realistic level of the story and generate its implicit-symbolic level:

- The story is described as taking place in a non-place (any synagogue, anywhere) and beyond time (the Day of Atonement as marking time in any year).
- The fact that both the father (who fails, irrationally, in his attempts to cover his daughter) and his daughter are anonymous helps to show that the story cannot be interpreted only on the realistic level.
- After the enemy destroys their home, the protagonist flees with his little girl and arrives at a city shortly before the Day of Atonement is to begin. In any case, the identity of the enemy is almost meaningless on the realistic level of the text, and only an excuse for the father’s flight with his daughter in search of shelter. The focus of the plot is the fire that consumes the daughter’s dress, for which the father finds no replacement. The daughter remains naked throughout the story, with no comprehensible, rational reason. It seems that not only the daughter loses her clothes in it; rather the entire world remains naked... Our entire generation is a generation with no clothes, a naked generation, as Baruch Kurzweil (1975) writes: “A generation with no clothes and with no books.” This is a generation that grew up in a cold, estranged atmosphere where, on the spiritual level, both fathers and sons remain impoverished and unclothed.

2. Construction of the implicit level: “...for even if no man was pursuing me, time was.”¹⁰

Construction of the symbolic level is based on:

- A. A variety of Jewish sources and textual foundations.
- B. Use of symbols: the memorial candle, the clothes and the torn books in the storeroom.
- C. Surreal scenes.

A. A variety of Jewish sources and textual foundations

Use of foundations from ancient Jewish sources: linguistic combinations and expressions based on biblical verses, the Midrash, and rabbinic sayings.

Song of Songs

The father’s failed attempts to cover the daughter’s nakedness: “I turned this way and that, seeking anything my daughter could clothe herself with. I sought, but found nothing.”¹¹ This expression, denoting a missed opportunity, is reminiscent of the Song of Songs: “On my bed by night I sought him who my soul loves; I sought him but found him not.”¹² The Song of Songs is a song of missed opportunities and of the beloved’s constant search for the maiden and of the maiden for her beloved. This is also true of

⁹ B. Kurzweil (1975), A generation with no clothes and with no books, in: B. Kurzweil, *Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon*, Schocken, 175-181 [Hebrew].

¹⁰ S. Y. Agnon, “At the Outset of the Day”, 255.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹² Song of Songs, 3:1.

Agnon's stories. They have in common the constant search for clothing, for values, for divinity, for certainty and stability. The lack and the search constitute the protagonist's mental state. He is occupied with the search and never stops searching. In this way, Agnon uses foundations from the prayers of the Day of Atonement, the day of justice, the day of the human soul searching for God, the day in which one seeks to reach God: our Father in Heaven.

The Book of Genesis

Clothing as a literary element representing a person's personality is also depicted in rabbinic sources, in sayings such as "For a person's dignity is his clothing."¹³ The element of clothing often appears in Agnon's stories.

The first encounter with clothes as part of human culture is in the book of Genesis: "Adam and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame,"¹⁴ and then: "Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves."¹⁵

We realize that Adam and Eve had not been blind previously; rather something happened in their consciousness after eating the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result of this change in consciousness, they felt uncomfortable with their nakedness. Their nakedness also became an excuse for hiding from God. This is interpreted by Midrash Raba: "'And they realized they were naked', they removed from themselves even the one commandment they were given."¹⁶ In this way, they remained naked of the one act of faith with which they had been entrusted, the ban against eating the certain fruit. This is the first encounter with the sense of clothing as covering the body in protection, just as the religious commandments are supposed to protect the soul. And further on: "The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them."¹⁷ One of the possibilities suggested by the midrash: "'Garments of light (*or*): this refers to Adam's garments...,"¹⁸ indicating that these garments shed radiance and light, i.e. an important spiritual component. According to Jewish tradition, as found in the prayers, God "clothes the naked"¹⁹ – but the father in Agnon's story is incapable of clothing his own daughter as he has become distant from God – in a process of searching.

The Book of Esther

The Book of Esther shows a serious attitude to clothes. King Ahasuerus commands "to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at."²⁰ Some have suggested

¹³ Exodus Rabba 18.

¹⁴ Genesis 2:25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 3:7.

¹⁶ Genesis Raba 19:6.

¹⁷ Genesis 3:21.

¹⁸ Zohar, Genesis 454.

