READING HEBREW LITERATURE

CRITICAL DISCUSSIONS OF SIX MODERN TEXTS

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BRANDEIS UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published by University Press of New England
Hanover and London

I read: "All thy garments smell like fragrant spices. And its meaning is that all your betrayals and foul deeds will be forgiven and will smell sweet before Me." My mind was eased, like a person smelling flowers that smell.

7 TO CONCLUDE WITH PRAISE AS WE OPENED WITH PRAISE

Come and see how great is this holy tongue! For the sake of a single word a holy man troubled himself to come out of the Academy on High in the Garden of Eden, bringing his book before me, causing me to rise up at night to recite the Psalms, so that I might find something I'd been seeking for many days.

Naomi Sokoloff

AN OLD JOKE ASKS, how do you keep a fish from smelling? The answer, of course, is: you cut off its nose. The joke pivots on the fact that the verb "to smell" can be either transitive or intransitive. In contemporary colloquial Hebrew, the verb *lehariaḥ* has parallel possibilities, and so the joke transfers easily across languages. However, this verb was not always so flexible. Uncertainty over the usage of *lehariaḥ* generates the central controversy of Agnon's "The Sense of Smell"—that is, whether it is proper to say *hasukah meriḥah*. In this story, the narrator has used this phrase to mean that a sukkah smells [nice], it gives off a fragrant aroma. However, a journalist who criticizes him insists that the verb must be transitive, taking both an agent and an object: "You cannot say: 'the sukkah smells.' Only a person smells the aroma of the sukkah" (104); *Ein lomar hasukah meriḥah, sheharei lo' hasukah meriḥah ela adam hu' hameriaḥ re'aḥ hasukah*" (A19).[1] Insulted, the narrator embarks on a series of attempts to verify the correct form of the verb. Consulting a variety of scholars and texts, a sage who comes to him in a dream, and even the sukkah itself, he seeks authority to justify his own usage.

This may seem a trivial disputation about a minor point of grammar. The story, however, brings into play large issues of authority, tradition, and language change. The narrator's concerns are embedded in a plot that highlights the remarkable history of the Hebrew language, its role as sacred tongue over millennia, and its dramatic growth within the modern era as a secular spoken language. The text poses a special challenge for translation. At issue are not just grammatical subtleties or lack of semantic congruence between "the sukkah smells" and *hasukah meriḥah*. (In English, to say something "smells" is to impart a distinctly negative connotation.) Instead, at stake here are matters of theme and style central to the narrative. "The Sense of Smell" explicitly posits the uniqueness of Hebrew and extols it as a "language like no other" (102; A18). How does a text so focused on the inimitable qualities of Hebrew come across in another language?

It is a commonplace to emphasize the untranslatability of Agnon's art. Agnon is known as a particularly difficult author to grasp in translation because of his deliberate efforts to archaicize and because of the profound

erudition that is part and parcel of his Hebrew prose.[2] Agnon devised a style that was distinctively his own and that changed very little over the years of his long career. It relied heavily on rabbinic vocabulary and locutions and made extensive use of citation, richly weaving into the fabric of the text references to sacred sources. Eschewing passing fashions and aiming to transcend the contemporary moment, this undisputed master of modern fiction in Hebrew held a grand vision for his art. He saw himself as part of a long tradition and not merely as a creature of his own time.[3]

In "The Sense of Smell," such issues are fundamental elements of plot as well as style. The narrator presents himself as a writer at the tail end of an immense tradition who expresses his respect for the Hebrew language through strict adherence to classical models and resistance to linguistic innovation. Congruences between narrator and author are more than coincidental. The primary episode of the story was based on an actual incident that took place in 1934. Agnon himself was criticized by a journalist for using the phrase *hasukah meriḥah* and he took great offense, since he prided himself on his knowledge of Hebrew. "The Sense of Smell," then, is a kind of revenge, and it confronts head-on some of the tensions Agnon felt between his own work and the modern Hebrew that was developing all around him. He saw himself as a champion of correct Hebrew, and his sometimes antagonistic relations with the Committee on Language were matched by the low regard he held for Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the foremost ideologue and advocate of reviving Hebrew as a modern vernacular.[4] The narrator similarly insists that Hebrew can be used by Jews as their current language, but that it should derive its power from knowledge of the religious sources and not from contemporary wordsmiths. He remarks that "even though speech passed from the lips, it never passed out of writing and it is there for anyone who seeks it" in Torah, Mishnah, and Gemara.

