

Zvi Ankori

As a Palm Tree in the Desert

PART ONE


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THE DESERT

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CHAPTER SIX

Neighbors

I

HATEKUF^{ah}, AMONG ITS many virtues, introduced the Wróbel boy to Agnon, the author. Of the seven Agnon stories Hesi^{ek} found in the anthology, two, for various reasons and unrelated to their plots — “*HaNidah*” (The Banished) and “*BiDmi Yameha*” (In her Prime) — became milestones in the Wróbel procession towards Agnon, the man.

Hesi^{ek}'s discovery of Agnon was his own personal revelation,¹⁸ unguided by the Hebrew school he attended. At the time, Agnon, *the* Galician-Jewish writer par excellence as he is regarded today, could not yet have been the darling of local Hebrew readers. Little wonder then that his name did not feature on any of the five Hebrew matriculation examinations given at the Safah Berurah Hebrew High School in Tarnów from 1935 to 1939, until the Nazis shut down all schools.

Yet one cannot help but wonder at the omission on the part of Bezalel Kresch, the school's enthusiastic reformer-teacher of modern Hebrew literature, who made dual love with every new Hebrew book, both because it was Hebrew and because it was new, and transmitted his fever for Hebrew literature to his pupils. How come he did not include in the curriculum any of the stories that Agnon had published by then and which had already won a faithful following?

Every year, upon his return from a summer visit to Eretz-Israel, Kresch could be seen keeling under a load of books purchased out of his own pocket and brought from Tel-Aviv as a generous gift to the school library and a personal gift to each of his pupils. Thus (he explained), the pupil would gradually form the habit of buying Hebrew books of his own and in time would build up a Hebrew home-library. But on none of his trips to Eretz-Israel, through 1938 inclusive, were Agnon's writings among the items he acquired for the library.



Bezalel Kresch
(Tarnów 1936)

What made Kresch — a graduate of Vienna's Rabbinical Seminary and an expert in the Hebrew of the Sages — turn his back, of all things, on that sort of Hebrew, the language Agnon brought to life in his stories? As an experienced teacher with an accurate measure of his pupils, Kresch may have feared that Agnon's language, anchored as it was in ancient sources, would deter the average Galician youngster from the challenge posed by that idiom. For how could a youth from a secular home possibly tackle the material if he had never read a page of *Gemara* or learned a chapter of *Midrash*?

Or was his stand based on principle? Did he subscribe to the view that Agnon's erudite Hebrew was inconsistent with the vision of the living language shared by twentieth-century revolutionaries, Kresch included, and other Galician lovers of Hebrew? As they saw

it, contemporary Hebrew the sacred tongue (Kresch masked the Diaspora's har and modify the criticism come from the pangs of realities of Eretz-Israel w very eyes. The beauty of t donned an everyday garr worker's overall, soaked i free of all pretensions to e language (Kresch demand serve the gray but hope-fi homeland!

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summer visit to Eretz-Israel, load of books purchased out of Tel-Aviv as a generous gift to each of his pupils. Thus he would form the habit of buying books and would build up a Hebrew library in Eretz-Israel, through 1938 and the items he acquired for



te of Vienna's Rabbinical School of the Sages — turn his back on Hebrew, the language Agnon had experienced as a teacher with Kresch. Kresch may have feared that the language in ancient sources, would not rise to the challenge posed by the modern secular home possibly on a page of *Gemara* or learned

le? Did he subscribe to the vision inconsistent with the vision of the nineteenth-century revolutionaries, the fathers of Hebrew? As they saw

it, contemporary Hebrew would not sprout from the formulae of the sacred tongue (Kresch preached to his pupils) — formulae that masked the Diaspora's harsh, decadent realities in an attempt to dull and modify the criticism and anger against Diaspora life. It would come from the pangs of birth of the new, tough and toughening realities of Eretz-Israel which were spawning a new Jew before our very eyes. The beauty of the new language was the very fact that it donned an everyday garment rather than Sabbath silks: a simple worker's overall, soaked in sweat and breathing of the earth, and free of all pretensions to excessive scholarship. The purpose of this language (Kresch demanded) was, first and foremost, *to serve* — to serve the gray but hope-filled everyday humdrum in the reviving homeland!

Only on his last annual visit to Eretz-Israel, in the summer of 1939, did Kresch seem to realize that he would do well to restrict his self-imposed function as gatekeeper to the world of literature; far better to let the writers' works speak for themselves without his intervention, and let the pupils themselves struggle with the limitations of their background. What or who caused the change in his thinking remains unclear. He may have sat in on a Tel-Aviv school literature lesson, as he was wont to do, to find the class reading Agnon; he may then have come away deeply impressed by the receptiveness of Eretz-Israeli youth to this type of literature. Or, if he spent time on kibbutz as he usually did, he may have joined members after a hard day's work for a gathering of the "Agnon Study Club", and appreciated the fellowship formed between writer Agnon, a participant in the Second Aliya immigration wave, and kibbutz members actually living the precepts of the Second Aliya.

Whatever the case, Kresch decided to change direction. He bought up all the available editions of Agnon prose he could find (including "*Ore'ah Natah Lalun*" [A Guest for the Night], which was hot off the press), to bring back to Tarnów, just as he had brought back the shining works of other writers in previous years. The scene, in fact, was typically Agnon: a fanatic *shtetl*-Galician

racing as if possessed from one Tel-Aviv bookstore to another to grab up Agnon's books for Jewish children in the Diaspora; and to do so in 1939, as the world was ablaze and fear was great and the heart was bursting with thoughts of what was to become of that same Diaspora. It was only nine months since *Kristallnacht* and the shattering glass of Jewish shop windows still rent the air, while newspaper headlines shouted out: "War at the Gate!"

Friends of the fanatic try their best to stop him and persuade him to stay in Eretz-Israel. He had in any event meant to settle there soon and what better time than the present to realize that dream? But the possessed Kresch turns a deaf ear to pleas and reason. He would take his chances. His conscience tells him that at a time like this, his place is with his pupils. He is thus leaving the land he so loved and where he hoped to make his home one day. He parts from friends, loads his Agnon-filled suitcases onto the last Polish ship sailing from Haifa to Constantza on the Black Sea (the closest port to southern Poland) and then rushes to catch the train for Tarnów so as not to miss — God forbid — the opening of the school year on September 1, 1939.

Kresch may have felt a sense of satisfaction about his clear conscience, but the minds of the Tarnów Hebrew high school pupils and parents were, at the time, on their personal safety. The fact — in itself important in normal times — that he managed to enrich the high school library with works by Agnon and arrange them on the bookshelves two days before September 1 does not lessen the anxiety any. The fear of pupils and parents turned out to be more solidly grounded than the naïve enthusiasm of the well-intentioned teacher, who was detached from reality. The school year did not open as scheduled; not on September 1 nor later — it did not open at all. Instead, war opened on September 1, and on the seventh day of fighting an advance German force entered Tarnów and installed an occupational government.