¹⁹ Morning prayers.

²⁰ Esther 1:11.

that he demanded that she come wearing no clothes aside from the crown on her head. On a completely different note, Mordecai the Jew too expresses his concern when faced by the edict of destruction issued towards the Jews by means of his clothes: “Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes...,”²¹ and when Esther is about to plead for her people, “Esther put on her royal robes,”²² i.e. her clothes were a major part of her royal appearance.

To clothe the naked

Clothing is indeed a manifestation of status, but it is first and foremost a basic need without which human dignity is violated. The prophet says: “...to clothe the naked when you see him, and not to ignore your own flesh and blood.”²³ Clothing the naked is one of the basic charitable obligations. Thus, it is not surprising that Jewish communities encompassed, as part of their charity and welfare agencies, organizations charged with “clothing the naked” (*Malbish Arumim*), who provided the poor with clothing.

Furthermore, with regard to the duty to respect the foreigner, it says, “and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing.”²⁴ The “Shulchan Arukh,” the major Jewish book of law, explains how one should behave with a person who has become bankrupt when someone lends him money and is interested in taking something to guarantee the loan. In this case the lender is forbidden from taking the poor man’s clothing. He must leave him enough clothing to last him twelve months.²⁵

Does Judaism treat clothing as a mere covering, or as an essential element?

Rabbi Dr. Moshe Be’eri, CEO of the Tzohar Rabbis Organization, says that clothing is often depicted as a basic product to which every person is entitled.²⁶ In the Bible, when Jacob flees his brother Esau, he turns to God and says: “If God will be with me... and will give me food to eat and clothes to wear.”²⁷ This refers to the basic usage of clothing – to warm and protect the body. According to Jewish sources, however, clothing is not only a basic need. Rather, it is the essence, the source of human warmth. It is a divine gift, and not merely incidental. There are conscious states in which one feels a strong need to cover one’s body with clothes. Clothing is the cover of our life, and as such its role is essential, but sometimes misleading.

Over the generations, and certainly in modern times, the issue of “attractive” clothing has gradually come to occupy a central place. This is not only a question of covering the

²¹ *Ibid.*, 4:1.

²² *Ibid.*, 5:1.

²³ Isaiah 59:7.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 10:18.

²⁵ Shulchan Arukh, Hosen Mishpat, Siman 97.

²⁶ M. Be’eri, Tzohar Rabbis Organization. Retrieved from: <http://www.tzohar.org.il/?content=%D7%9C%D7%91%D7%95%D7%A9-%D7%91%D7%99%D7%94%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%A6%D7%95> [Hebrew].

²⁷ Genesis 28:20.

body, but rather also of how we see ourselves and how others see us through our clothes. Clothing has always occupied a central place in human culture, representing an external indication of one's inner essence.

Jewish sources also show that clothing is essential, an existential necessity. They refer to the basic usage of clothing – to warm and protect the body, and also to the basic need to modestly conceal one's body parts. These needs are so basic that any person is clearly entitled to demand them from others. But clothing is not only a basic need. For example, the Babylonian Talmud²⁸ says that when two litigants come before the judge, one wearing nice clothes and the other simple clothes, they cannot be judged until the poor man is clothed in nice clothes. Apparently, faced with both respectable and simple clothing, the judge might inadvertently perform a miscarriage of justice. Jewish law recognizes that it is very difficult to avoid forming preconceptions based on the clothing of the litigants. Thus, on the holiday of Tu B'Av, when the women would dance in the vineyards to attract suitors, they wore borrowed white clothes to remove all distinction between the rich and the poor.

Clothing as a literary element representing a person's personality is also depicted in rabbinic sources, in sayings such as: "For a person's dignity is his clothing."²⁹ It is therefore no surprise that a central place in the weekly portion of "Tetzave," as part of the preparation of the Tabernacle, is accorded to the priestly garments: "They are to make these sacred garments for your brother Aaron and his sons, so they may serve me as priests."³⁰ The priestly garments uniquely link resplendence and humility: "You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh. They shall reach from the hips to the thighs."³¹ The proximity to the sacred only enhances the commitment to modesty. The priestly garments are part of the spiritual and faith-related manifestation of the priests' mission. "The dignity and the splendor" signified by their garments are part of their divine mission.

