

## AGNON'S CONVERSATION WITH JEREMIAH IN *A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT*: 'AGINUT IN AN AGE OF NATIONAL MODERNIZATION

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**Abstract:** *Approaching A Guest for the Night from the point of view of the Book of Jeremiah—from which this novel draws its title—leads us to revisit two central components of Agnon's theology and stylized identity. First, his majestic evocation of a deity (Jeremiah's "guest") who abandoned his "wife" (the people of Israel); and concomitantly, Agnon's lifelong preoccupation with the "'agunah problem" as a metaphor for national rupture, in ways that for Agnon were linked to his vocational identity as a modern writer dedicated to the project of national repair. Through his conversation with the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Lamentations traditionally attributed to this prophet, Agnon adjusts and reduces the diasporic weight assigned to the 'agunah metaphor. In his midlife masterpiece, he enlists the midrashic concept of 'aginut to explore, among other things, his own composite identity as a traditional Jew and modern Jerusalemite, lover of texts and absent-minded husband.*

"Little Sister," explains the cantankerous Jeremy to his sister-in-law in A. B. Yehoshua's *Friendly Fire* (2007)—"the ethical teachings of the prophets" are bundled up with loyalty to the God of Israel, a kind of crazed husband, jealous of his one and only wife to whom he latched onto in the desert and has tormented ever since with his commandments.... And because the language is so majestic, and the rhetoric so hypnotic, we don't pay attention to what's said between the "lines."<sup>1</sup> This attack against the prophets, especially against Jeremiah in *Friendly Fire*—which along with all of Yehoshua's work is fundamentally indebted to Agnon<sup>2</sup>—prompts one to wonder about Agnon's own attitude toward that prophet of wrath and lamentation, particularly as manifested in *'Oreah nata la-lun* (*A Guest for the Night*), whose very title is drawn from Jeremiah 14:8:

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1. A. B. Yehoshua, *'Esh yedidutit* (Bnei Brak: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uhad, 2007), 274; trans. by Stuart Schoffman as *Friendly Fire: A Duet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), 278–79. Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler discusses its references to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Song of Songs in "Why did Jeremiah Cry? Bible and Intertextuality in *Friendly Fire*," in *Mabatim miztalvim: Essays on A. B. Yehoshua's Oeuvre*, ed. Amir Banbaji, Nitza Ben-Dov, and Ziva Shamir (Bnei Brak: Ha Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uhad, 2010), 441–450.

2. Regarding this deep indebtedness of Yehoshua and other contemporary Israeli writers to Agnon, see Nitza Ben-Dov, *Vehi tehilatekha: Studies in the Works of S.Y. Agnon, A. B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2006) and Yael Halevi-Wise, "The 'Double Triangle' Paradigm in Hebrew Fiction: National Redemption in Bi-generational Love Triangles from Agnon to Oz," *Proof-texts* 26 (2006): 309–343.

“Why are you like a stranger in the land / Like a guest who stops only for the night?”

Although scholarly appreciation of Agnon’s intertextual conversations with Jewish Scripture and lore has substantially broadened and deepened over the years,<sup>3</sup> no attention was paid to this central intertext in Agnon’s midlife masterpiece.<sup>4</sup> Even Shimon Halkin’s often reprinted essay on the four repetitions of *’Oreah nata la-lun*’s title within the body of the novel bypasses the phrase’s biblical referent, except in an offhand comment about Eikha—the book of Lamentations attributed to Jeremiah—through which Halkin (mis)defines Agnon’s novel as an elegiac lamentation for European Jewry.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps references to Scripture were so transparent among learned readers of Agnon’s generation that they obviated further commentary; yet it is nonetheless interesting that four years before Agnon began this novel, Halkin himself published an epic poem called *Barukh ben Neriah* in reference to Jeremiah’s faithful follower and ancient biographer,<sup>6</sup> but in his analysis of Agnon’s novel he avoids any direct engagement with the actual biblical referent.

In Agnon’s mind the book of Jeremiah was indeed inseparable from its rabbinic legacy, particularly one that construed the people’s historical loss of national control as a suspended marriage between God and the people of Israel. When examined in relation to the book of Jeremiah and its rabbinic contexts, it becomes clear that the “guest” in *A Guest for the Night* not only stands for the novel’s semi-autobiographical protagonist/narrator, but also functions metaphorically as a

3. Gershon Shaked underscores that “for Agnon, intertextuality was... the very source of his creativity, perhaps even its main subject,” *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist* (New York: NY University Press, 1989), 24; in “Sofer be-divrei torah” Shaked discusses *’Oreah natah la-lun*’s oppositional stance toward traditional Jewish attitudes to *hurban*, exile, redemption, and messianism, yet he too does not engage with the Jeremian intertext, *Mehkarei Yerushalayim be sifrut ’ivrit* 20 (2006): 237–252. Among the most notable studies of Agnon’s intertextual conversations with the Bible and the gamut of Jewish literature are Nitza Ben-Dov’s *Agnon’s Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Leiden & New York: Brill, 1993); Ziva Shamir’s *Shai olamot : ribui panim bi-yezirat Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Safra and Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uḥad, 2011); and Dalya Ḥoshen, *Agnon: sipur (’eino) sugya ba-gemara* (Jerusalem: Re’uven Mas, 2006). According to Gerard Genette’s palimpsestuous categorization of intertextual devices, Agnon’s relationship with the book of Jeremiah falls under the category of “commentary,” *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln, NE & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

4. The biblical source of the title is mentioned in a “Publisher’s Note” appended to the English translation of the novel, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (Madison, WI: Schocken Books/University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 485; and by Agnon’s biographers, Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 289, and Dan Laor, *Ḥayei ’Agnon: biografiah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 314. Dov Sadan analyzed a few other cases in which Agnon chose biblical phrases as titles for stories and collected volumes, *’Al Shay Agnon: masah, ’iyyun va-ḥeker* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me’uḥad, 1967), 160–172 and 194.

5. Shimon Halkin, “’Al ’Oreah natah la-lun,” in *Le-’Agnon shay: dvarim ’al ha-sofer ve-sfarav*, ed. Dov Sadan and Efraim Urbach (Jerusalem: Ha-va’ad ha-ḥiburi le-yovel ha-shiv’im shel Shay ’Agnon, 1958–9), 91–123.

6. Shimon Halkin, *Barukh ben Neriyah: po’emah* (Tel Aviv: Shen, 1934).

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substitute for Jeremiah's God in a world where God is painfully absent. Reading *A Guest for the Night* in light of Jeremiah further underscores Agnon's lifelong interplay with the national "'*agunah* problem" via his vocational self-representation as a writer anchored ('*agun*) to an ancient theologized dynamic of national repair. The concept of '*aginut*, understood as a suspended marriage between God and the people of Israel, links the main elements of *A Guest for the Night's* diffuse plot, allowing us to see more profoundly the dilemmas affecting the semi-autobiographical protagonist's identity as a traditional Jew, modern Zionist, writer, and husband.

In his midlife retrospective, Agnon used metaphors of marital rupture associated with Jeremiah to express a modern program of national reconstruction and repair. While it is true that prophecies of consolation and repair in the book of Jeremiah are almost drowned out by wrathful exhortations to uphold the Sinaitic covenant or be obliterated, Jeremiah's own rhetoric of restitution is nevertheless robust enough to evoke a dynamic of expected return to God and the Land of Israel. Walter Brueggemann's 1998 *Commentary on Jeremiah*—subtitled *Exile and Homecoming*<sup>7</sup>—emphasizes this pendular dynamic in ways that resonate with a similar dynamic of exile and homecoming that both Anne Golomb Hoffman and Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi highlight in their respective analyses of Agnon's work.<sup>8</sup> Yet when Agnon's rhetoric of exile and return is compared to Jeremiah's, we see that Agnon's novel essentially offers an *anti-jeremiad*, even if one less opposed to Jeremiah's *actual* stance vis-à-vis God and the covenant than the political fossilization of that legacy by Orthodox institutions of Agnon's day.