The town's educational institutions, both Polish and Jewish, were shut down (except for the Jewish "Ochronka" orphanage, which was for a while permitted to continue functioning), and

the Wehrmacht requisitioned to guess what happened to the pupil managed to look at on the shelves. Both lots were in the Berurah building on Sant the German army.

The fate of the teachers come in harm's way was that of Dr. Rosenbusch. Having done for the Jewish intelligentsia for fear of the Germans included both a socialist member of the town council and father of a delegate to the Bund. Reported to Auschwitz in 1941, and in Auschwitz today, it is mind-boggling a factory of mass extermination to send families (false) "deaths" to death. The Rosenbusches, family, purportedly containing the fate of the school was treated to a proper burial.

Details about the deaths of the teachers are more obscure. In wars, people assumed that it was the women and children who were killed. Most of the male teachers, like Malkischer, in the occupation to Poland under Soviet control following the war between the German Reich and Poland included Safah Berurah's La to flee to Lwów. When the town was taken in June 1941, Malkischer was taken to the camp. By that time, he was an eye-witness testimony of a massacre. Weissmann, the Jewish Student, no trace. His wife, Irena née

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the Wehrmacht requisitioned the school buildings. It is not hard to guess what happened to Agnon’s books — which not a single pupil managed to look at — or, for that matter, to the old books on the shelves. Both lots were probably destroyed when the Safah Berurah building on Santa Anna Street became a warehouse for the German army.

The fate of the teachers resembled that of the books. The first to come in harm’s way was the principal of the Hebrew high school, Dr. Rosenbusch. Having decided to wipe out the town’s Polish and Jewish intelligentsia for fear of their heading a core of resistance, the Germans included both Rosenbusch and Ciołkosz Senior — a socialist member of the town council, a high school teacher and the father of a delegate to the Polish Sejm — in the elite group transported to Auschwitz in 1940. Considering what we know about Auschwitz today, it is mind-boggling that before the camp became a factory of mass extermination, its administration still bothered to send families (false) “death notices” citing illness as the cause of death. The Rosenbusches, for twenty złoty, even received a tin box purportedly containing the ashes of the head of the family. The box was treated to a proper burial in the Jewish cemetery.

Details about the deaths of the Hebrew high school’s rank-and-file teachers are more obscure. Based on the precedents of previous wars, people assumed that it was men who faced the greatest danger while women and children would not be harmed. Consequently, most of the male teachers, like many of their pupils, fled early on in the occupation to Poland’s eastern provinces. There they came under Soviet control following the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed between the German Reich and the Soviet Union. The refugees included Safah Berurah’s Latin teacher, Malkischer, who managed to flee to Lwów. When the Germans crossed the Soviet border in June 1941, Malkischer was deported to the Janowska forced labor camp. By that time, he was already in a bad way according to the eye-witness testimony of a pupil who survived the war. Moshe Weissmann, the Jewish Studies teacher, also fled. He, however, left no trace. His wife, Irena neé Lieblich, who taught Polish literature,

took her small son and returned to the home of her father, the head of both the shut-down Hebrew elementary school and the still-functioning "Ochronka" community orphanage.

But relying on past precedents turned out to be unsound, since Germany's systematic killing apparatus had no precedent. The mass murder operations — such as the three "*Akcja*"s of 1942 which bled Tarnów's Jews to death — did not distinguish between men and women or between old and young. Dora Ressler, the science and geography teacher, lost her life in the very first *Akcja* launched on June 11, as did Henda Silberpfenig, the German teacher, and Bella Fuhrer, the history teacher. Wasserfall, the mathematics and physics teacher, perished along with them. Instead of joining the flight of the males, he had stayed in town to care for his infant son whose mother had died in childbirth.

On June 19, 1942, the Sunday immediately following the week-long bloodbath of the first *Akcja*, the last exits of predominantly Jewish streets were sealed and the area was declared a mandatory closed ghetto. All the Jews from the town and the vicinity who had survived the initial slaughter were confined in this area. The "Ochronka" orphanage was moved there, too, with its orphans and counselors. Principal Lieblich and his downsized staff did their best to continue their educational work. But "Ochronka" too soon met its end. In the second *Akcja*, begun on September 13, 1942, its children, counselors and principal, were rounded up to join the thousands of Jews on an agonizing march to the train station en route to the Bełżec extermination camp.

Kresch's decision to leave Eretz-Israel on the eve of war and descend, like Orpheus and Dante, to the lowest hell together with his cherished pupils, may have been a romantic-heroic gesture, though its sincerity, however bizarre the literary-like act, cannot be doubted: primarily, because of his regard for the teaching profession as a sacred mission and his conscientiousness about the built-in duties of teacher and educator. At the same time, there is no denying that the step he took was consistent with his literary conception of life, as if he saw before him the plot of a famous,

classic epic poem. In this different from Golda; like of literature. All you had antagonists and the places a story, while happening in

But this time, reality r and savagely derailed th when Tarnów's schools v their buildings were evac army, Kresch's act of sacri less — useless and bleakly poor Kresch had persona takingly arranged on the s weeks, the scale of the pu it transpired that, apart fr elementary level such as t boys in the basement, it v instruction at the high sch self realized that reality ha own contribution to Tarn adopted town while he sti birth on the San River, ar times until the dust settle

After Kresch's world t to leave Eretz-Israel on tl certainly never opened hi Idek Biberberg, who was F high school before leaving suited to the pioneering l many that fled eastward al Tarnów. On October 22, 1 the river separating the R ran into his teacher at the out to be fateful: Idek cro advice, Kresch followed s

the home of her father, the elementary school and the city orphanage.

It proved out to be unsound, since there had no precedent. The mass "Akcja"s of 1942 which bled the distinction between men and women. In the case of Maria Ressler, the science and the very first *Akcja* launched against the German teacher, and the downfall, the mathematics and the poem. Instead of joining the mother to care for his infant son

Immediately following the week-long mass exits of predominantly Jewish Tarnów was declared a mandatory Jewish zone and the vicinity who were confined in this area. The school, too, with its orphans and a downsized staff did their best. But "Ochronka" too soon closed on September 13, 1942, its members were rounded up to join the march to the train station en

acted on the eve of war and the lowest hell together with the romantic-heroic gesture, the literary-like act, cannot be regarded for the teaching profession's conscientiousness about the future. At the same time, there is a consistency with his literary style in the plot of a famous,

classic epic poem. In this respect, he was (unwittingly) not very different from Golda; like her he viewed reality through the prism of literature. All you had to do was change the names of the protagonists and the places as listed in books, and you knew how the story, while happening in real time, would end.