The Malbim interprets the priestly garments in the Bible as follows: Just as the external body, which is the clothing of the soul, wears its external garments, thus the inner soul shall wear its inner garments and covers itself with them, and just as the external garments have been called *mad*, made as they are to fit one's measure (*mida*), thus the soul's garments are called measures (*midot*), since one's qualities and measures clothe the soul and display its strength and deeds, and the command concerning the priests' external garments was aimed mainly at teaching them how to clothe their soul in good measures and pure and holy qualities.³²

In conclusion, Jewish sources show a dual attitude to clothes – on the one hand, human clothing is not given primary significance. The Bible does not tell us what Moses was wearing when he appeared before Pharaoh, or when ascending the mountain to receive the tablets. Many sources, however, attest to the significance of clothes and indicate that human clothing has a major part in one's life. For example, the prophets

²⁸ Babylonian Talmud, Shvuot 31a.

²⁹ Exodus Rabba 18.

³⁰ Exodus 28:2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 28:42.

³² Malbim (Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel), *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Vilna 1892 [Hebrew].

likened human deeds to a garment that covers the soul, and for this reason it is necessary to maintain clean and pure clothes.

In order to construct the level of symbolic meaning it is necessary to decipher the meaning of the main symbols as portrayed in the sources that underlie the story.

B. Use of symbols: the clothes, the memorial candle, the torn books in the storeroom.

The memorial candle

The candle as a symbol also has several possible interpretations:

- The candle symbolizes the Torah and good deeds.
- The candle symbolizes the human soul.
- The candle symbolizes the ability and opportunity to rectify: the Hassidic belief that as long as the candle is burning, whatever is wrong can be fixed.

The clothing (the daughter's dress, ketonet)

The element of clothing appears often in Agnon's stories. A new dress in these stories indicates both the desire to change reality and fictitious renewal.³³ In the story which we are discussing, "What could I do for my daughter, what could I cover her nakedness with? And I had no garment, nothing to wrap my daughter in."³⁴ There is a desire to change and to be renewed – seeking a new dress for the daughter.

C. Surreal scenes: The figure of the father

The father's figure is of an anti-hero. He is portrayed in an ironic light that makes fun of his artificial excuses, and his inability to fulfill the task. Agnon describes a radical figure, but we as readers can identify with the qualities and emotions described in the story – rejection, anger, laziness, defensive mechanisms, feelings of remorse and guilt and others – that separate him from the ability or inability to find his daughter "clothing."

In this story the image expresses irony and ridicule at human helplessness. The father represents human beings in the modern world. We may sense humor in the use of this title to designate our poor protagonist... The irrational obstacles that prevent the father from finding clothes for his daughter are part of the implicit sphere of the plot. The father's flight: "fled in frenzied haste a night and a day... what she was wearing was all that remained of her lovely clothes... We... had taken nothing with us."³⁵ This excuse is unacceptable by the reader in the light of the father's unrealistic attempts to search for clothing in unlikely and completely improbable locations:

³³ G. Shaked, On S. Y. Agnon's 'The Garment,' *Masa Lamerhav* 2, 1959 [Hebrew].

³⁴ S. Y. Agnon, "At the Outset of the Day," 255.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 254.

1. "I'll go to the corner of the storeroom, I said to myself, where torn sacred books are hidden away... But now I... found nothing with which to cover my little girl. Do not be surprised that I found nothing. When books were read, they were rent; but now that they are not read, they are not rent."³⁶ This is an unlikely place to search for clothes, where sacred writings are collected – weakening the previous realistic excuse.
2. The home of Reb Alter – "I'll go to his sons and daughters, and ask clothing of them... I... found Reb Alter's daughter together with a small group of old men and old women... these people have not lit a 'candle of life'" – The house exudes an odor of death, their clothes are torn: "Enough that creatures like ourselves still have skin on our flesh... their skin quivered."³⁷ This too is an unlikely place to search for clothes, a place of old people, described as surrounded by the spirit of death – weakening the previous realistic excuse.

As a result of the father's failure, the daughter remains naked and must find her own ways of coping – "Her hair was loose and wrapped about her."³⁸ The father's failure and the daughter's "wisdom" – a description that reflects the author's unrealistic statement: the father's generation is incapable of covering the sons' nakedness. They do not even have clothes of their own to give their children.