### AGNON'S BIRTHDAY JEREMIADS

During a year in which he planned to exercise and study Talmud in anticipation of his fiftieth birthday,<sup>9</sup> Agnon was seized instead by an impulse to give fictional form to a meditation on his private identity, history, and mission as a modern Zionist writer. He had just finished proofreading *Yamim nora'im* (*Days of Awe*, 1938), an ambitious collection of Halakhah and lore successfully marketed by Schocken as a companion to the prayer book for the High Holidays.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of that laborious accomplishment, and instead of resting as he had hoped,

7. Walter Brueggemann, *Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998).

8. Regarding Agnon's dynamic of exile and return, see Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991); Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and Hillel Barzel, "'Erez Yisra'el-Golah,'" in *Sipurei 'ahavah shel S. Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan University Press, 1980), 78ff.

9. Dan Laor, *Hayei 'Agnon*, 299–300.

10. As Stephen Katz has shown, Agnon scribbled the initial pages of the new novel on the dorso of typescripts for *Days of Awe*, which he had just finished proofreading, and that anthology's focus on reflection, repentance, and renewal remains a conceptual—but ultimately oppositional—backbone for the new novel, *The Centrifugal Novel: S. Y. Agnon's Poetics of Composition* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 36.

Agnon wrote the bulk of *A Guest for the Night* in one fell swoop; he then augmented, revised, and polished it with the intention of completing the new novel in time for his birthday, which he always claimed fell on Tisha be-'Av. As Agnon's biographers have shown, Agnon was actually born a few days after the Ninth of Av.<sup>11</sup> Yet in keeping with his general tendency to round things off to the nearest symbolic figure, he portrayed himself as being born on the day that marks the destructions of the First and Second Temples, yet also promises restitution through the birth of a messiah. In ways that relate to the Jeremian intertext, Agnon's midlife novel meditates on the implications of being allegedly born on such an ominous date.

When considered from the perspective of his vocation as a modern Jewish writer, Agnon's claim to be born on Tisha be-'Av becomes a bold way of appropriating for himself a redemptive mission that had practical significance in an age of national reconstruction that was still dogged by persistent threat of *ḥurban* (destruction) both in the Land of Israel and abroad. More interestingly, by claiming to be born on Tisha be-'Av, Agnon personally linked himself to an ancient history of trauma and hope that Jeremiah expressed in terms of a ruptured marriage between the people of Israel and God. Jeremiah's concept of '*aginut*' as a suspended relationship with God was later amplified in the book of Lamentations and the Midrash on the Song of Songs; jointly, the core conceptual underpinnings of these works inform the stylized identity of the writer who named himself Agnon. Therefore, to focus on Agnon's conversation with Jeremiah in his midlife retrospective is to explore a historical, symbolic, and autobiographical network of references through which Agnon links and separates himself from traditional Jewish attitudes toward national '*aginut*'.

From the moment that *A Guest for the Night*'s semi-autobiographical narrator enters his Galician birth town on the eve of Yom Kippur (after an absence of twenty years) to the novel's final scenes in Jerusalem right after Tisha be-'Av, Agnon combines and contrasts the High Holidays' (personal) dynamic of introspection and repentance with Tisha be-'Av's (national) dynamic of loss and renewal, in ways that have been traditionally associated with Jeremiah as the prophet who witnessed the destruction of the First Temple. Unlike prophets who began their careers as adults, Jeremiah spent his entire life exhorting family, king, priesthood, and people to place the covenant at Sinai above every political and social consideration; he begged Judeans and the remnants of Northern Israel to accept the Babylonians' yoke and lay low until geopolitical forces would enable them to regain sovereignty, while maintaining the gamut of Sinai's humanitarian and theological stipulations. He refused to leave the Land of Israel with the exiles to Babylonia, yet was forcefully dragged down to Egypt by the remaining Judeans after the murder of Gedaliah. And since he witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, the book of Lamentations is also traditionally attributed to him, although it is unlikely that he was among its actual

11. Arnold Band notes this date discrepancy (*Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 5 n.5), but see Dan Laor for a more detailed recounting (*Hayei Agnon*, 19).

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authors. The book of Jeremiah itself, however, is a compendium of his prophesies, actions, and life story scrambled into one of the Bible's most difficult documents.

Although Jeremiah's rhetoric of punishment escalates as the situation in Judea worsens, and he certainly comes across as God's most cantankerous mouth-piece, throughout his life Jeremiah also acted as a harbinger of hope. When his hometown 'Anatot on the outskirts of Jerusalem was destroyed, for instance, he obeyed God's command to purchase property there at great personal expense in order to signal the area's eventual reconstruction. This dynamic of destruction/reconstruction, which already informs the book of Jeremiah, was amplified in Tisha be-'Av's liturgical commemoration of the fall of Jerusalem, and so, by melding Jeremiah with Second Isaiah, the liturgy of Tisha be-'Av promises messianic redemption on that day.

With this background in mind, and given *A Guest for the Night's* moment of composition in 1938, it is tempting to compare the warnings issued by the book of Jeremiah at the end of the fifth century BCE with Agnon's anxieties about Hitler's intentions in the late 1930s. Agnon's novel was initially published in daily installments in *Haaretz* from October 1938 to April 1939, amidst reports of escalating conflict with the British and Arabs in Palestine, and surrounded by news of Hitler's expansion abroad.<sup>12</sup> Undeniably, Agnon's awareness of potential catastrophe is corroborated by the fact that during the summer of 1939, Agnon and his wife Esther managed to move all of his siblings from Germany to Mandatory Palestine at a time when it was almost impossible to obtain visas.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, to read Agnon's novel as prophesy of the Holocaust is to project later events back into it, as Arnold Band rightly argues.<sup>14</sup> The historical catastrophe to which *A Guest for the Night* compares the Fall of Jerusalem is first and foremost the destruction and disorientation wrought on the people of Shibusch/Buczacz by World War I and its aftermath, a war that Agnon witnessed from the sidelines as a young man living in Germany, and whose corrosive effects on the lives of European communities he continued to deplore even after the Holocaust became fully known.

The cognitive disorientation to which *A Guest for the Night* compares the fall of Jerusalem is, therefore, less centered on the fear of any potential future catastrophe, than on a detailed representation of the devastation wrought upon the Galician Jewish community of Agnon's boyhood and youth by the combined effects of the Great War, the pogroms, and the process of modernization. As Alan Mintz observes in regards to the rhetoric of the book of Lamentations itself, it was the cognitive disorientation provoked by the Fall of Jerusalem that

12. Although Agnon completed the manuscript before anyone could fathom the extent of destruction in Europe, his revisions for the full volume do lend "an air of deeper despair toward the world of Shibusch while increasing a tendency to color favorably all aspects of the Zionist enterprise" (Katz, *Centrifugal Novel*, 58). Still, I would maintain that Agnon presents a retrospective rather than prophetic vision of catastrophe, even though he puts himself in conversation with a prophet of destruction whose words of consolation were few, and even then rather vengeful.

13. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 7–8; Laor, *Hayei Agnon*, 321.

14. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 284–85.

turned that historical event into a pivotal catastrophic concept.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, in Agnon's novel a series of combined historical and autobiographical disasters—WWI and its aftermath as well as the destruction of the author's homes in Germany and Jerusalem—provoked his reevaluation of traditional attitudes toward catastrophe and redemption anchored in Jeremiah.