But this time, reality refused to conform to the literary formula and savagely derailed the story from its expected course. Thus, when Tarnów's schools were no longer allowed to function and their buildings were evacuated by order of, and for, the occupying army, Kresch's act of sacrifice proved to have been thoroughly useless — useless and bleakly futile, just as Agnon's books, which the poor Kresch had personally brought from Eretz-Israel and painstakingly arranged on the shelves; proved useless and futile. Within a few weeks, the scale of the pupils' mass flight eastward came to light; it transpired that, apart from clandestine personal tutoring at the elementary level such as that offered by Reb Aazik to children and boys in the basement, it was unfeasible to conduct underground instruction at the high school level. At this point even Kresch himself realized that reality had triumphed over literature and that his own contribution to Tarnów had no takers. He decided to leave his adopted town while he still could, to return to Lasko, his place of birth on the San River, and care for his mother in these troubled times until the dust settled.

After Kresch's world turned over, did he regret his decision to leave Eretz-Israel on the eve of war? It's a moot question. He certainly never opened his heart to anyone, not even to his pupil, Idek Biberberg, who was Hesiak Wróbel's classmate at the Hebrew high school before leaving the school and choosing to learn a trade suited to the pioneering life in Eretz-Israel. Idek was among the many that fled eastward about a month after the Germans entered Tarnów. On October 22, 1939, he reached Lasko to cross the San, the river separating the Reich and Red armies. To his surprise, he ran into his teacher at the town square, an encounter that turned out to be fateful: Idek crossed the river that same night; on his advice, Kresch followed suit. Both made it to the opposite shore

where they parted, each to find his own way to Lwów. Since the Soviet invasion, Lwów had been the capital of Western Ukraine — an abject mire of refugeedom yet the only lifesaver available to Galician fugitives. There, they hoped to weather the storm. But in July 1940 their hopes were thwarted: the Soviet authorities decided to exile the refugees to forced labor camps in Central Asia, to the icelands of the Arctic Circle and the wastes of the Siberian taiga. Kresch was one of the exiles.

Kresch was never to realize his aspirations of guiding Tarnów youth through Agnon's works. Nor was it given to Safah Berurah's pupils to make the acquaintance of Agnon's works, which Kresch proffered to them. And sadly, Agnon was not awarded the opportunity of being read by the flowers of Tarnów youth under the guidance and inspiration of a man like Kresch: lover and disseminator of Hebrew literature unequalled down the generations, breathing it moment by moment with every fiber of his being, living it for as long as he could breathe, and dying for it without complaint or regret.

II

If the uniqueness of Agnon's language was responsible for the withdrawal of the uninitiated from his writings, it was this very quality that seems to have drawn Hesiek Wróbel to Agnon. Intuitively — or perhaps because he imagined he heard there an echo of the *Gemara* melody as rendered by his father, Aazik — the boy (in high school at the time) arrived at the conclusion that his acquaintance with Agnon would be incomplete if he did not reread the works he had once discovered in *HaTekufah* "the way Father would read them". Or, better still, he would ask Father to read the Agnon stories together with him, just as the two had once read the stories of Mendeleh Moikher Sforim together.

Reb Aazik had never been initiated into *reading* a story or poem for enjoyment; he *studied* them as he did a page of *Gemara*.

Since Mendeleh's death in written proper Hebrew. For the four walls of *Halakha* Hebrew literature to Gold pages his son had marked uniqueness at once, and garment over with the li from beneath *Agnon the* — according to Father — erudite, an overflowing f Aazik himself, would nev matter, writing, like a "yes

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own way to Lwów. Since the capital of Western Ukraine was the only lifesaver available to weather the storm. But in the Soviet authorities decided to move camps in Central Asia, to the wastes of the Siberian taiga.

Instructions of guiding Tarnów were given to Safah Berurah's son's works, which Kresch was not awarded the opportunity to guide youth under the guidance: lover and disseminator of the generations, breathing life of his being, living it for or without complaint or

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led into reading a story or he did a page of *Gemara*.

Since Mendeleh's death in 1917 (so he said in regret) no writers had written proper Hebrew. For this reason, he was retreating back into the four walls of *Halakha* and leaving the cultivation of modern Hebrew literature to Golda. However, when he leafed through the pages his son had marked in *HaTekufah*, he grasped their linguistic uniqueness at once, and began to show his son how to "turn the garment over with the lining on top", meaning, how to uncover from beneath Agnon the storyteller, the "real, important Agnon" — according to Father — Agnon the rabbinic scholar: sharp and erudite, an overflowing fount with a colossal memory who, like Aazik himself, would never stop being, feeling, acting or, for that matter, writing, like a "yeshiveh bukher" (a yeshivah student).

The great change brought to their world by their joint absorption in Agnon dawned on Aazik and Hesiak gradually: how the pursuit honed the boy's understanding of Agnon's linguistic style (though, unlike his father, he was primarily delighted by the literary richness of every story); and how it molded Father's attitude to the author and master of the linguistic style. To Hesiak's delight, Father found himself delving into Agnon over and over again in open enjoyment — exulting in a passage or verifying a handful of quotations — and changing from an Agnon reader at his son's urging into an Agnon lover of his own free will.

Beyond the covenant of rabbinic scholarship which kept Reb Aazik faithful to Agnon as if they were old friends even though they had never met, another surprising and covert covenant came to light: from Agnon's phrasing in "*HaNidah*", Aazik inferred that the writer had sprung from, and been nurtured on, the soil of Buczacz; and beyond Buczacz itself, the towns of Potik and Jazłowicz were mentioned. Not that Reb Aazik was familiar with Buczacz or the nearby towns. For, unlike his father-in-law, Zvi-Hersch, or his own wife, Golda, who conjured up lands beyond the horizon, he, Aazik, had never been a traveler and did not long for distant landscapes. His long journeys to Vienna or to Przemyśl, to Moldavia or to Korets and back — whether as a refugee, a soldier or a captive, whether finally as a returnee from captivity or exile — had been

forced on him by war. In any case, he had very little interest in remembering them. Even the defining single journey of his life, undertaken of his own free will — his young, self-imposed exile in 1895 from the barrenness of Wisłok to “the flowerbeds of Torah” in Tarnów — by 1925 its light too had dimmed and its memory blurred in the thirty years that had since elapsed. But even if Reb Aazik never set out for Buczac, Buczac, so to speak, caught up with him in Tarnów, in the guise of its last rabbi, Rabbi Meir Arak. The rabbi was invited to Buczac after serving in the towns of Potik and Jazłowicz: at the end of the First World War he was called to fill Tarnów’s rabbinical seat, which had stood empty since the death of Rabbi Abbeleh Schnur in 1914. Thus, when the last rabbi of Buczac in Eastern Galicia became the last rabbi of Tarnów in Western Galicia, East and West, to the delight of Father and son, sealed a twin alliance — an alliance of great learning in the best tradition of both Buczac and Tarnów.