Many aspects of the story transfer quite well to English. In Arthur Green's version, an archaic quality carries over quite successfully, thanks to the level of diction and to somewhat formal and anachronistic locutions, such as "priests at service"—a rendering of a phrase *kohanim be'avodatam* (104; A19), which might have been rendered more colloquially as "priests worshiping". In addition, many intertextual references are clear, since they are not hidden but manifest in the narrator's frequent and deliberate quoting of Scripture (particularly in the opening, which resembles homily). In the English, many phrases appear as direct citations, and the use of quotation marks signals the reader openly that there is a need to identify

sources. However, surely one of the first things to change in English, no matter how skillful the translator, is the music of the text and the sounds of Hebrew that elicit reverence by evoking ancient tradition. Deep devotion to the holy tongue, expressed by Agnon's narrator, is likely to be appreciated by Hebrew readers, especially those well aware of Agnon's own profound erudition and commitment to Hebrew textual traditions. These matters may be less evident in English, which simply does not carry the same weight as the original. This is a key issue, since some readers have read the text reverentially and others have read it ironically.

An English-speaking audience, unschooled in Hebrew or Jewish texts and relying on translation, may well be inclined to read skeptically. It would be natural for them to view the narrator as a somewhat ludicrous figure whose concern with language is overwrought and who suffers an exaggerated preoccupation with textual authority. Such an understanding would then steer interpretation to questions about unreliable narration and about the ironic presentation of scholars in Agnon's fiction (topics that critics have discussed at length in connection with others of his texts).[5] Similarly, for readers unaware of the Jewish pious tradition in which nature is cast as a lure, a distraction from study, it may be self-evidently laughable that the narrator, toward the end of his tale, ignores the singing of birds in order to focus on psalms. These readers might well assume that his text-driven pursuits are tantamount to self-defeat and that he foolishly ignores the glory of God's Creation in order to praise God. The cultural lens that predisposes English-speaking audiences to underestimate the narrator's reverence for the holy tongue also provides sensitivity to ironic dimensions of the story.[6] Contributing to these are elements of plot (such as the narrator's obtuseness and xenophobia)[7] that appear particularly nakedly in the English because they are not offset or counterbalanced by the resonance and echoes of the Hebrew original.

More nuanced readings have concluded that Agnon's art is capacious enough to encompass both ironic and reverential readings of this story. As Anne Golomb Hoffman and Alan Mintz have emphasized, "The Sense of Smell" is a highly ambivalent piece. They note that in this text, Hebrew is presented as a language of plenitude and presence.[8] Agnon here approaches a mystical view of language that imagines Hebrew as existing prior to the creation of the world and capable of creating worlds. This belief in this power of the Hebrew language can be traced far back in Jewish tradition—for example, in Bereshit Rabba. Yet these critics also describe Agnon's story

as "mock-heroic." They observe that the narrator presents himself as a figure on the margins of tradition, who, as a modern writer, performs a much diminished role in comparison with his predecessors, the priestly poets. His quest to ascertain the correctness of a single phrase both reveals his respect for tradition and exposes the triviality of his own concerns. Modern writing is, at the same time, admirable and diminishing; the character is both clownish and endowed with dignity because of the long chain of texts and traditions to which he attaches his work.

While some ironies emerge from plot elements, others emerge from multivalences in the Hebrew that are lost in translation. One such example is when the narrator makes reference to his writing as *ma'asiyot* (A19; translated simply as "stories," 104). He casts them as the mere writings of a modern author overshadowed by the sacred writing of yesteryear. At the same time, the Hebrew carries special connotations because it is associated with hasidic tales of Nahman of Bratslav.[9] The word *ma'asiyot* conveys a very distinguished pedigree and is invested with spiritual import. Consequently, Agnon's narrator may be making modest claims for himself or may be claiming a highly prestigious role. The dividing line between humble and great is elusive, and the use of language over time, as it brings layers of connotation, makes definitions unstable and opposites oddly interchangeable.