3. Mystical Aspects in Kabbalist Tradition

The issue of clothes developed within the Jewish narrative tradition, and mainly within the Kabbalist tradition. The Zohar³⁹ says, "One's good deeds in this world give him a precious upper garment to wear... Come and see when those days come before the holy king, if the person leaving this world is fortunate, he ascends and enters heaven by virtue of those days, and they are honorable garments worn by his soul. And those are the days on which he did well and did not sin... those days that he damaged by his offenses lack that attire and wear deficient clothes."

Kabbalah expands on Joseph's robe of many colors, called a *ketonet* in the Bible, the garment given by Jacob to his beloved son. This is also the Hebrew word used by Agnon to describe the daughter's dress in our story.

Joseph's robe

The garment that Joseph is given by his father, the robe of many colors, is a spiritual garment that remains with him even after the physical garment is taken away. Joseph changes his clothes repeatedly, according to the circumstances and to his various roles. He knows how to dress as an Egyptian, but removes his Egyptian clothes when in danger

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 257.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Zohar, Part III, 101.

and remains in the clothes of a Hebrew boy, in order to save himself from the claws of Potiphar’s wife.

R. Zadok of Lublin says that this is Joseph’s strength. Joseph knew how to dress himself. He knew how to find the inner light, the spiritual designation, in every external object in the world. Joseph could turn even the height of the Egyptian style’s external aspects and the simple beauty into garments of good deeds.⁴⁰

This comes full circle from the beginning of Genesis, which opened with the corruption of Adam, who betrayed the role he was given by God, “to work it and to protect it,” to link Earth and Heaven through Torah and labor. The First Man’s sin brought death into the world, and thus separated the practical from the spiritual world.

Genesis ends with a rectification, in the figure of Joseph, whose head is in the sky while his feet are on the ground. Joseph, who never falters in the test of faith. Joseph enhances the teachings of the fathers and manages to bring back a little of Eden to the world, a taste of connection between the practical world and the spiritual world, an ideal combination between Torah and labor. Therefore Joseph is deserving of receiving the garments of the First Man, garments that make it possible for him to realize and live the desired link between earth and heaven, the link between the world of Torah and the world of labor...

The element of clothes and garments is one of Joseph’s major features. When Joseph is brought from the pit to Pharaoh’s house, the text states, “Then Pharaoh sent and called Joseph, and they quickly brought him out of the pit. And when he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh.”⁴¹ When Joseph is released from prison he puts on special clothes in anticipation of his encounter with Pharaoh. According to Rabenu Bechayei, these clothes were royal clothes, like Mordecai’s clothes, which also leave the king wearing royal clothes.⁴²

About clothes and garments in Jewish mysticism

The Zohar says that in the world-to-be the ritual commandments are the soul’s garments, and bring upon it “ambient light,” and that the Torah is the food of the soul and brings upon the soul “inner light.”⁴³

Gershom Scholem writes, “The matter of the garment woven for man to be used in heaven and called haluk (robe) is not mentioned in the ancient Aggadah literature, but its source can be found in the later Aggadah, which reached the author of the Zohar through the Aggadah collection of R. Nissim ben Yaakov from Kairouan [a sage who died between 1058 and 1065] called ‘An elegant compilation concerning relief after adversity,’ where it is related, ‘It was the Eve of the fast of Kippur and they were walking in Temple Mount and then an angel came towards them holding a white robe and shining like the sun... This robe belonged to a man from Ashkelon whose name was Yosef the Gardener.’

⁴⁰ Zadok Hacohen of Lublin, Pri Tzaddik, Genesis, Vayigash 12.

⁴¹ Genesis 41:14.

⁴² Rabenu Behayei, Commentary on Exodus 1:6.

⁴³ Zadok Hacohen, Pri Tzaddik, *loc. cit.*

Further on this man and his wife try to perfect their deficient robe. Until finally they are told that their robe has been perfected.”⁴⁴

Zohar: At first they had robes of light, which the supreme beings would use above, because upper angels would come to the First Man to enjoy that light, as it says: “Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor,” and once they sinned they were given garments of skin, which the skin enjoys, i.e. the body and not the soul...⁴⁵

“The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them” – meaning that God clothed them.⁴⁶ The First Man, when he was in the Garden of Eden, wore a garment similar to that of supreme beings, and it was a garment of supreme light, when he was banished from Eden and needed hues of this world, at first there were garments of light, from the supreme light that served in the Garden of Eden. Since in Eden he had the illuminating supreme light, so when Adam entered the Garden of Eden God clothed him in a garment of that light and put him in there, and if he had not first been clothed in that light he would not have entered, but when he was banished from there he needed another garment, and then the Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife...⁴⁷