Reb Aazik, returning to Tarnów in 1918 from his wartime wanderings, and the town’s new rabbi soon formed ties of friendship based on mutual respect. These ties grew stronger as the two became neighbors, only a hundred steps separating Reb Aazik’s apartment on Bóznic Street from Rabbi Arak’s community apartment near the *Belzer shtibl*, inside the courtyard that was darkened by the shadow of the “Great” Synagogue. The friendship between Reb Aazik and “*Der Turner Ruv*” (as the Tarnów community now reverently called him, after having stopped referring to him by his former officiating titles as “*Der Jazlowitzer Ruv*” and “*Der Biczuczer Ruv*”), was based on a learned and spiritual kinship. Though years later, when Father told him about it, Hesiek, the young socialist, was not sure that the liaison was entirely free of an erudite, conceited elitism. “How the ‘respectable townsfolk’” — Aazik had recalled with a chuckle — “had grumbled upon leaving the ‘Old Synagogue’ after Rabbi Meir’s sermon on *Shabbat HaGadol*.” By contract, he had to give two yearly sermons at the “Old Synagogue” (on *Shabbat HaGadol*, the Sabbath preceding Passover, and *Shabbat Shuva*, the Sabbath preceding the Day of Atonement). He had begun the first

one light-heartedly: “Get nothing new, however... lengthy voyage in the sea the “learned” attendees a able townsfolk”. They, w through the sermon, asto forced out of them.

That first *Shabbat Ha* the two Sabbaths that the the town’s Torah scholars if they habitually prayed e were somewhat patronizi an advanced lesson for a s was modest and unassun simple ways. Moreover, h and his authority was unc tions poured into Tarnów out his *responsa* — and th

It’s a pity that the tov death snatched him up or. From then, until Jewish in 1942, he had no succes forlorn. The month that T heavenly throne — Tishr dar — had been proclaim program aimed at encoura page”. The idea had been Shapira, head of the Talm ered momentum in Polan month and in memory of t instituted a series of discu *drish*” (the *beit midrash* in including a selection of *Ge* of content and presentatio the broad public and lift it

had very little interest in the single journey of his life, a young, self-imposed exile to "the flowerbeds of Torah" dimmed and its memory faded as time elapsed. But even if Reb Aazik, so to speak, caught up with the first rabbi, Rabbi Meir Arak, serving in the towns of Potik and Buczacz, World War he was called had stood empty since the death of the last rabbi. Thus, when the last rabbi of Tarnów in the delight of Father and son, great learning in the best

in 1918 from his wartime mission formed ties of friendship that grew stronger as the two years separating Reb Aazik's return to Arak's community apart from the courtyard that was darkened by the war. The friendship between Aazik and the Tarnów community now continued referring to him by his name "Ruv" and "Der Biczuczer" as a sign of kinship. Though years had passed, the young socialist, was still of an erudite, conceited nature — Aazik had recalled his first seeing the 'Old Synagogue' on *Shabbat HaGadol*. By contract, he had seen the "New Synagogue" (on *Shabbat HaGadol*); and *Shabbat Shuva*, the day after. He had begun the first

one light-heartedly: "Gentlemen, about eating *matza* I can tell you nothing new, however..." and here he promptly embarked on a lengthy voyage in the sea of *Halakha*, Jewish Law, to the delight of the "learned" attendees and the chagrin of the numerous "respectable townsfolk". They, who had never opened a book, had to sit through the sermon, astonished, and almost choked on the "amen" forced out of them.

That first *Shabbat HaGadol* initiated a new custom in town: on the two Sabbaths that the rabbi preached at the "Old Synagogue", all the town's Torah scholars, gathered there to hear his sermon even if they habitually prayed elsewhere. And even if his words of Torah were somewhat patronizing — for he turned a folksy podium into an advanced lesson for a select handful — in everyday life the rabbi was modest and unassuming, winning the public's heart with his simple ways. Moreover, his reputation spread throughout Galicia and his authority was undisputed: because of him, religious questions poured into Tarnów from all over the Diaspora and he sent out his *responsa* — and the town basked in his reflected prestige.

It's a pity that the town had him for only seven years before death snatched him up on the first day of Sukkot (October 3) 1925. From then, until Jewish Tarnów was destroyed in the Holocaust in 1942, he had no successor, the rabbinical seat again remaining forlorn. The month that Tarnów's last rabbi was summoned to the heavenly throne — Tishrei 5686 according to the Hebrew calendar — had been proclaimed the "Month of Awakening", with a program aimed at encouraging the masses to learn a "daily *Gemara* page". The idea had been devised two years earlier by Rabbi Meir Shapira, head of the Talmudic Academy in Lublin, and had gathered momentum in Poland's Jewish communities. As part of that month and in memory of the late Rabbi Arak, Tarnów's synagogues instituted a series of discussions on Talmudic issues at the "*bismidrish*" (the *beit midrash* in the back wing of the "Old Synagogue"), including a selection of *Gemara* lessons, publicly digestible in terms of content and presentation. This was to open up the Oral Law to the broad public and lift it out of the ivory tower of Torah scholars.

Reb Aazik, since leaving the *kloyz* in 1914 had set aside regular times for Torah study at the *bismedrish* and had made a name for himself in both methodology and popularity with pupils. He was given the honor — in his own right, of course, but also because of his friendship with the deceased rabbi — of presenting the first lesson right after the holidays.

He chose to inaugurate the program with “Two take hold of a *tallith*”, the issue of minor property disputes that starts the *Baba Metziya* tractate and is every novice’s first taste of Talmudic give-and-take. Reb Aazik’s “dramatic model lesson” was still remembered seventy years later by the aged Reb Moishe Stiglitz, who had attended it as a young Talmud student. The memory had not dimmed with time and he shared his impressions with Reb Aazik’s son. “Reb Aazik’s public lesson” — Reb Moishe said enthusiastically — “was a work of art, weaving together all the aspects of the first *mishna* in the tractate, satisfying the tastes of every participant. The average listener — i.e., not a scholar but a laborer who would come to the *bismedrish* after a day’s tiring work — walked out of that lesson with the feeling that the erudite Reb Aazik had spoken to him personally, not from the heights of singular scholarship but eye to eye, and what he had said had been presented in a pleasing and easily comprehensible way. On the other hand, the Torah scholars present, grasped the lesson’s innovation, if not in terms of Law study, then at least in the proposed novel method of imparting *Gemara* to broad sectors of the public.”

At the end of the summer of 1925, the same month that Rabbi Arak passed away, fate took a hand and the Wróbel household received from the newly-opened Kanner-Weinberg Hebrew bookstore a first consignment — the anticipated volumes of *HaTekufah*. But it took some five or six more years, before Hesiak, then already in high school, became enamored in Agnon’s works he discovered in *HaTekufah* and was followed by Reb Aazik himself.