Similarly, other ironies accrue in the story, likewise emerging from and calling attention to the richness of Hebrew as it has evolved over time. To gauge this effect, it is fruitful to identify several points in the story that defy translation and to show how some key contradictions and ironies manifest themselves in these details. A salient example comes from the very opening of the story, where the narrator sets up an opposition between the holy tongue and all other languages.

> The holy tongue is a language like no other. All other tongues exist only by agreement, each nation having agreed upon its language. But the holy tongue is the one in which the Torah was given, the one through which the blessed Holy One created His world. Angels and seraphim and holy beings praise Him in the holy tongue. And when He comes to praise Israel, he also does so in the holy tongue. (102; A18)

The narrator praises the holy tongue and posits that it is unlike languages governed by human agreement and man-made conventions; it has a special God-given status prior to human history. Yet in the Hebrew, this passage

complicates matters by placing the word *lekales* in a crucial position: *mekalsim oto belashon hakodesh* (the angels and other holy beings "praise Him in the holy tongue"). Embedded in the word *lekales*, to praise, is the opposite meaning: to denigrate or humiliate. The first sense is prevalent in rabbinic usage, while the second is more frequent in biblical Hebrew. While it would be preposterous to suggest that Agnon intends the negative meaning here, the choice of this word, in contrast to, say, *shevaḥ* (a word meaning "praise," which does appear later in this story), calls attention to the fact that words change over time. The text thereby points to meaning and word usage as things that evolve. In another context, this word choice might not be significant. Here, though, it is enough to raise an interpretive eyebrow, since this story features a narrator so resistant to change, so intent on seeking a definitive truth about word usage in age-old sources. The use of *lekales*, then, is a kind of invitation to a deconstruction, implying the possibility of dismantling the rigid distinction between the holy tongue and other language—despite the bold pronouncements of the narrator at the opening of the story. The passage demonstrates the specialness of Hebrew, not as a language that is primordial, but as a language whose vast wealth of meanings and richness of possibilities allow even for opposite meanings at the same time. Hebrew is a language like no other, it could well be argued, because of its unique history, its remarkable longevity, and its spectacular growth in the twentieth century. As a modern vernacular, it is rightfully to be judged by the Language Academy here on earth, and not just the celestial Academy on High that Agnon's character prefers.

Another element of the text that hints at contrary meanings is the word *tam*. It appears in the title *Sefer ketav tamim* (A19), translated as "Perfect Treatise" (104). This polemical work is one source where the narrator finds justification for using the phrase *hasukah meriḥah*. It is, in fact, a historically authentic document written by a thirteenth-century tosafist, and so its primary function in the story is to add authenticity to the narrator's truth claims. However, the title also introjects ambivalence into those claims. The semantic range of *tam* includes variable meanings: perfect and complete, but also simple and foolish. Why should we attribute ambivalence to the word *tam* in this title? The answer depends on knowledge about the author of that treatise, Moshe Taku. Taku was known for taking a stance "fiercely opposed to any innovation in the realm of beliefs and theology."[10] He distinguished himself by rejecting the ideas of Saadia Gaon, Abraham ibn Ezra, the Ashkenazi Hasidim, and Maimonides, because he considered their doc-