Like the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, and to a certain extent also like Bialik, Tchernikhovsky, and Greenberg's cycles of pseudoprophetic modern poems,<sup>16</sup> Agnon's novel records the effects of *ḥurban* in order to insist on social renewal and reconstruction in the Land of Israel. For despite the undeniable presence of an anxious modernist pessimism which Uri Cohen and others have noted in their assessments of this novel,<sup>17</sup> *A Guest for the Night* confirms a Zionist ethos of exile and homecoming: the bare-boned plot of the novel revolves around a married man, who after making Aliyah with his family, returns to his birth town in Galicia after their new home in Jerusalem is destroyed in the Arab riots of 1929. For almost a year, he lingers in his diasporic hometown (Shibush), fussing about a new coat and a lost-and-found key, which opens his grandfather's *beit midrash*. After his birthday on Tisha be-'Av, the anonymous narrator/protagonist takes leave of all those with whom he had conversed during his stay in Shibush, and meeting up with his wife and children, boards a ship back to the Land of Israel.

But why does he linger away so long? And does anything change for him when he returns to Jerusalem? Exploring these questions in relation to Agnon's conversation with the book of Jeremiah leads us to pay particular attention to *'aginut* as a multilayered metaphor of suspended marriage, both within the plot of the novel, and ideologically, in relation to Agnon's nuanced identity as a lover of Zion *and* Buczacz, a traditional Jew *and* modern Zionist, a busy writer and an absent-minded husband. Within the plot of the novel, the narrator/protagonist manages to overcome his year-long existential crisis through a gradual process of introspection and renewal that enables him to deal with his ambiguous civil status and traumatic experience of destroyed houses. On its intertextual and historical plane, this dynamic of homecoming and repair overturns the midrashic

15. Alan Mintz, *Ḥurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 21.

16. After Bialik began to publish what Dan Miron calls his pseudoprophetic poems, David Frishman attacked the idea that the ancient rhetorical style of the prophets could be revived or even imitated in the modern world. Frishman aligned himself in this matter with Aḥad Ha-'am, who also felt that "Biblical prophecy ... emerged from a mental world so alien to ours that it could not, in any real way, be revived and continued," Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 119. See also Miron's extended study of *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2010); as well as Sidra Ezrahi's comparison of Bialik's and Agnon's lamentations in "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 84–85; and Reu'ven Shaḥam's "Motivim Bialikayim be-'Oreah natah la-lun," in *S. Y. Agnon: Critical Essays on His Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Avinoam Barshai (Tel Aviv: The Open University of Israel, 1991), 244–250.

17. Uri S. Cohen, "Agnon's Modernity: Death and Modernism in S. Y. Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*" *MODERNISM/modernity* 13, no. 4 (2006): 657–71.

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concept of 'aginat by opposing a maskilic rhetoric of practical renewal to a rhetoric of retrenchment and repentance à la Jeremiah.

Dan Laor relates that when Agnon first mentioned his new novel to the critic Dov Sadan, he described it as a story "about the events of 1929."<sup>18</sup> In the completed novel, however, references to the destruction of the narrator's Jerusalem home during the riots of 1929, and the family's ensuing dispersion, occur only halfway into the volume—so that only at this late point the reader learns about the event that set in motion the protagonist's journey abroad. Moreover, from a biographical perspective, the existential and theological crisis that the narrator/protagonist undergoes in the aftermath of the destruction of his Jerusalem home mirrors not only the destruction of Agnon's Jerusalem home in 1929, but especially the shock and disorientation that Agnon had actually experienced five years beforehand, when his apartment and manuscripts in Germany had burnt down. In 1924, in Bad Homburg, Agnon reacted to the loss of his library and manuscripts as a wakeup call that sent him back to the Land of Israel, where he had lived four years as a young man, and also back to the religiously observant lifestyle of his boyhood, which he had maintained in a somewhat slacker manner from the time he left Buczacz at the age of nineteen until that second and final immigration to the Land of Israel in 1924.

After the destruction of his German apartment in 1924, Agnon moved to Jerusalem alone, separating from his wife and children for nearly a year—so long that she feared permanent separation and their closest and most influential friends, Zalman Schocken and Gershon Scholem, intervened to help the Agnons build a new life in Jerusalem. Five years later, however, in marked contrast to the crisis he had suffered after the destruction of his German home and library, Agnon merely reacted to the destruction of his family's new Jerusalem home (in the riots of 1929) as a nuisance, and took the opportunity to travel back to Germany to oversee the Schocken publication of his collected stories. It was at the end of this "business trip" that Agnon visited Buczacz, and was received there with enormous public fanfare barely reflected in the semi-autobiographical novel.<sup>19</sup> *A Guest for the Night* thus transforms the five to seven days that the author spent as a lionized writer in Buczacz, into a year that the narrator/protagonist spends in Shibush after the destruction of his Jerusalem home—which in turn mirrors the existential crisis and cognitive disorientation that Agnon suffered after the destruction of his home and manuscripts in the first (but not the second) fire.

With this biographical background in mind, it is fascinating to observe the novelized transformation of these experiences. As Anne Golomb Hoffman emphasizes, the language that Agnon employs to describe his protagonist's history of lost homes reverberates with allusions to the destructions of the First and Second Temples.<sup>20</sup>

18. Laor, *Hayei 'Agnon*, 301.

19. Laor, 316ff; Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 284. For a comprehensive analysis of Agnon's fictionalization of his visit to Poland in 1930, see Dan Laor, *S. Y. 'Agnon: Heibetim hadashim* (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Ha-po'alim, 1995), 154–174.

20. In the original Hebrew, the repetition of the term *hurban* to describe the destructions of the narrator/protagonist's homes renders the reference to the temple much more obvious. For an extended

Why am I here, and my wife and children elsewhere? After our enemies had destroyed my house and left me with nothing, a great weariness entered me and my hands were too feeble to rebuild my house, which had suffered a second destruction [*hurban*]. The first destruction was abroad and the second in the Land of Israel; but when my house was destroyed abroad, I accepted the justice of the verdict and said: It is my punishment for choosing to live outside the Land and we saw that the Almighty was looking down with favor on His Land and that a people was being created.... While we were living in tranquility, the judgment struck us. The enemy raised his sword. ... My wife and children and I emerged alive ... [but] the house in which I thought I should live was laid desolate.<sup>21</sup>

This sequence, as we have noted, resembles but does not fully align with Agnon's own experience of damaged homes, for the novel not only connects its author's experience of two destroyed houses with the historical fall of the First and Second Temples, but also repositions their relationship to Agnon's existential crisis by melding the destruction of his Jerusalem home in 1929 with the existential crisis he experienced when his diasporic home and library burnt down five years earlier. These personal losses are moreover subsumed into the national loss mourned on Tisha be-'Av, Agnon's alleged birthday, through references to lamentations attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. Most important, however, is that Agnon insists on the redemptive dimension of this day: "the Fast of Av passed and the days of consolation arrived. I felt as if the whole world were new, for I was born on the Ninth of Av, and every year, at this season, this man's heart renews itself and reawakens."<sup>22</sup>

The conversation that *A Guest for the Night* conducts with Jeremiah thus conflates Agnon's personal experience of destroyed houses with Tisha be-'Av's national symbolism of loss, dispersion, and renewal in ways that enable Agnon to subject Orthodox Jewish attitudes toward Jeremiah's heritage to a modern Zionist reflection. By going all the way back to Jeremiah and the destruction of the First Temple, Agnon is able to reinterpret historiosophic and theological paradigms articulated by this prophet in ancient times, revisiting a foundational marital and sexual rhetoric that Jeremiah and other prophets used to describe the relationship between God and the House of Israel. For it was Jeremiah, moreover, who offered a blueprint for life in the Diaspora when exile became inevitable and a promise of reconciliation between a few faithful survivors and their now conditional God.<sup>23</sup> It is this blueprint—crystallized into a stale rhetoric of atonement

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analysis of this house symbolism, see Anne Golomb Hoffman, "Housing the Jewish Past in *A Guest for the Night*," in *Between Exile and Return*, 77–103.