“Then the eyes of both of them were opened” – Their eyes opened, unlike previously, when they were supervised and guided from above, in the upper world, as to the world to be it says, I will lead the blind by ways they have not known etc., because God will open eyes that were not wise, to look in supreme wisdom, and to understand that which they did not understand in this world, so that they can recognize their sovereign. Blessed be the righteous who will receive that wisdom, as there is no wisdom like that wisdom, and there is no knowledge like that knowledge, and there is no devotion like that devotion.⁴⁸

Mechilta: And that is one of the things created on Sabbath eve at twilight and they are these... and some say also the garment of first man, as it says (Genesis 3): The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them, those were Sabbath clothes...⁴⁹

Yalkut Reuveni: The garments of light of First Man were to bear holy souls, the garments of First Man, taken by Nimrod and Esau, and Jacob, who is the rectification of Adam, took them, and this is the garment of the soul called the image of God, from which comes And your fear will be on all beasts of the field, and right after that comes In the image of God He created etc., and therefore every beast that saw the garment of the First Man would immediately subdue itself and would be caught.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ G. Scholem, The garment of souls, *Tarbiz* 24, 1956, 299 [Hebrew].

⁴⁵ Zohar, Bereshit 454.

⁴⁶ Zohar, Bo 148.

⁴⁷ Zohar, Pekudey 168.

⁴⁸ Zohar, Va'etchanan 33.

⁴⁹ Mechilta, Genesis 3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The hidden meaning of words: About the garment and the robe

The garment has deeper meanings than the individual issues we have studied, and these concern man's existential state. The Hebrew words for acts of betraying loyalty, *begida* and *me'ila*, have their roots in two words that denote garments, *begged* and *me'il*, attesting to the complexity of human life. Clothing glorifies human beings, distinguishing them from other animals, and at the same time it is a mark and sign of the shame felt by Adam and his wife after eating from the tree of knowledge.

4. Spiritual-Ethical Meanings of the Story and its Relevance

A generation with no clothes and with no books

Agnon, who as a writer was an observant Jew and was seen by many as a chronicler of Jewish life, appeared in these stories as a modern writer whose writing expresses existential states of anxiety through a novel technique that undermines the realistic tradition in which he had operated up to this point.

Agnon's stories are closely affiliated with the generations of rabbinic literature. This affiliation is manifested in his use of language, style of writing, symbols, and actual texts. Some of the texts are alluded to associatively, and some are mentioned outright. The implicit level is decoded through multiple general archetypal symbols (such as the candle – a symbol of life) as well as specifically Jewish symbols ("clothing," "outset of the day") and previous Jewish sayings and texts embedded in the story. The geographical indicators and time indicators are seemingly realistic. Locations such as the synagogue are recognizable on the realistic level, as are time descriptions, such as the eve of the Day of Atonement – but nonetheless they also carry a metaphorical meaning that becomes clearer as the story progresses and the symbols that comprise it are identified.

The story "At the Outset of the Day" is told in a way reminiscent of the nonrealistic (surreal) genre, on both the explicit and, particularly, the implicit level. The explicit level is mostly realistic, although it also contains scenes that are beyond reality, and towards the end it becomes distinctly surreal. This story joins others of Agnon's stories that are non-realistic.

Why did the narrator choose unrealistic writing, characterized by the blurring of life and death, imagination and reality, and confusing times? Kurzweil (1975) explains that in some of his works Agnon chose the unrealistic genre to "describe situations reflecting the collapse of naive religious certainty." Common doubts in the modern world lead to attempts by the speaker or the character to evade various commands. Deviating from the paved route of Jewish law generates difficult feelings of guilt and sin, as well as fear of punishment. Then again, there is the longing to return to a world controlled by complete faith, although such a return is no longer possible.

A realistic story centering on this rift might have been interpreted as approval and support of the modern world with its lack of faith... but that is not the case: the narrator's soul pulls him precisely towards the world of his fathers and of innocent faith, the lost world. That is the reason for choosing this non-realistic genre as an artistic solution for

portraying the ambivalent reality and the rift in the narrator's heart – between the ideal state and the existing state. The story focuses on a description of the father's sense of failure and missed opportunity to realize his designation and his religious mission, clarifying the tragic entity of one who cannot reach the state of perfection to which he aspires.