trines a threat to orthodox belief. In other words, he was a man strongly resistant to change, whose endorsement of the phrase *hasukah meriḥah* carries certain weight. It is as if Agnon's narrator says, here's an opinion not to be taken lightly. It does not come from those who lack respect for time-honored tradition. At the same time, from the vantage point of the twentieth century, the fact that Taku was so very reactionary suggests that, in some sense, he missed the boat. To a certain extent, he got left behind by history. Maimonides and Saadia Gaon, after all, are towering figures whose names are much better known than his. And, curiously, his name may signify a tie, that is, a dispute in which there is no definitive answer.[11] Consequently, at one and the same time, this figure suggests positions that are both definite and yet not definitive. He has a firm stance, yet the text hints that—precisely because it is so firm—the reader should not be overly impressed. Perhaps Agnon is playfully telling us that to be too rigid is undesirable and that his own position in relation to tradition is not so one-sided. It seems that Agnon celebrates devotion to the holy tongue and to tradition, but distances himself from a narrator who overdoes the search for authority and who relies on an authority known, finally, for writing foolishness rather than a "perfect" treatise. The word *tam*, in its polysemousness and in conjunction with the felicitously equivocal possibilities of the name Taku, allows for a reading opposite to the explicit message of the narrator.

Another passage merits attention as it undercuts the narrator's rigidity. It appears at a particularly sensitive juncture in the story, the beginning of section 4, which first introduces reference to the sukkah and to that key phrase, *hasukah meriḥah*.

> It once happened that I had written a story about a sukkah, a festival hut. Using colloquial language, I wrote, "The sukkah smells." (104; A19)

This passage defies translation as it employs an idiom—rendered here as "using colloquial language"—that denotes making something easy to understand. The words may be read as *lesaber et ha'ozen* or as *leshaber et ha'ozen*. According to the Even-Shoshan dictionary, the more prevalent *lesaber* is related to the verb *lehasbir* (to understand) and hence to the concept of making something understandable. However, the pronunciation *leshaber et ha'ozen*, which can be traced back to Rashi, has the sense of breaking, cracking open the ear so that someone will hear. An example of such usage, cited by Even-Shoshan, is, in fact, this very passage from Agnon's "The Sense of Smell," so it is not far-fetched to read the phrase that way.[12] The verb *leshaber* indicates a rupture. Especially for anyone unfamiliar with the idiom, the expression might well convey or insinuate more of an assault on the ear or the hearing than something that eases. So the question that this choice of word raises at some level is, does the use of the phrase *hasukah meriḥah* make things easier? Is it a colloquialism that makes the language more accessible? Alternatively, does it grate on the ear? Is it a colloquialism that damages the beauty of the Hebrew language? The narrator himself frets over the suitableness of the phrase and finds scholars who support both the position that it is acceptable and the position that it is not. The instability of the phrase *leshaber / lesaber et ha'ozen* itself provides evidence that verbal meaning is not fixed and stable, but evolving and open to controversy. As such, this phrase may serve subtly as a flag to direct our attention to the instability also of the phrase *hasukah meriḥah*.

The English translation, while unable to capture such complexities of pronunciation, derivation, and accrued idiomatic meaning, has its own advantages. Substituting the word "colloquial" for *leshaber / lesaber et ha'ozen*, the narrator more explicitly refers to the revival of the Hebrew language as a historical phenomenon. More firmly placing this story in the context of that sociolinguistic process, he thereby more explicitly brings into view an opposition of innovation and tradition and helps the story highlight the antagonism Agnon felt toward linguistic invention. The English sharpens attention to those tensions because it acknowledges what is, in fact, basic information or common knowledge that the story in the original obscures: the phrase *hasukah meriḥah* is perfectly acceptable in contemporary spoken Hebrew, and it was even in 1937, the date of composition of this story. The narrator's entire enterprise of searching for justification is anachronistic, or at least indicative of an exceptional need to cling to the past. Pitting himself against his detractor, the narrator separates himself from the widespread, collective effort to turn Hebrew into the modern language of a contemporary people. The result is an odd kind of self-aggrandizement. The narrator casts himself as a hero singlehandedly fighting the forces of ignorance and defending the holy tongue, but this is not genuine heroism. It is the stance of a man who takes an aggrieved and isolated stance because he feels personally insulted.