21. S. Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, 207–209; *'Oreah nata la-lun* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 151–52.

22. *Guest*, 442; *'Oreah*, 322.

23. It was Jeremiah, for example, who advised the exiles in Babylon to "Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit.... Multiply there ... seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to



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and redemption—that Agnon (and modern Zionism) challenges through a practical program of national renewal.<sup>24</sup>

### SPEAKING IN THE NAME OF GOD

Critics have automatically associated the idea of guesthood in this novel with the semi-autobiographical narrator who habitually calls himself *'oto 'adam* or *'otoh 'oreah* (“that man” or “that guest”) and is thus labeled by several characters in the novel. But this tendency to refer to the novel's narrator as “the guest” is the first thing one is obliged to reconsider when examining Agnon's title in its biblical context.

Early on in the book of Jeremiah, the prophet pleads with God on behalf of the people:

Though our iniquities testify against us,  
Act, O Lord, for the sake of Your name,  
Though our rebellions are many  
And we have sinned against You.  
O Hope of Israel,  
Its deliverer in time of trouble,  
*Why are You like a stranger in the land,*  
*Like a traveler [ 'oreah /guest] who stops only for the night?*  
Why are You like a man who is stunned,  
Like a warrior who cannot give victory?  
Yet You are in our midst, O Lord,  
And Your name is attached to us—  
Do not forsake us!<sup>25</sup>

The first and most substantial point that emerges here is that Jeremiah's “guest” refers to God. Agnon is therefore in some way equating his protagonist with Jeremiah's God. But in so doing, is he replacing God with a character that acts and speaks in the place of one who not only threatened, but also actually departed like a guest, since the days of Jeremiah? Or is there rather a suggestion that God is still immanent in the world of the novel as a beloved husband/traveler expected to return at any moment?

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the Lord in its behalf, for in its prosperity you shall prosper” (Jeremiah 29:5–7). Further on I will discuss Jeremiah's sexualized portrayal of Israel's relationship with God.

24. This double-edged relationship to Jeremiah's legacy to some extent resembles that of American puritans from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, whose “cries of declension and doom were part of a strategy designed to revitalize their errand,” despite a profound inner disquiet, as Sacvan Berkowitz puts it in *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), xii. I am grateful to Miranda Hickman for bringing this to my attention.

25. Jeremiah 14:7–9.

The second point that emerges from the biblical context is that Agnon shifted Jeremiah's interrogative plea into a declarative sentence: whereas Jeremiah begs God *not* to abandon His land and people, Agnon's title and its four reappearances within the novel assert an absence: '*Oreah natah la-lun*—a guest who stayed just a night or two. According to the Derridean terms first deployed by Anne Golomb Hoffman in her analysis of this novel and more recently by Yaniv Hagbi in *Language, Absence, Play*, we are confronted here by an absence that has left a powerful trace, testifying to something that had been present once upon a time, thus drawing our attention to the writer's responsibility as a recorder and (re)creator of the past in the present.<sup>26</sup> The modern writer—a creator himself—puts God “in his place” by assigning Him the role of “honored guest” in a narrative that otherwise acknowledges his absence. Reality and pious rhetoric are thus at odds in Agnon's novel.

A modern writer cannot promise the physical protection expected from Jeremiah's God, nor is he able to speak *for* God or even *with* God like an ancient prophet.<sup>27</sup> Agnon's narrator/writer nevertheless insists on speaking respectfully in the name of God, even when this is shown to be futile, and thus creates an illusion of harmony that replaces divine guidance when all seems hopeless. This comes across vividly in the novel's penultimate chapter, when the narrator is reunited with his family in Jerusalem, but is still stressed about the predicament of his young friend Zvi, imprisoned by the British police for attempting to enter Palestine despite the restrictions of the White Paper:

Zvi's misfortune abated my joy [of return].... I went to a number of men in authority to beg mercy for Zvi.... When I saw that it was *useless*, I went to the distinguished men of the day. When I saw that they were *useless*, I went to the leaders of the community. When I saw that they were *useless* I went to the public benefactors. When I saw that they were *useless*, I went to the lovers of charity. When I saw that they were *useless*, I relied on our Father in heaven.<sup>28</sup>

According to this passage's refrain, we are enjoined to wonder whether God will turn out to be just as useless, or whether He is eternally *useful* as a calming last resort after all practical venues have been exhausted. At the very beginning of the novel, Daniel Bach, one of Shibus's inhabitants, announces, “I don't

26. Yaniv Hagby, *Language, Absence, Play: Judaism and Superstructuralism in the Poetics of S. Y. Agnon* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009).

27. Bialik's *Be-'ir ha-haregah* (In the City of Slaughter) is the most notable appropriation of a prophetic and divine stance that requires its reader, as Dan Miron observes, to “work through the entire first part of the poem before grasping ... [that] the speaker is none other than God himself.” But whereas in Bialik “the poet-prophet is ... a ‘son of man’ ... inferior to and distant from the Godhead,” in Agnon's novel the conflation of God (as Guest) and narrator (as guest) via the Jeremian intertext cannot be pried apart and hence it is as daring as Bialik's later antitheological poems. Dan Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry*, 130. For an analysis of what Alan Mintz calls Bialik's “presumption,” see *Hurban*, especially 142; and also Re'uvén Shoham's “Motivim Bialikaim.”

28. Agnon, *Guest*, 469; '*Oreah*, 342, my emphasis.

believe the Almighty cares about the welfare of His creatures,” and later he asks, “is it to the glory of God if a lump of rotting flesh or a skinful of stinking blood cries out, ‘Thou art our righteous, no matter what befalls me, and I have been wicked,’ and even then He does not lift His hand from me and continues to afflict me?”<sup>29</sup> The narrator’s consideration of God’s usefulness, or lack thereof, via Zvi’s predicament at the end of the novel, flirts with Daniel Bach’s rejection of theodicy at the beginning of the novel—but the narrator refuses to categorically endorse such a position.

Also in the age of Jeremiah, the people are frustrated by their relationship with God: “Why are You like a man who is stunned?” they ask. God is angry because the chosen people have turned their back on the covenant, and the special relationship He affirmed with them at Sinai is on the verge of breaking apart. However, the people point out that the relationship cannot be dissolved, for a common history already exists: “Your name is attached to us.” Appealing to God’s vanity, they beg him to help them, at least for the sake of His own reputation as their protector. However, as Yehezkel Kaufman has argued, the God of the prophets differed from other regional deities because this god does not *need* people: he can exist on his own terms and it is the people’s problem if they renege on Sinai’s guidelines.<sup>30</sup> Thus, according to Kaufman’s model, the relationship between God and the people of Israel is *not* symbiotic, and even when the prophets portray the people of Israel as God’s adulterous wife, this is a relationship of choice rather than dependency.

Agnon was interested, nevertheless, in the notion of a symbiotic relationship between God and the people of Israel—an eroticized model expressed in the Kabbalah and the Midrash on the Song of Songs.<sup>31</sup> Yet even in what Band calls the “signature” story, “Agunot” (1908), which opens with the exquisite (pseudo) midrash to which we will turn at the end of this essay—even then, and certainly in his midlife masterpiece two decades later—Agnon questioned the usefulness and liability of the symbiotic model. While for Jeremiah, God remains a palpable and approachable entity despite the withdrawal of His protection, for Agnon the choice to lean on “the Holy One blessed be He” and speak majestically in His name is reasserted as a deliberate choice maintained in the face of an absence traced here as far back as Jeremiah.

In the course of conversations with interlocutors who represent a spectrum of beliefs—from the naively pious to the politically manipulative and atheists of various types—Agnon’s narrator consistently evokes God in majestic terms.<sup>32</sup> He does so regardless of whether he finds himself in the company of the

29. *Guest*, 4 and 34; *Oreah*, 7 and 28.