In this way, the rabbinic demand that scholars of the Torah keep their clothes clean has to do with human dignity and with that of the Torah. A person is expected to maintain a pleasant appearance before his family and community and to make an effort to continue to look respectable, as one who was created in the image of God. Nonetheless, special efforts to clothe oneself elaborately are linked to a wider concept, whether respectable garments in honor of the Sabbath or festivals or the special spiritual status of the priests, whose clothes are an important component of their mission. As long as we remember that we initially appeared in the Bible with no clothes, and that is also how we first appear in the world at birth, it is assumed that we will not prefer the coverings of the body over the contents of the personality. We enjoy wearing nice clothes (*begged*) when they are not traitorous (*bogged*), complicating our life.

A person's clothing expresses his attitude both towards himself and towards others. For example, to this day it is customary that judges wear a special robe that has a double function: to arouse the judges' gravity regarding their responsible position, and to arouse the respect of those being judged for the judges and the legal process. Jewish legal sources mainly emphasize the first dimension. The Shulkhan Arukh decrees that the judges must sit in awe and reverence, wrapped and serious. And it is forbidden to behave flippantly and to speak of mundane matters in court.⁵¹ Although the custom of wearing a prayer shawl was cancelled, the judges are accustomed to wearing respectable clothes and a hat while discussing legal matters. This is also true of civil judges in Israel, who wear a special robe, and do so by force of deep-rooted legal custom and tradition rather than by law.

In summary, in all these sources there is a connection between the rectification of the soul and the accounting that one must perform before death. The many literary sources with their various levels of meaning undoubtedly reverberate in Agnon's stories that center on this element [clothing], with its religious significance. Moreover, in our story it is possible to see a wider picture of modern man's discomfort and helplessness at his shortcomings and imperfection.

At the end of Agnon's story "The Garment," the narrator himself emphasizes the allegorical meaning of the garment: "As regards the garment which the tailor did not finish and moreover made dirty, and even lost – the minister has many garments and is able to give up one, whereas the tailor who lost the garment which was made from the cloth of the looms of the minister's work shop, what will he answer, and what will he say when they ask him, 'Where is the garment?'"⁵²

Notably, the garment is a common element in Agnon's work. Clothes and their opposite – nakedness as a symbol of rejecting values and human conventions – are a significant and major theme in Agnon's work. His stories deal with the disintegration of human identity set on the background of the human and ethical crises caused by the world wars.

⁵¹ Shulkhan Arukh, Hoshen Mishpat 97.

⁵² M. Isaacson, The Genesis of clothes, retrieved from: http://www.nrg.co.il/app/index.php?do=blog&encr_id=7b710fc4596b25648b44472262adc013&id=4340.

In our story the father remains incapable of finding clothing to cover his daughter. Thus many of Agnon’s stories describe the wish to reach one’s complete designation and the strong sense of missing the opportunity to achieve this desire.

The attitude to clothing in “At the Outset of the Day” – cover or essence?

One of the cultural foundations indicating that human beings are on a higher level than animals is clothing. Preparing food and making clothes are distinct human actions in which human beings improve the surrounding nature. Clothes have many essential roles in human life. They are distinct means of socialization as well as primary tools for expressing events and emotions. Clothing distinguishes human beings in their society and reflects their status. Priests have priestly robes and modern judges and lawyers have robes and unique accessories. Army and police uniforms also signify the status of their wearers in society. All these are a constant element of all cultures in all times.

“At the Outset of the Day” is a story of a Jew whose home has been destroyed by his enemies, and who flees with his young daughter and arrives at a city on the eve of the Day of Atonement, one hour before dark. In the synagogue, his daughter’s dress catches fire and he tries, unsuccessfully, to seek other clothes for her. “...don’t imagine that your soul is as pure as a little girl; this is but an indication that she passionately yearns to recapture the purity of her infancy when she was free of sin.”⁵³

The dress as a symbol can be interpreted in various ways:

- A. The dress as the human soul that must be maintained in its pure form.
- B. The dress as a symbol of man’s designation in the world.