“What a missed opportunity! And irreparably so!” — Aazik bemoaned the circumstances in those later years — “What

a pity that I never had
How I would like to be
pupil in the Buczacz

The disappointment aside
somewhat mystical hope
the rabbi and Reb Aazik’s
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Talpiot was still empty
Zvi Ankori, the son of Aazi

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parably so!" — Aazik later years — "What

a pity that I never heard of Agnon before the rabbi died. How I would like to know what he thought of his former pupil in the Buczacz *bismedrish!*"

The disappointment aside, the son never stopped nursing the faint, somewhat mystical hope that the two connections — Agnon's with the rabbi and Reb Aazik's with the rabbi — would somehow, in a mysterious way coalesce, sowing the seeds of a new experience; but the when and how thereof were unpredictable. Alas, Reb Aazik did not live to see the realization of that hope; that privilege fell to the son and his family.

III

The onset of the experience was rather modest and unassuming. It sprouted accidentally some decades later from the soil of Talpiot, Jerusalem's pine-capped neighborhood "whose air is unlike anywhere else in the country", Agnon noted. Agnon chose to live in Talpiot in 1927 and four years later, he built his home there. The trials ensuing from that decision are metaphorically recounted in the short story, "*MiOyev leOhev* [From Foe to Lover]". After the riots of 1929 and the "Disturbances" of 1936-39, the hardest test for the neighborhood came with the outbreak of the 1948 war. Invading Egyptians reached the fence of Kibbutz Ramat Rachel, a fifteen-minute walk from the twin neighborhoods of Arnona and Talpiot. The area was evacuated to become an advance post of southern Jerusalem. Twice the kibbutz fell into enemy hands, twice the defense forces came to its rescue. The Gadna Youth Corps, under the command of this writer, hastily threw together fortifications in the adjoining neighborhood of Bak'a, which leads from Talpiot towards town, and thus instituted a second line of defense.

Talpiot was still empty even after the fighting died down, when Zvi Ankori, the son of Aazik and Golda Wróbel, after a year-and-a-

half of military service in the War of Independence, started looking for a place there to rent, in advent of his wedding to Ora Auerbach of Tel-Aviv in July 1949. He would not have been able to scout the neighborhood at all had he and Ora not been officers in the Israel Defense Forces, which allowed them freedom of movement. The house they finally found abutted the barbed wire fence of the State of Israel: outwardly, the fence overlooked the valley between Israel and Jordan, inwardly, only two houses and a lane separated the young man's home from Agnon's temporarily abandoned residence.

The small stone house was rented to the bride and groom on condition that they repair the roof and the wall where an Egyptian shell had made a gaping hole. The couple were to live there for twenty-seven years and there they raised a fine family of three daughters. The house was one of the first built in the neighborhood. The construction date was engraved on the lip of the cistern (beneath the balcony gazing towards the Dead Sea) — "1925". What coincidence! That was the very year that Tarnów rabbi Meir Arak died and the Wróbel bookcase incorporated the volumes of *HaTekufah* that years later brought Reb Aazik and son face to face with the works of Agnon!

Many long months passed before the neighborhood was re-inhabited. Most of the residents were newcomers, Holocaust survivors. Only a few of the veteran residents returned to the homes they had left. Agnon and his wife, Esterlein, were among the last to return. The neighborhood's isolation inevitably threw newcomers and veterans together and it was only natural that Ankori, on one side of the lane, formed ties with Agnon, on the other. In time, the lane became a street and was named after another neighbor, the scholar, Joseph Klausner. Agnon, who was at odds with Klausner, confessed to Ankori that he found the address hardly acceptable. "It has its advantages" — the young man consoled Agnon — "it means that this poor lane will not be called after you, but you will be honored with a fitting, large street instead." Agnon laughed. Inside, he knew that the prediction would come true.

It is hard to know what the acquaintance with his student at Hebrew University took a daily stroll and soon constitutional of himself, fond of walking.

All Agnon had to do was knock on the door twice and signal him to enter. He would drop whatever he was carrying, take the soles of their shoes, old worn shoes, and two men along a well-trodden path from Talpiot to Ramat Rachel.

If the neighbor was not at home, he would knock on the door a cypress sprig from the garden had been there, and when the door opened, he would lane at once to the Agnon's. Agnon always came from Agnon's neighborhood and topics of conversation were always to memory all of Agnon's works. In a moment of grace: the young man spoke of what language to write in, of special ties with Brenner, the friendship with Bialik; the

Agnon knew his neighbor. When he learned his original name, he said "Tarnów, Mahanayim..." — a pause in the 1930s. Agnon's comments in *Tmol Shilshom* [Yesterday, Tomorrow, and the Day After Tomorrow] Do you recall the passage

— "How could I forget it on my mind. What a person would have found it an excellent example of the failed attempt of Tarnów settlement of Mahanayim

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It is hard to know whether or not Agnon consciously fostered the acquaintance with his young neighbor, a teacher and doctoral student at Hebrew University. He may have noticed that Ankori took a daily stroll and sought the companionship for his own afternoon constitutionals of one who was within arm's reach and, like himself, fond of walking. He was not mistaken.

All Agnon had to do was to rap the metal ball of his neighbor's door twice and signal him: "Come!" Instantly, the teacher-student would drop whatever he was doing and accompany the writer. The soles of their shoes, old work horses, would immediately carry the two men along a well-trodden path, to and fro, to and fro, from Talpiot to Ramat Rachel and back again.

If the neighbor was not at home, Agnon would hang on the door a cypress sprig from the tree opposite, as a sign that he had been there, and when the young man returned, he would cross the lane at once to the Agnon house. The initiative for their meetings always came from Agnon and it was he who decided their duration and topics of conversation. Ankori carefully tried to commit to memory all of Agnon's musings as the author opened his heart in a moment of grace: the question he pondered in the early days of what language to write in, whether Yiddish or Hebrew; his special ties with Brenner, the writer; the complicated character of his friendship with Bialik; the experiences of his period in Germany.

Agnon knew his neighbor by his Hebraized name, Zvi Ankori. When he learned his origins, he came to a complete standstill. — "Tarnów, Mahanayim..." he muttered. "That tragedy already gave me pause in the 1930s. A decade later, I incorporated my sentiments in *Tmol Shilshom* [Yesterday and The Day before Yesterday]. Do you recall the passage?"

— "How could I forget? I turned it over and over again, etching it on my mind. What a pity my father did not live to read it, he would have found it an echo of his own sense of tragedy about the failed attempt of Tarnowian Zionists to establish the Galilee settlement of Mahanayim:

Your heart suddenly leaps as the train pulls into Tarnów. The very Tarnów that added another colony to Eretz-Israel. The colony, Mahanayim, lies in ruins and its members have scattered in bitter disillusion. But your eyes fondly dwell on every Jew in town lest it is he who lent a hand to Eretz-Israel, or had spent time in Eretz-Israel and returned, his settlement attempt having gone awry.