30. Yehezkel Kaufman, *Toldot ha-‘emunah ha-‘isra’elit*, V. III (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1937), 80.

31. On Agnon’s relationship to the Kabbalah, see Elchanan Shiloh’s *Ha-kabbalah bi-yezirat S. Y. Agnon* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2011) and regarding Agnon’s relationship to the Song of Songs, Ilana Pardes offers an important new historicist approach in Agnon’s *Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013).

32. See Amos Oz’s discussion of this ambivalent attitude in *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon’s Fear of God* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Marxist Yeruham (whom he likes) or at the home of the town's anti-Zionist rabbi (whom he detests). To convince the rabbi that the Labor Zionists are acting in consonance with God's plan, he speaks about God's will as if it were palpable, insisting, for example, that the Labor Zionists "have been privileged to have the Holy One, blessed be He, appoint them as guardians over His Land," thus seeming to position himself against Daniel Bach's aforementioned opinion about God's lack of interest in His creatures. But when the rabbi brushes aside his guest's modern Zionism and begs him to travel "throughout the communities of the Exile to restore Israel to the good way," the narrator/protagonist falls closer in line with Daniel Bach in order to detach himself from Shibush's rabbi:

'Neither you nor I can [bring Jews back to God and Halakha],' I replied. 'Why not?' 'I, because I regard all Israel as innocent, and if it is a question of repentance, it is the Holy One blessed be He—if I might say so—who ought to repent. As for you, sir, even if all Israel were like the ministering angels, you would not regard them as innocent.'<sup>33</sup>

To rebuff the rabbi's jeremiad, Agnon's narrator accuses God of unacceptable negligence, as does Daniel Bach, who had experienced the horrors of the trenches; but Agnon's narrator still insists on employing majestic rhetoric to evoke this negligent God—"it is the Holy One blessed be He—if I might say so—who ought to repent." Although the main criticism is directed here against the political agenda of Shibush's rabbi rather than against the God he allegedly represents, Agnon's narrator blatantly rejects a post-*hurban* tradition that exhorts the people to "submit to the yoke and wait in silence for deliverance."<sup>34</sup> Jeremiah, too, had accused God of unfairness and negligence.<sup>35</sup> But on account of his hysterical tone and because he witnessed the destruction he warned about, Jeremiah is evoked primarily as a voice of punishment and lamentation. In *A Guest for the Night* the town's rabbi represents this rigid and negative type of jeremiad and the protagonist/narrator rejects it.

#### UNPACKING THE TERMS OF COMPARISON

Wrestling with interpretations that immobilize the prophets' figurative language, Agnon unpacks metaphors traditionally used to describe the relationship between God and the people of Israel, as well as between this people and their various homes, past and present, in Israel and the Diaspora. If God can be "*like* a stranger in the land / *Like* a guest"—then is He or isn't He a guest, a stranger?

33. *Guest*, 180; *Oreah*, 133–34.

34. Mintz, *Hurban*, 35. Particularly relevant to my argument here is Mintz's observation that "Lamentations, taken generically rather than as a particular text, can be understood as a record of man's struggle to speak in the face of God's silence," 41. For a broader comparison of Lamentations and its midrashic treatment in Lamentations Rabbati, see Shaye Cohen's "The Destruction: From Scripture to Midrash," *Prooftexts* 2, no. 1 (1982): 18–39.

35. For example in Jeremiah 12:1–2.

## Agnon's Conversation with Jeremiah in *A Guest for the Night*

When does simile become reality? And what exactly is at stake in this process of metaphorization?

Such questions about the relationship between reality and symbol are central to Agnon's narrative, and he examines them, among other ways, through direct references to the prophet Jeremiah. Along with *A Guest for the Night's* four unattributed repetitions of the title phrase within the body of the novel, Agnon twice explicitly refers to Jeremiah, first in connection with the book of Jeremiah itself and then in connection with the book of Lamentations, traditionally attributed to this prophet. Both references deal with a discrepancy between truth and empty rhetoric under the shadow of Jeremiah's legacy.

Early on in the novel, Daniel Bach argues with his pious father, Reb Shlomo:

'The war of Gog and Magog has already come, but the Messiah, the son of David, has not yet come.' His father replies, 'My son, the war of Gog and Magog exists in every generation, in every era, in every hour, in every single man, inside a man's house, inside his heart, in his heart and in the hearts of his children. Be still, my son, be still. *Long ago Jeremiah said of the wicked: 'Thou art near in their mouth and far from their reins [thoughts],'* and the words still cry out from the heart of Israel.'<sup>36</sup>

A witness to this conversation, the narrator worries that Reb Shlomo's piousness will not withstand relocation to his younger son's secular *kvuzah* in Ramat Rachel. That night he has a nightmare in which he falls into the sea, while look-alikes of both pious father and disillusioned son are equally unable to cast the drowning dreamer a saving hand.<sup>37</sup> In the context of Agnon's conversation with Jeremiah, it is interesting to note that when the narrator is drowning, the only phrase that comes out of his mouth echoes the book of Lamentations: "Comfort the city that is mourning and burnt."<sup>38</sup> Like the pious formula used to comfort a Jewish mourner, the dreamer's call for help takes the shape of complete identification with Jerusalem during its worse moment.

The narrator, too, is evidently undergoing a war of Gog and Magog in his own heart, a crisis that worsens as the novel progresses. God is still evoked majestically and respectfully in his *mouth*, yet his *heart* entertains a panoply of doubts. He cannot help this, for he *sees* that all the things he lovingly associated with a godly universe—justice and righteousness; prayer and study in a beit midrash that is harmonized with practical good deeds; and healing connections to the childhood experiences he expected to find in his old hometown—are all so palpably absent that the narrator/protagonist/writer finds himself stepping into this absence, haphazardly speaking and acting in the name of a haphazard God.

Ironic discourse is defined precisely as such a deliberate discrepancy between what is said and what is meant, and Naomi Sokoloff has shown how

36. *Guest*, 38; 'Oreah', 31, my emphasis.

37. For an analysis of this dream see Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 324.

38. *Guest*, 40; 'Oreah', 32.

Agnon systematically trains his readers to deduce the *opposite* of what is said—as when his narrator preposterously affirms, “I am not one of those who compare the present to days gone by.”<sup>39</sup> Yet this discrepancy between what is said and what is felt or meant enables Agnon to soften and round out every character, including the town’s rabbi, who as he takes leave from the departing narrator, sheds tears of longing for Jerusalem while continuing to withhold any endorsement of the narrator’s Zionism.<sup>40</sup>

Exactly in the middle of the novel, during the second half of the year he spends in Shibush, the narrator/protagonist musters strength to visit five impoverished widows whose husbands were the most righteous and powerful men that he knew as a child. This visit to the widows occasions the novel’s second explicit reference to Jeremiah, exposing most clearly the Jeremiah metaphor of ‘*aginut* to which Agnon opposes an active model of national repair:

A verse came to my lips: ‘She has become as a widow.’ When Jeremiah saw the destruction of the First Temple, he sat down and wrote the Book of Lamentations, and he was not content with all the lamentations he wrote until he had compared the House of Israel to a widow and said, ‘She has become as a widow’—not a true widow, but like a woman whose husband has gone overseas and intends to return to her. When we come to lament this latest destruction [the Great War and its aftermath] we do not say, ‘She has become as a widow,’ but a true widow, without the word of comparison.

So this lamenter sat before the five gentle widows from good families, whose husbands had gone away and not returned. He searched his heart for a word to say to console them. But since the word of comparison had been taken away he found no consolation.<sup>41</sup>

First of all, great effort is made here to emphasize that these bereaved women are actual widows and not ‘*agunot*. Secondly, this narrator has shown himself to be perfectly capable of spinning a consoling rhetoric of messianism and piety to confront the physical and psychological war of Gog and Magog that surrounds him, yet here he is unable to attenuate the shock that he experiences when he visits the fallen matrons of his youth: “since the word of comparison had been taken away he found no consolation.”