The “garment” as a literary element – its various appearances in Agnon’s work

Kurzweil writes that Agnon’s volume “To This Day” in fact describes a generation with no clothes and with no books. He claims that Agnon describes a reality of disintegration and of leaving the faith. For example, in our story the father is engaged in the endless search for a garment for his daughter, while the world around him is becoming gradually more naked in the physical-material, mental, and spiritual respect. The world has removed all its “clothes” that gave it meaning. The protagonist is swept up in the flow of the world, and he seeks a dress for his daughter, the daughter of his soul, although part of his self finds meaning in a naked world, with no clothes and no shame. The story may be said to deal with human designation, with the meaning of clothing.

⁵³ S. Y. Agnon, “At the Outset of the Day,” 257.

Towards the Day of Atonement: An experience of shared learning

Chava Yafa-Uzan⁵⁴ says that this story can be assumed to be about a father and his baby daughter who flee the destruction of their home and arrive on the eve of the Day of Atonement at the courtyard of the Great Synagogue, which the father left many years previously, and their journey; but in fact, the destruction of the soul is revealed in all its nakedness and the journey is to find a suitable garment. Both old and new provide no response to the suffering soul. It is necessary to let human beings return to their orphaned exposed soul, at the height of both its vulnerability and its purity, in order to create new tunes that have never been heard. The naked soul receives a response and finds an answer that emanates from within the nothingness.

This is very appropriate for contemporary times. In "At the Outset of the Day," Agnon described the spiritual destruction of the Jewish world. For Agnon as well, the deterioration and the destruction are a consequence of forsaking the books, in his case – the holy books. In a world with no books, emptiness rules. Agnon describes a world in which even torn books are not to be found and the soul has nothing to cover itself with. In the world of electronic media, bereft of books and order, and mainly in a world controlled by television, there is no continuity, morals, or ethics; anything that could give meaning and covering to the naked soul.

"From the depths I call to you O Lord"

"From out of the depths rose the Great Synagogue, on its left the Old House of Study and directly opposite that, one doorway facing the other, the new House of Study. This was the House of Prayer and these the Houses of Torah that I had kept in my mind's eye all my life. If I chanced to forget them during the day, they would stir themselves and come to me at night in my dreams, even as during my waking hours."⁵⁵

According to the Malbim,⁵⁶ the Song of Songs deals entirely with the suffering of the soul, which descends into the material world and connects with the human body, while striving to connect to the source of its life, to the King of Kings. In light of this interpretation, human life can be comprehended, reflected in the soul, as a constant search for God, with no ability to come into regular contact with Him due to the obstacles posed by matter, until the day of death when the soul returns to its source and to its origins. The soul of King Solomon, as the souls of all those who were granted the prophecy, was given the special merit of connecting with God temporarily several times, of creating this connection without completely separating from the body. However, since there was no complete separation from the body, the connection between the soul and God could not be complete and permanent, and it remained on the temporary, local level. Every human soul strives to grow closer to God and eventually to connect to Him.

⁵⁴ C. Yafa-Uzan, Towards Yom Kippur: Experience of learning in a team, retrieved from: <http://www.orianim.ac.il/sites/heb/hamidrasha/heart-melody/havayot/likrat-yomkipur/pages/default.aspx>.

⁵⁵ S. Y. Agnon, "At the Outset of the Day."

⁵⁶ Zadok Hacohen, Pri Tzaddik.

“The Day of Atonement... a day whereon men’s supplications are dearer, more desired, more acceptable than at all other times. Would that they might appoint a reader of prayers worthy to stand before the Ark, for recent generations have seen the decline of emissaries of the congregation who know how to pray; and cantors who reverence their throats with their trilling, but bore the heart, have increased. And I, I needed strengthening – and, needless to say, my little daughter, a babe torn away from her home.”⁵⁷

Rabbi Soloveitchik, in his essay “The Lonely Man of Faith,”⁵⁸ explains that in our times prayer has come to replace prophecy. Prayer is a way of connecting between human beings and God, which comes from the opposite direction as the prophecy. Where the prophecy is an up-down axis, divine abundance that descends to man, who mostly remains passive, prayer is a down-up axis, with man the initiator, the seeker, the supplicant. The soul constantly seeks its creator; it does not depend on human moods; it also strives to become free of the body’s constraints, to leave its material prison. The maiden who seeks her beloved, who is in the desert, expresses her yearning for the beloved in her constant seeking, even when she cannot find him. The soul that seeks its God expresses its constant yearning in prayer.