“That’s how Father’s heart leapt at the sight of Mahanayim’s builders. No doubt he would have cherished your words whenever he bumped into Motl Leibel on Tarnów’s streets. Leibel ‘had spent time in Eretz-Israel and returned, his settlement attempt having gone awry’. Yet until his dying day, he still hoped to return to rebuild Mahanayim.”

Apart from Mahanayim, Agnon also recalled the last rabbi of Buczacz and Tarnów, singing his praises:

From his second floor library he brought down Part II of Rabbi Arak’s anthology of *Responsa* entitled *Imrei Yosher*, the part published in Tarnów-Kraków several months prior to his death (Part I had been published in Munkacz before the end of the First World War). But this was not enough: with the enthusiasm and pride of a townsman, who felt that the edge of the exalted rabbi’s garment had brushed him as well, he began to list all the rabbi’s *halakhic* writings, noting their renown throughout Galicia and the Torah world as a whole.

At Agnon’s request, Ankori related what his father Aazik had told him about his relationship with Rabbi Arak in Tarnów. He also described one of his own unforgettable childhood memories: the rabbi’s funeral on the second night of Sukkot — a frightening experience in the dead of night, the first funeral the five-year-old boy had ever been exposed to. He waited for the cortège at the corner of Bóznic Street, alongside a handful of *goyim*, come to see the strange Jewish funeral, and among the block of Jewish women (his mother included), their heads wrapped in dark scarves.

All at once a murmur rose from the crowd: the cortège is

approaching! The full Tis and in its light, a river erupted and poured out offices and the main entrance stopped there for the recologies on a holiday). Th to the cemetery. Jewish T

After Ankori returned from Columbia University in Hebrew University in Poland again at Agnon’s initiative a profoundly intellectual imagined. It stemmed from with enchanted, hidden scarcely explain — topics and butter and the focus of

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that his father Aazik had bbi Arak in Tarnów. He ole childhood memories: Sukkot — a frightening funeral the five-year-old d for the cortège at the ul of goyim, come to see block of Jewish women ed in dark scarves. e crowd: the cortège is

approaching! The full Tishrei moon hung in the middle of the sky and in its light, a river of black hats (his father's among them) erupted and poured out of Nova Street — site of the community offices and the main entrance to the "New Synagogue". The crowd stopped there for the recitation of *kaddish* (tradition precluded eulogies on a holiday). Then the cortège continued to stream down to the cemetery. Jewish Tarnów took leave of its rabbi.

IV

After Ankori returned from America, a doctoral diploma from Columbia University in hand and a part-time appointment at Hebrew University in pocket, the relationship of the two neighbors, again at Agnon's initiative, leapt forward to a new level, taking a profoundly intellectual course that neither could have initially imagined. It stemmed from topics that for years had drawn Agnon with enchanted, hidden cords — the origin of which he could scarcely explain — topics that he knew were his companion's bread and butter and the focus of his academic work.

Agnon could listen for hours to his friend sum up whole chapters on the Byzantine Empire and the history of its successor, the Ottoman Sultanate. From the remarks he interjected, it was obvious that the topic in broad lines was not unknown to him. He had likely read about it or heard lectures on it when he lived in Germany, as is clear from references that anyone familiar with Agnon's works can easily spot. Nor were his questions about the history of Poland's early kingdom surprising, for he had written about the Jews of that period.

What was strange, however, was his ongoing interest in another of the young researcher's fields — the history of the Karaite sect and of Karaism. The observant Jewish scholar drank in the documentation on which his friend dated the appearance of Karaites in Byzantium as early as the mid-tenth century — preceding the usual dating till then by half a century. This, Ankori showed, was

not due to internal developments in the Greek Jewish community but a direct result of the period's wide-ranging Byzantine conquests; the conquests embraced large areas of Eastern Islam (areas which included Karaite communities) and gave rise to massive migration waves from the annexed regions to Constantinople and other imperial centers. Agnon was inquisitive too about the new research on Karaites since the 1930s, when researcher Jacob Mann, his acquaintance and briefly his neighbor in Talpiot, had published a prodigious collection of documents from Street Petersburg archives. Agnon also had in his own library Karaite studies preceding Mann, whether in Hebrew or in German. He had read them all and absorbed every last detail.

During their very first conversation on the topic, Agnon disclosed that he had read Ankori's methodological article in *Tarbiz*, which was a re-analysis of original sources on the formative stage of Byzantine Karaism and an overall revision of its dating. Typically, he volunteered the generous praise for the article that he had heard from his acquaintances in the Academy, but clammed up about his own opinion. He expressed regret that he was unable to read Ankori's *Karaites in Byzantium*, published as a thick volume in English, since he did not know the language. Nevertheless, he asked for a copy for his library and was happy when the author presented it to him as a gift.

Only in the wake of events of the summer of 1960 did Ankori discover the depths of Agnon's *personal* involvement in the subject. Karaism was not a purely intellectual interest for Agnon but grounded in both childhood memories of Eastern Galicia and early impressions in Jerusalem. One day, Agnon signaled his arrival at his neighbor's door with a battery of agitated knocks rather than the usual "one-two". "Read this!" he stuck a letter under Ankori's nose. It was from the leadership of the Egyptian Karaite community that had settled in Israel — wonder of wonders! — in the town of Ramleh, having preserved, perhaps, an echo of their ancestral settlement in this town from a thousand years earlier. Ramleh had been the seat of the Egyptian-Fatimid governor; its strong Karaite

community had arisen since the better-known *Aveilei*. It had been led by "nesiim" (heads) of the House of David. Thanks to the Egyptian Karaite community in Egypt at the time, they did not know of Ramleh's rival Rabbanite community of Eretz-Israel.

"What do you suggest?" Ankori asked, injured and at a loss as to what to do. The Karaites had written their laws, and their schools were forced to read them to their fathers. They referred to the laws as if they had allegedly tripped up a rabbi in the Old City, causing him to fall and conceal himself beneath a rug. The course on Jerusalem's Karaite

The recent Karaite settlement in Israel was upset by Agnon's testimony. It was a Karaite custom to hold a *shulhan* in the synagogue for all Egyptian Karaites.

Seeing Agnon's quantity of work, Ankori suggested a "sulha", a reconciliation. Ankori was regarded by the Karaites as the introduction to the Israeli Karaite community. Bashyatchi's *Adderet Eliah* was a reference to the Karaite Passover.

He suggested that Agnon should write which he, Ankori, would be the community secretary in Ramleh. He typed up the final version in pencil with erasures and corrections, giving the background to

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community had arisen separately from the Jerusalem Karaites of the better-known *Aveilei Zion* (Mourners of Zion) branch and had been led by "nesiim" (headmen) tracing their lineage back to the House of David. Thanks to their political and economic status in Egypt at the time, they did not shrink from interfering in the life of Ramleh's rival Rabbanite community or in the affairs of the *Geonim* of Eretz-Israel.