But who gives or takes away this “word of comparison”? Is it not the narrator/author himself?<sup>42</sup> And, why does *this* encounter in particular, among the

39. Naomi B. Sokoloff, “Metaphor and Metonymy in Agnon’s *A Guest for the Night*,” *AJS Review* 9, no. 1 (1984): 97–111.

40. See the narrator’s conversations with Shibush’s rabbi in *Guest*, chapters 31 and 75.

41. *Guest*, 231; ‘*Oreah*, 169.

42. Uri S. Cohen argues that “*A Guest for the Night* is the place where Agnon transforms the Author, tearing him away from the narrator” (“Agnon’s Modernity,” 665); see also his extended discussion of this issue in *Hisardut: Tfisat ha-mavet bein milhamot ha-’olam be-’Erez Yisra’el u-ve-’Italiah* (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 70ff. Unquestionably, a persistent ironic distance separates these two constructs throughout the novel, but the tension that Agnon maintains between the narrator’s confusion

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constant stream of characters and situations that illustrate Shibush's downfall, paralyze the narrator's ability to continue juggling metaphors about the relationship between God and the people of Israel, in their various lost and found homes, in Israel and the Diaspora? To answer these questions we must pay greater attention to the concept of 'aginit threaded all the way from Jeremiah through the Midrash on the Song of Songs, which stitches together Agnon's entire corpus and vocational identity as a modern "anchor" during an era of heightened national consciousness.

### JEREMIAH AND THE NATIONAL 'AGUNAH PROBLEM

From the beginning of his career as a modern Hebrew writer, Agnon obsessed over the concept of 'aginit as a suspended marriage between God and Israel. He used it to hint at the midrashic relationship between God and the people of Israel in exile and Zion, and thus project historiosophic resonance unto complicated love stories, which he thereby turned into teleological accounts of return and redemption. In "Agunot"—the first story S. Y. Czaczkes signed under the penname that eventually became his family's official name—Agnon portrays the concept of 'aginit as an existential condition of ruptured harmony within individual psyches whose private sufferings disrupt the life of an entire community. An 'agunah, at a basic level, is a married woman whose husband has disappeared, leaving her without a writ of divorce, so she cannot remarry until he either sends her a *get* or it is established that he is dead. In some ways, her status is worse than a widow's, for although her daily struggles are like a widow's, she remains officially married and therefore cannot make free decisions about the course of her life. It is considered a great mitzvah to release an 'agunah either by finding the missing spouse or proving that he is no longer alive.

The book of Lamentations' opening verse, comparing the people of Israel to an 'agunah—"She has become as a widow," not a true widow, but like a woman whose husband has gone overseas and intends to return to her"—therefore sets in motion a national framework with legal and theological implications that have colored Jewish attitudes toward freedom and national renewal since ancient times. The problem of the husbandless 'agunah is that she is tethered to an absent entity. This paradoxical situation—applied to the national situation in a strict manner as does Shibush's rabbi in *A Guest for the Night*—stipulates that the repentant people of Israel must accept the stricter Halakhah of exile until the husband (God) sees fit to call his wife back to their mutual home in Zion. By contrast, *Guest's* narrator wishes to hasten the resolution of this national 'agunah status by *first* returning the people to Zion and then hoping that God has or will return too, or in any case deferring the matter of God's practical role in this

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and the reader's expectations of a clarification-of-confusion, are nevertheless attenuated in the novel's final pages, where the semi-autobiographical author rears his head not only to articulate, but to also enact the practical responsibilities of a modern resident of Jerusalem, paterfamilias, and Hebrew writer.

process, as we have seen in connection to Zvi's imprisonment. Agnon's play with the concepts of absence and guesthood—God's and the narrator's—is therefore just another means of revisiting his lifelong preoccupation with exile and return as an *'agunah* problem. In challenging the legacy of Jeremiah's *'aginut*, Agnon thus articulates his own vocational identity as one who not only anchors the people to God but also paradoxically works to release the people from a fallow state of *'aginut* to that God.

The *'agunah* metaphor—perceived as a suspension of marital harmony between God and the people of Israel—derives from traditions much older than the book of Lamentations. Following Hosea, Jeremiah brought this theologized marital discourse to new levels of imagery and rhetorical force. He explains to the northern Israelites, for example, that “the Lord ... espoused you” and would “bring you to Zion” except “you have broken faith with [Him] as a woman breaks faith with a paramour”; and “because Rebel Israel had committed adultery,” God “cast her off and handed her a bill of divorce.” Nonetheless, her “love as a bride”—when she accepted the covenant at Sinai—is “accounted in [her] favor.”<sup>43</sup> Examples of this marital and sexual rhetoric abound in the book of Jeremiah. Its warning that the divine husband might turn into a wandering traveler, or departed “guest,” thus forms part of a wider use of marital metaphors that reach their most tragic expression in the book of Lamentations.

Enter the Midrash on the Song of Songs—which takes an ancient collection of erotic love poems and interprets them systematically as a metaphor for a ruptured relationship between God and Israel.<sup>44</sup> The erotic content of the Song of Songs—interpreted as a theologized marriage between God and the people of Israel—was transformed by the book of Lamentations and its midrash into a *national* rhetoric of loss, atonement, and redemption after the fall of the First and Second Temples. This post-*hurban* rhetoric of *'aginut*, which the prophets themselves had begun to spin, acquired a mystical dimension in kabbalistic discourse. It is from these combined sources—crystallized in the Midrash on the Song of Songs—that Agnon derives his *'agunah* metaphors.

From “Agunot” and “And the Crooked Shall Become Straight” (*Va-hayah he-àkov le-mishor*), to the actual and metaphorical *Agunot* in *At the Handles of the Lock*, and indeed across his entire opus, Agnon reworked various forms of the “*'agunah* problem.”<sup>45</sup> In his midlife summa, *A Guest for the Night*, he thus naturally returns to this metaphor of loss of home and spousal abandonment in order to conduct a deeper cultural archaeology of the *'agunah* construct—and

43. Jeremiah, 3:14–20; 3:8; 2:2.

44. For analysis of this theologized marital discourse, see Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 9–36. See also Larry L. Lyke's *I Will Espouse You Forever: The Song of Songs and the Theology of Love in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), and Sharon Moughtin-Mumby's *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah and Ezekiel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

45. Roman Katsman discusses another Agnonian manifestation of *'aginut* in *Literature, History, Choice: The Principle of Alternative History in Literature (S.Y. Agnon, “The City with All That is Therein”)* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 291ff.



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this brought him to the metaphor's earliest constructions in the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations.

Within the fictional plot of *A Guest for the Night*, an actual 'agunah problem develops during the winter of the narrator's stay in Shibush, when the wood-carrier Hanoch disappears in the snow with his horse and cart, and nobody knows whether he is dead or alive. The townspeople organize a search followed by a fast and collection on behalf of Hanoch's wife. Reb Haim, a broken man who had returned to Shibush after many years in the army, takes charge of the education of Hanoch's children. But when the snow thaws and Hanoch's body is discovered hugging the carcass of his beloved horse, Hanoch's wife becomes a full-fledged widow free to remarry, for example, this lonely Reb Haim, except he too dies shortly afterwards.

Reb Haim, a broken man even before the war, had scrupulously avoided turning his own wife into an 'agunah by sending her a *get* as soon as he became a prisoner of war: "we don't know whether he's alive or dead, for we've heard nothing from him all these years, except for the time when he sent his wife a bill of divorce, so that she wouldn't remain tied all her life to a missing man."<sup>46</sup> And so it is fitting that upon reappearing in Shibush, this same Reb Haim encourages the narrator/protagonist to resolve his own 'agunah problem.