Rabbi Kook, in his introduction to *Olat Reaya*, writes, “Prayer is only rectified when one thinks that the soul is indeed constantly praying, flying and clinging to its beloved without cease, but during the actual prayer the soul’s frequent praying is manifested in practice.” In this paragraph Rabbi Kook explains that in order for us to understand the role of prayer in our life it must be seen in the context of “the constant prayer of the soul.” We must understand that our soul ceaselessly strives to draw closer to God, but this aspiration is hidden, and when engaged in prayer we apply it in practice; we turn the fundamental aspiration that only occurs within our soul into a practical process of growing closer to God, applied by all parts of our reality, the different facets of the soul. Through prayer we create a reality in which our soul can become closer to its origins, and we remove some of the physical-material obstacles that prevent our soul from becoming connected to God, the source of its life. Only through such a full understanding of the essence of prayer, and only when seeing prayer as the correct place within all the mental-soul processes we undergo, can we reach a true and more complete grasp of prayer. This does not mean that such thoughts must accompany every prayer, but they should serve as an orientation for our overall conception.⁵⁹

In summary, the role of the Jewish sources in our story: Use of symbols from Jewish sources enriches and enhances their naturally symbolic meaning due to the allegorical character of the story.

Kurzweil distinguished between the dominant role of the experience of loss, loss in the story, the experience of exposed reality in the present. He concludes that “the world is not rectified, it is not divine, it is arbitrary. And in such a world, there are no houses, there is no clothing, and there are no longer any books” (Agnon, 181). Kurzweil finds in the New Hebrew literature various expressions of the disruptive current situation. There are expressions that refer to the experience of the individual, such as suffering and loneliness.

⁵⁷ S. Y. Agnon, “At the Outset of the Day,” 253.

⁵⁸ J. D. Soloveitchik (1965), *The Lonely Man of Faith*, *Tradition* 7:2.

⁵⁹ Kiryat Shmona Hesder Yeshiva website.

The certainty that a transcendental being exists is not only unaffected by the hidden state of this being, but rather it even overshadows the present explicit reality. As a result, this is a world with no clothing, no house, no books – and into this external reality bursts a figure, born of the hidden, intrinsic reality” (Agnon, 179). These words reflect another attempt by Kurzweil to express the transcendental reality in his worldview, which sought to both reflect the absence of this being in the modern Jewish existence and to confirm it by exposing the experiencing of the hiddenness of that very being.

Some have compared Agnon’s surreal stories to Kafka’s stories. For example, literature researcher Dan Laor presented the unique role of these stories: “These were short, sometimes even very short, stories that portrayed a sequence of events characterized by completely loose causal ties and a blurred distinction between reality and fiction. These stories depicted a distorted and embarrassing reality.”⁶⁰

Nonetheless, Agnon himself constantly said that these stories are the most personal of his works, and that they were not affected by anyone, including Kafka: “Once I rummaged in my works. I happened upon *The Book of Deeds*. I suddenly felt like publishing some of them. But I was unsure, because I found nothing like them neither in Hebrew literature nor in that of the gentiles [...] And those who say that my writing resembles Kafka’s are wrong. When I first published *The Book of Deeds* I had no knowledge of Kafka’s stories...”⁶¹

Kurzweil stressed the significance of Agnon’s surreal stories: All Agnon’s works contain the problematic of a person who is a man of faith but nonetheless struggles with himself. The alleged quiet, serenity, well-being, and internal observation that characterize his style do nothing to divert his attention from this fact. They create an increased artistic stimulus in their contrast with the disquiet of the conquered soul and its inner demons. Agnon’s demons are strongly evident in his short stories, like in “*The Book of Deeds*.” They alone show us the significance of the transition from the world of dreams to current reality in his works. For this reason, they are the main key to understanding Agnon the poet. Agnon’s complex relationship with God is exposed to the reader. After deep deliberations and struggles with the stormy times, with modern factors, with the exilic town and Jewry, beloved but fixed and withered, with his soul obligated as it is to the past but striving for the future, he reaches the metaphysical truth. God creates an opening for him, through which he enters.

⁶⁰ D. Laor (2008), *Shay Agnon*, Zalman Shazar Center, 88 [Hebrew].

⁶¹ S. Y. Agnon (2000), “To Dov Sadan,” in: *From Myself to Myself*, Schoken, 256 [Hebrew].

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