"What do you suggest I do?" — Agnon groaned. He sounded injured and at a loss as to how to defend himself from slanderers. The Karaites had written to complain that their children in state schools were forced to read Agnon writings that slighted their forefathers. They referred to his story about Jerusalem Karaites who allegedly tripped up a rabbi visiting their underground synagogue in the Old City, causing him to step on a book by Maimonides concealed beneath a rug. In reprisal, the ill-treated rabbi placed a curse on Jerusalem's Karaite community.

The recent Karaite settlers in Israel from Egypt were equally upset by Agnon's testimony, ostensibly meant as a rebuke, that it was a Karaite custom to hang a *tzitzit* (the fringed undergarment) in the synagogue for all eyes to behold — a custom foreign to Egyptian Karaites.

Seeing Agnon's quandary — Ankori offered to help conduct a "*sulha*", a reconciliation ceremony, between the two parties. Ankori was regarded by the Karaites as a friend; he had composed the introduction to the Israeli edition of their book of laws, Elijah Bashyatchi's *Adderet Eliahu*, and at their request had written a preface to the Karaite Passover *Haggadah* printed in Ramleh.

He suggested that Agnon formulate a written clarification, which he, Ankori, would personally deliver to Hayim Levy, the community secretary in Ramleh. That draft, written on the spot in pencil with erasures and corrections, remained with Ankori who typed up the final version. This may be the only personal document giving the background to Agnon's attitude towards Karaism.

Mr. Hayim Levy
 Secretary, Community of Karaite Jews in Israel
 Ramleh

Dear Mr. Levy — Greetings!

Your letter arrived yesterday and I hasten to reply in deference.

I am astonished that you took words I wrote in an early book as a denigration of Karaites. I have reread the passages and found nothing that could be construed as disrespectful. Apart, perhaps, from the fable about Karaites having slighted a book by Maimonides, of blessed memory. But as the Sages have already said, one does not question fables.

In general, I beg to advise you that I am well-versed in Karaite literature. And while I cannot pretend to be an expert, my bookshelf is graced by many Karaite books, from Karaite prayer books to Firkowicz's book. As for research works on the Karaites, it goes without saying that many are in my possession, such as Pinsker's and so on.

I would also like to tell the gentleman that as president of the *Mekitzei Nirdamim* society — which is a hundred years old and has published a selection of works composed by our sages — I helped publish *Pitron Shneim Asar* [Commentary on the Minor Prophets] by one of the great early scholars of Karaism, Reb Daniel al-Qumisi, even though the book has harsh things to say about our rabbis of blessed memory.

Moreover, forty-nine years ago on one of the "Seven Days of Matza" as you call it, i.e. Passover, I spent many hours at the Karaite synagogue in Jerusalem within the [Old City] walls in the company of two Karaite pilgrims

from inner Russia. I had that the older of the had donated money Elijah Bashyatchi.

As for the *tzitzit* was practiced by Kar is not far from the to up to be seen, in ke *see it and remember* impure — many do Prof. Jacob Mann, n of Lithuania.

My friend and n University, who is a tory, intends to visit him new and import about my attitude to and preserve them.

Wishing you and Jews a peaceful, bless

P.S. I see that you ha the description of the judge in our town.

Following the personal let retary and as a result of t to Ramleh, good relations Karaite Jewish communit of friendship and reconci Karaite calendar put out b

from inner Russia. And when I left, the beadle told me that the older of the two was an important dignitary and had donated money to republish *Adderet Eliahu* by Reb Elijah Bashyatchi.

As for the *tzitzit* — you should know that the custom was practiced by Karaites in Poland, as in Halicz, which is not far from the town of my birth; the *tzitzit* was hung up to be seen, in keeping with the verse, “*and you will see it and remember it*”. As for the matter of pure and impure — many documents were published by scholar Prof. Jacob Mann, mainly on the Karaite communities of Lithuania.

My friend and neighbor, Dr. Zvi Ankori of Hebrew University, who is a prominent scholar of Karaite history, intends to visit you in Ramleh. You will hear from him new and important information, and he will tell you about my attitude to the Karaites, may God protect them and preserve them.

Wishing you and the entire community of Karaite Jews a peaceful, blessed Sabbath. May God be with you.

Shai Agnon

P.S. I see that you have read my books. Perhaps you saw the description of the Karaite judge who served as court judge in our town.

Following the personal letter Agnon wrote to the community secretary and as a result of the “emissary’s” intercession on his visit to Ramleh, good relations were restored between Agnon and the Karaite Jewish community in Israel. Thereafter, every year, a gift of friendship and reconciliation was sent to Agnon in Talpiot: a Karaite calendar put out by the community.

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Handwritten text in Hebrew script, written on lined paper. The text is written in pencil and includes several lines of prose, some with corrections or insertions. At the top, there is a note: למען הן יבין. The text continues with several lines of script, including phrases like הנה, הנה, and הנה. There are several lines that appear to be crossed out or corrected.

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, written on lined paper. This section also contains several lines of text, some with corrections and some that are crossed out. There are several lines that are heavily crossed out with a dark pencil stroke.

Pencil draft of Agnon's letter to the Karaites (p. 1a)

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, written on lined paper. This is a very short note, possibly a date or a reference, with the word כיום visible.

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, written on lined paper. The text is partially obscured but appears to be a short sentence.

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, written on lined paper. This section contains several lines of text, some with corrections and some that are crossed out.

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, written on lined paper. This section contains a few lines of text, including the word הנה.

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, written on lined paper. This section contains several lines of text, some with corrections and some that are crossed out. There are several lines that are heavily crossed out with a dark pencil stroke.

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Gradually and indiscernibly, the relationship between Agnon and his neighbor broke out of the confines of the second, "scholarly", stage and moved onto a third stage. As time passed, it grew stronger and matured into an especially close friendship, annulling the age difference, toppling every barrier and tabu and holding nothing back. It was nourished by regular heart-to-heart chats spread over the afternoon and evening hours (Agnon's mornings, by an ironclad law, were reserved for working at home). Relaxed and free, the two friends strolled almost obsessively to and fro, to and fro, from the corner of Klausner Street to the rebuilt kibbutz Ramat Rachel.

"Relaxed and free" seemed to be the cornerstone of the haven Agnon sought — and found — with his neighbor in the third and final, mature, stage of their relationship. As Agnon's status rose on the Jerusalem book scene, he increasingly rubbed shoulders with university pundits who sought him out, and his position in the academic community became firmer. Paradoxically and concomitantly, since by force of circumstances he always remained a non-academic, hence an outsider, he became more and more ambivalent about that community: he despised its hypocrisy and self-righteousness as only Agnon was able to despise; he mocked its ludicrous, puffed-up self-importance with the most venomous irony; and he knew its great and petty intrigues and injustices inside out, even hinting at a smattering of them in his books. Yet, at the same time, he found the community's courtship of him flattering and the honors pleasant, and he was bound to it by dual cords of love and guilt, as if — Mercy! — he had sinned in an incestuous relationship.