For as now becomes clear, the central character of *A Guest for the Night* is also its chief wandering husband—at least on the surface level of what passes for plot in this novel. When he stays so long in Shibush that his underwear begins to disintegrate, he imagines that Krolka, the inn's servant,

feels sorry for that man who was a guest for the night and stayed many nights far away from his wife and children, and cannot distinguish between a thing that is beyond repair and a thing that can still be repaired.<sup>47</sup>

Upon this cue—right in the middle of the novel, and just before the inconsolable visit to the widows pointedly described as *not 'agunot*—the narrator finally discloses that his own affairs are in grave disarray: his home in Jerusalem has been destroyed and he has wandered away from his wife and children without any concrete plans for the reconstruction of their home.

Several months later, Reb Haim exhorts him, 'And when are *you* leaving, sir?' 'Where to?' said I. 'Home,' said he. I replied quoting the Prophet [Isaiah], 'For my house is a house of prayer.' 'A man's house—that means his wife,' said he, and then he added, 'The sooner the better.' I laughed and said, 'Are you afraid the sea will freeze?'<sup>48</sup> Reb Haim's talmudic reminder that a man's home *is* his wife—before the *beit midrash* or God—is one of Agnon's perfectly pious statements that invite reinterpretation of the Orthodox anchoring of Israel

46. *Guest*, 3; 'Oreah, 6.

47. *Guest*, 206; 'Oreah, 151.

48. *Guest*, 395; 'Oreah, 288.

(wife) in God (husband) by suggesting alternative attitudes toward the prophets' theologized marriage metaphor.

Nevertheless, even after "the guest" is reminded that he has a wife and she is his home, he still delays their reunion and continues to mull over past and future, until one day his wife takes the initiative by sending him money for their journey back to the Land of Israel. A new world order, Jeremiah had said disparagingly about a situation where the "woman courts the man."<sup>49</sup> At any rate, this family eventually boards a ship headed to the Land of Israel, and their resolution to act, constitutes one of Agnon's subtle challenges to the manner in which Jeremiah's legacy was used by Orthodox institutions to impede change. Regardless of whether the reunion of husband and wife at the end of Agnon's novel signals a symbolic reunion of God (wandering husband) returning to the Promised Land with His wife, or a practical enactment of Isaiah's Messiah announcing that God is ready to view with favor the reestablishment of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland—the fact of the matter is that the wife (not the procrastinating narrator), takes the initiative of return.

By contrast, the Orthodox establishment, leaning on the book of Jeremiah and responding to the reality of exile that shaped the book of Lamentations and the Midrash on the Song of Songs, stipulated that the wife must wait patiently for the offended husband to call her back to Zion. Hence, when Agnon's narrator tells the town's rabbi that "if anyone should return [repent] it is God," he is revising the exilic interpretation of Israel as a faithless wife condemned to wait. Indeed, according to the modern Zionist program in *all* its variations, it is the people (the wife) who must undertake a practical return, and even national-religious Zionist leaders—toward which Agnon was ambivalently sympathetic—interpreted the possibility of return as an active sign of redemption on a grand historiosophic plane, thus enacting prophesies of restitution that do "anticipate the coming of the Messiah instead of waiting for salvation"—as the anti-Zionist itinerant preachers who passed through Shibush had (correctly) warned.<sup>50</sup>

*A Guest for the Night* ends with the narrator/writer at his desk in Jerusalem, composing stories about Israel's past, present, and future, with a tiny key dangling next to his heart to keep him anchored, albeit lightly, to the heritage of his childhood world. According to Agnon's multilayered frames of reference, childhood can refer to the national childhood during the days of Jeremiah, as much as to the narrator's own childhood in Shibush. His tiny key may be thus likened to a symbolic anchor—not the unwieldy 'agnin used to stabilize ships in ancient times,<sup>51</sup> but a practical modern object whose weight is sufficient to draw this writer and dreamer back into the old beit midrash, pulling him all the way to Jeremiah's ancient rhetoric to reconsider 'aginut through the problems of his own times.<sup>52</sup>

49. Jeremiah 31:22.

50. Agnon, *Guest*, 138; 'Oreah, 104.

51. Reuven Alcalay defines the archaic 'agnin as a "killick," a rock or big stone once used to anchor ships, *The Complete Hebrew Dictionary* (Tel Aviv: Yedi'ot 'ahronot, 1996).

52. Yael Feldman astutely observes that the original key to the beit midrash functions as an "opener" (mafteah), yet after it is lost and remade, the substitute key functions primarily as a

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### ANCHORED TO A LIGHTER KEY

Before closing this analysis of *A Guest for the Night*'s conversation with Jeremiah, and given that Agnon's preoccupation with the Jeremian oriented 'agunah problem was a lifelong affair, it might be helpful to compare, briefly, his play with the 'agunah metaphor in his midlife retrospective with his early and best known construction of 'aginit in "Agunot," the first story to which the nineteen-year-old Czaczkes almost offhandedly appended the singular penname that would henceforth characterize him.

Unlike "And the Crooked Shall Become Straight" (*Va-hayah he-akov le-mishor*), where Kreindel Tchami mistakenly believes her husband has died and starts a new family—or "In the Heart of the Seas" (*Bi-lvav yamim*) and *A Guest for the Night*, where different scenarios of 'aginit are at once realistic and metaphorical—in "Agunot" none of the characters are actually 'agunot or 'agunim in an halakhic sense.<sup>53</sup> As Gershon Shaked emphasizes, the harmonious wholeness desired by each of the characters in "Agunot" is mercilessly thwarted so as to challenge the story's opening midrash about a delicately woven relationship between "the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves ... a tallit of grace and all mercy, for the People of Israel to deck herself in."<sup>54</sup> In the context of "Agunot's" moment of composition in Hebrew, and in Jaffa, at the beginning of the twentieth century—and in light of the author's arrival there with his parents blessing and relatively good prospects—the blatant misalignment between the celebratory tone of the opening midrash and the bleakness of the story's ending—Sire Ahiezer's failure to establish a beit midrash in Jerusalem and the subsequent dispersion of all the characters—signaled a modernist critique of traditional mores disguised under the narrator's pious rhetoric, as well as the expression of fears of the "second" *aliyah* group, to which Agnon belonged.<sup>55</sup>

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"closer" (*shlüssel*). It is the original key, the "opener," that turns up in the protagonist's backpack in Jerusalem. "The Latent and the Manifest: Freudianism in *A Guest for the Night*," *Prooftexts* 7, no. 1 (1987): 29–39. Regarding the key motif in Agnon's novel see also Baruch Kurtzweil's seminal analysis in *Masekhet ha-roman* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 50–65; as well as Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 314–21, and Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return*, 96ff.

53. The abstract 'aginit of this story has been widely discussed, for example, by S. Y. Penue-li, "Tehilato shel Agnon—"Agunot," *Davar*, July 25, 1958, 5–6; Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 57–63; Harold Fisch, "The Abandoned Wife," in *S. Y. Agnon* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975), 16–17; Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman in their introduction to "Agunot," in *A Book that Was Lost and Other Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), 33–34.

54. S. Y. Agnon, "Agunot," in *A Book that Was Lost and Other Stories*, ed. Mintz and Hoffman, trans. Baruch Hochman, 35. For an analysis of tensions between Agnon's opening midrash and the body of his story, see especially Gershon Shaked's "Midrash and Narrative: Agnon's 'Agunot,'" in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986): 285–303.

55. For an analysis of the puzzling relationship of this story to its historical moment of composition see Arna Golan, "Ha-sipur 'Agunot' ve-ha-'aliyah ha-shniyah," *Moznayim* 32 (1971): 215–223.