As this example suggests, although there are things that cannot be conveyed in translation, it is important to keep in mind the advantages that translation may bring. In this text, which is so focused on a language like

no other—where the narrator extols the holy tongue to the detriment of other languages and even excoriates Jews who write in other languages—it is interesting that there are times when the English shines. Adding felicitously to the text, for instance, is the title, "The Sense of Smell." The phrase may be read not only as referring to the sensory realm and to olfactory sensibility, but as a pun where "sense" refers also to definition or meaning. Used in this way, the title indicates that the story, to a large extent, is about definitions and thus highlights major issues in the text: Who has agency? Who has authority? Who defines words and who turns meaning from one thing to its opposite? As his narrator immerses himself in what at first seems like trivial disputation (leading the reader to ponder, what's the sense of all this?), Agnon lays out conundrums with far-reaching implications: What is the role of the modern writer at the tail end of a long tradition? Is it big or small, and from what does the writer derive his importance—from the humble position he occupies as a latecomer, or from starting anew, from constructing a new identity and exercising originality? Where and in what way does he insert himself into tradition and the startling process of revitalization that Hebrew has undergone in the past century and a half?

As contemporary readers, we can view these matters from our own privileged vantage point in time. Throughout the 1990s and until now, the Hebrew used in literary texts in Israel, particularly in fiction, has drawn increasingly closer to everyday spoken Hebrew. Agnon's distinctive register, his profound reliance on classical sources, and the dense tissue of allusion in his work contrast dramatically with much of today's writing. More and more, Agnon has become an author who is relegated to academic settings, studied in school but rarely read by the general public. However, other recent fiction has turned to a rich, deeply engaged use of traditional sources, even as religious themes, characters, and settings have come increasingly into view. The question of how literary language relates to colloquial language remains a timely one for Hebrew. As "The Sense of Smell" encourages us to sniff out that which is enduring and that which is not, it can remind Hebrew readers to examine their own relation to this extraordinary language. By the same token, it can alert English-speaking readers to some of the large issues of authority, tradition, and language change that come into play in the exceptional history of Hebrew writing and culture.

Notes

1. The English translation by Arthur Green, reprinted here, appears in *A Book That Was Lost*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (New York: Schocken, 1995), 139–46. The Hebrew version comes from the volume *Elu ve'elu* in Agnon's collected works (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1974).

2. For insights into translating Agnon, see William Cutter, "Rendering Galicia for America: On Hillel Halkin's Translation of *Sippur Pashut*," *Prooftexts* 7 (1987): 73–87.

3. Robert Alter provides an overview of these issues in his essay on Agnon in *After the Tradition* (New York: Dutton, 1969). Gershon Shaked provides an excellent introduction to Agnon's use of allusion and pseudo-midrash in *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey Green (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 23–39.

4. Aharon Bar-Adon, *Shai ʿAgnon uteḥiyat halashon haʿivrit* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1977), esp. pp. 165–95, and "Kenagen hamenagen, kemakor leḥeker lashon veḥevrah bitkufat haʿaliyah hashniyah" in *Kovets ʿAgnon*, ed. Emunah Yaron et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1994). Agnon's skepticism about Ben-Yehuda is congruent with the outlook of sociolinguists and cultural historians, who since the late 1970s and the 1980s have set themselves the task of debunking the Ben-Yehuda myth. For the most prominent discussion of these matters in English, see Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

5. For example, Esther Fuchs, "The Unreliable Narrator," *Prooftexts* 3, no. 3 (1983): 278–84, and *Omanut hahitamemut: ʿAl haʿironiyah shel Shai ʿAgnon* (Tel Aviv, 1985); Naomi Sokoloff, "Passion Spins the Plot: Agnon's 'Forevermore,' " in *Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon*, ed. David Patterson and Glenda Abramson (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1996), 9–26.

6. I base these remarks on my personal experience teaching "The Sense of Smell" in North America, both in university classes and in community settings with adult readers.

7. See discussion by Alan Mintz and David Roskies in this volume.

8. Mintz and Hoffman, *A Book That Was Lost*, 10, 81. Interpretation of this text is also to be found in Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 115–22.

9. My thanks to William Cutter for this point. See also Arnold Band's comments on "The Sense of Smell," in *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

10. *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), 738.

11. According to the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, the name Taku most probably derives from a place name, perhaps Dachau. However, in the context of "The Sense of Smell" it begs for other interpretation.

12. Avraham Even-Shoshan, *Hamilon hehadash* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1986), 4:1324.