When Agnon's interest in the concept of *'agunut* is interpreted as a call for systematic social reevaluation, it immediately becomes clearer that *A Guest for the Night* takes this agenda of (personal) introspection and (national) repair a step further. "Agunot" ends badly for all its characters: "Ahiezer left Jerusalem with his daughter. He had failed in his settlement there; his wishes had not prospered. He went forth in shame, his spirit heavy within him. His house was deserted, the house of study stood desolate."<sup>56</sup> The desires of the young lovers are crushed and even the rabbi's wife becomes an *'agunah* when her husband wanders away to atone for his mistakes.

By contrast, *A Guest for the Night* ends well for all the principal characters.<sup>57</sup> The existential crisis and state of *'agunut* that plagued the narrator/protagonist during his year in Shibush is repaired in his own lifetime; Daniel Bach's pious old father thrives in Ramat Rachel, renewed by contact with the land; Yeruham and Rachel give birth to a baby in Shibush, which had experienced a shortage of weddings and births since the Great War; the narrator/protagonist, reunited with his wife and children, takes up his pen again to write stories about the Land of Israel and his adventures there.

To be sure, the narrator/protagonist still talks about diasporic houses of study destined to roll into Jerusalem and readies his key for their arrival. But since he hears no imminent rumblings of return, he becomes impatient and turns instead to the real world outside his window, consoled and connected mnemonically to Shibush's *beit midrash* through light contact with the diminutive anchoring key that now hangs near his heart: "I did not hang the key of the old Beit Midrash over my heart, for it was too heavy for my heart to bear; the early craftsmen used to make their keys too big and heavy.... It can wait, but I, who am flesh and blood, find it hard to endure."<sup>58</sup>

Wrestling with a tradition that fossilized the trauma of destruction into an eternal moment of loss and hope, Agnon's *A Guest for the Night* uses Jeremiah's legacy to hint at historical specificity, and thus flexibility, in the metaphorical relationship between God and His people. The unfortunate Jeremiah, chosen from his youth to serve as God's tool, undergoes no psychological transformation through the course of his long life as a prophet, except perhaps for the progressive despair to which he is driven as the national situation turns from bad to worse. Agnon's naïve narrator, on the other hand, does undergo a psychological process of maturation when he realizes that his memories of a harmonious Shibush were childish illusions; he admits now that the world of his past

56. Agnon, "'Agunot," 46.

57. The scholarly debate about whether or not *A Guest for the Night* ends optimistically can be revisited in light of the novel's conversation with Jeremiah. Yael Feldman, for example, argues contra Arnold Band's optimistic interpretation of the novel's ending, see "The Latent and the Manifest," 37. For a comprehensive discussion of Agnon's sense of an ending, see Dan Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transactions with the Novel," *Prooftexts* 7 (1987): 1-27 and especially Michal Arbel, "Sof ha-ma'aseh: 'al 'ofane ha-siyum bi-yezirotav shel Shai 'Agnon" (PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1999).

58. Agnon, *Guest*, 472; *Oreah*, 344.

changed and progress, even if partial, is possible and inevitable.<sup>59</sup> In Anne Hoffman's words, Agnon's midlife novel "undertakes a journey to the past in order to restore a flawed present."<sup>60</sup>

The conversation that Agnon conducts with Jeremiah and his rabbinic legacy in *A Guest for the Night* revolves around his lifelong preoccupation with the concept of national 'aginit in ways that have yet to be fully resolved: Why was the concept of 'aginit so important to Agnon that he used it vocationally as a marker of identity, and thematically as the basic plot of so many of his narratives? In what way did S. Y. Czaczkes confront the jeremian concept of 'aginit via the neologism that became his name and around which he subtly dances in his semi-autobiographical midlife masterpiece?

A proper answer to this not-so-irrelevant question requires a more extensive intertextual, biographical, historical, and literary-historical investigation of "the inner relationship" between Agnon's name and "artistic temperament" as Arnold Band put it years ago.<sup>61</sup> One point of departure, however, is to note that to be 'agun is to be at the same time attached and detached: anchored, that is, to a spouse whose absence precludes moving on freely with life choices. To be *Agnon*, on the other hand, does not necessarily mean to be a bereaved 'agun/ah. Rooted both in 'ogen (anchor) and the archaic word 'agnin, Agnon's neologism connotes an active anchorer that employs olden-time materials to balance a ship always headed to the Land of Israel.<sup>62</sup> Agnon's characters may be 'agunim—souls in limbo, full of doubt—but the author serves as a stabilizing anchor for questions that have hazy and multiple answers, however unconvincing, and thus he vigorously participates in the "inner struggle of a man who is bound by his figurative umbilical cord to the tradition but acknowledges the revolutionary power

59. Kurtzweil interpreted *A Guest for the Night* as the record of an existential crisis during which the narrator wrestles with his childhood's beliefs, *Masekhet ha-roman*, 49–55; see also Shimon Halkin, "Al 'Oreah natah la-lum," 122.

60. Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return*, 80.

61. Band, *Nightmare and Nostalgia*, 18. In addition to Uri Cohen's discussion of the figure of the author in *A Guest for the Night*, mentioned earlier, see Shirli Sela-Levavi, "Guests in their Own Homes: Homecoming, Memory and Authorship in *A Guest for the Night* by S. Y. Agnon and the *Yash Novels* by Jacob Glatstein," (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2013). In *Here and Now: History, Nationalism, and Realism in Modern Hebrew Fiction* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), Todd Hasak-Lowy conducts such an investigation of Brenner's semi-autobiographical 'Oved 'Ezot.

62. A maritime-oriented analysis of Agnon's representation of the "'agunah problem" could further illuminate the enormous role played by the sea in his opus, particularly in his return-to-Zion stories such as *Bi-lvav yamim* (*In the Heart of the Seas*) and the maritime episodes within *Guest* itself. Hananiah from *Bi-lvav yamim* misses a ship to Jaffa because he runs off to release an 'agunah while his fellow travelers are busy divorcing and remarrying their wives in an effort to avoid leaving 'agunot. Hananiah's own family status is pointedly unclear, but his efforts to release an 'agunah onshore (which causes him to miss the boat) are rewarded by his miraculous sailing to the Holy Land on a kerchief. In the Midrash on the Song of Songs, "the sea," moreover, functions as code for the perfect moment of union when God "kissed" Israel by the Red Sea, Jacob Neusner, "Song of Songs in Song of Songs Rabbah," in *Judaism and the Interpretation of Scripture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 145.

of modern life.”<sup>63</sup> Confronting the absence of Jeremiah’s God, yet still speaking in His name, Agnon turned his work into an anchor for renewed attachment to the Land of Israel, its language, and its history, thus modeling himself vocationally into a substitute for messianic hopes.

“Little Sister,” says A. B. Yehoshua’s Yirmiuahu to his sister-in-law in *Friendly Fire*, using terminology from the Song of Songs to rail against the prophet who witnessed the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE:

Lazy secular people, who wave the flag of the ethical teachings of the prophets, don’t actually read them. They remember only lovely verse, some lines that have been set to music, swords beaten into plowshares ... it turns out that ... because the language is so majestic, and the rhetoric so hypnotic, we don’t pay attention to what’s said between the lines.<sup>64</sup>

Agnon, who teaches us to pay attention to what is said between the lines of all ideologies of national and personal renewal, signals in his midlife retrospective the coordinates of his own vocational and existential struggle with the business of repairing the national state of ‘*aginit*, associated since ancient times with the prophet Jeremiah.

In this way, the little key dangling from the neck of Agnon’s semi-autobiographical narrator in *A Guest for the Night* becomes a symbol for a practical agenda of national restitution that still anchors the bearer to tradition without wearing him down. Agnon’s narrator in *A Guest for the Night* thus equips himself to become a spokesman, and even a substitute for Jeremiah’s absent Guest, refining our understanding of the historical sense of responsibility that Agnon, the author, took upon himself as he reworked Scripture in an age of national modernization.

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63. Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, 248.

64. A. B. Yehoshua, *Friendly Fire*, 278–79.