— "What do they want of me? They don't stop inviting me and wasting my time" — he would complain to his confidant.

Even as he profusely lamented that the engagements devoured him alive, he continued to accept every invitation, attend every

gathering, taste every cook of outward pretence and in haven of Talpiot's purifying with his neighbor from the Here, baring his soul to tl notice, no phone call, but w him and listen, and who w even if it was unpleasant to at both himself and at soci or conference, nauseated b ing in gossip. He would rej inhibition and in complete need here for pretence or ca sionally affiliated with the u and self-seclusion despite tl would never divulge anythi

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gathering, taste every cookie and sip every drink. And after hours of outward pretence and inward disgust he would rush back to the haven of Talpiot's purifying air which stroked his face as he strolled with his neighbor from the corner of Klausner to Ramat Rachel. Here, baring his soul to the friend — who needed no advance notice, no phone call, but was always there, always prepared to join him and listen, and who was not afraid to give his honest opinion even if it was unpleasant to the ears — Agnon poured out his wrath at both himself and at society, mocking so-and-so at some party or conference, nauseated by the wagging tongues wickedly reveling in gossip. He would repeat these things to his friend without inhibition and in complete freedom, knowing that, there was no need here for pretence or caution, that the friend — though professionally affiliated with the university — guarded his independence and self-seclusion despite the heavy personal price he paid, and he would never divulge anything to anyone.

For all the contradictions, Agnon could not shake off a desire to be more like university academics. A hidden envy of professors and their working arrangements buzzed around his mind like a mosquito that need not bite in order to disturb one's peace. This is the sort of thing he would feel after a visit to a researcher's home where he found that the latter had an "effective" handle on his material, especially if the scholar was a man after his own heart whose work he respected.

One evening, on his return from his erudite friend, Prof. Goitein, these feelings brought the frustrated Agnon straight to his neighbor's door, knowing that Ankori and Goitein were both personal friends and professional colleagues:

"Wouldn't it be wonderful" — he confessed as he dropped into his favorite armchair in the Ankori living room — "if I too could file away thoughts and story ideas, quotes and references in the kind of card index I saw at Goitein's!

"If only I could... But — alas! — I am so disorganized!" Agnon bewailed his situation as if he, the literary giant, did not have his own "filing system" effectively storing up impressions as borne

out by his long years of creativity. It was as if he had suddenly discovered that he had lived his seventy years under the illusion of accomplishment, wasting most of his days on nothing. The complete faith he had in the advantages of Goitein's methodology suggested that the scholar had in fact shown him how he too could use the system in his work. Agnon had obviously "peeked and gotten hurt", as the Talmudic saying has it. But he had no idea how to proceed: did he expect his neighbor to translate the theory into practice for him? After all, Ankori was well-acquainted with Goitein's organization and himself used an up-to-date card index in his research!

Using all his powers of persuasion, the young academic tried to point out what the elder Agnon, a non-academic, already knew in any case: the basic difference between a researcher's work of gathering sources and a writer's creative, imaginative force. The plea was to no avail. Finally, his patience snapped and the form of his admonishment was a new experience for Agnon: "Agnon!" — the young friend's face was uncompromisingly severe — "Hebrew literature will never forgive you if you concentrate on organizing a card index! Should you nevertheless do so, we will no doubt have two excellent Goiteins, but unfortunately we will have lost the one and only, the unique Agnon!"

Agnon seemed placated and the subject did not come up again. The idea of a card index may have died, but Agnon never stopped his complaining and lamenting all the way from Talpiot to Ramat Rachel and back again. "What *do* they want from me? They invite me to their ceremonies where I'm totally out of place. And I" — he whispered like a penitent — "And I — I'm but a poor, simple 'yeshiveh bukher!'"

His false modesty was patently ridiculous. To his credit, however, when it came to an eye for the ridiculous, Agnon was the master. He consequently shed the pose of the Passover *Haggadah* figure "who does not know to ask", transferring it to an eminent Torah scholar and friend, also a "yeshiveh bukher," unused to pomp and circumstance. A foxy gleam lit Agnon's eyes as, for the

umpteenth time, he laur relishing the scandal and laughter marked retrospec not befallen him persona delight at a friend's down:

This was the story: a res "bukher" all the same — w gala performance with all of honor in the front row in an elegant evening gown overflowing in generous seat. During the performance only the stage lights cast a suddenly espied the edge trousers. He was "alarme word. It was obvious to tl was his white undergarn trousers (which, as was n apparently not properly b stuffing the white cloth b stuffed, and the cloth wer there was no end to it. Al his busy hands quiver: en ence rose, and clapped en rest of the story for he n succumbed to gales of ra usually able to tell a funny or gestures any of the lau

"As I said" — he ended 'yeshiveh bukherim' and r be!"

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umpteenth time, he launched into the "yeshiveh bukher story",
 relishing the scandal anew though one hardly knew whether his
 laughter marked retrospective satisfaction that the misfortune had
 not befallen him personally or — perish the thought! — roguish
 delight at a friend's downfall.

This was the story: a respected, bookish scholar — yet a "yeshiveh
 bukher" all the same — was once invited to the opera house for a
 gala performance with all the trimmings. He was assigned a place
 of honor in the front row. Next to him sat a matron decked out
 in an elegant evening gown made of white silk, and spilling and
 overflowing in generous waves beyond the confines of madam's
 seat. During the performance, when the auditorium was dark and
 only the stage lights cast a pallid glow on the front row, the savant
 suddenly espied the edge of a white cloth trailing sloppily over his
 trousers. He was "alarmed" — Agnon used his favorite dramatic
 word. It was obvious to the poor man that the culprit once more
 was his white undergarment, naughtily breaking loose from his
 trousers (which, as was not infrequently the case with him, were
 apparently not properly buttoned up). In the dark he hastily began
 stuffing the white cloth back into the opening of his trousers. He
 stuffed, and the cloth went on and on, he stuffed and stuffed, and
 there was no end to it. All at once, the thunder of applause made
 his busy hands quiver: end of Act I. The lights came on, the audi-
 ence rose, and clapped enthusiastically. Agnon never divulged the
 rest of the story for he never managed to get past this point. He
 succumbed to gales of rare laughter — rare, yes, for Agnon was
 usually able to tell a funny story without betraying by voice or eyes
 or gestures any of the laughter rocking his insides.

"As I said" — he ended triumphantly, his eyes flashing — "we're
 'yeshiveh bukherim' and nothing else, and that's what we'll always
 be!"

Rejecting Agnon's pose, the neighbor avoided the trap laid by
 the "yeshiveh bukher" who liked to present himself as a *shlemiel*.
 "If it's 'yeshiveh bukherism' we're dealing with, I have a revelation
 for you: my father in Tarnów told me how he visualized the author

from *HaTekufah*. And that's exactly how he saw him: a 'yeshiveh bukher'. But — of the best kind, not a caricature of the original! In other words, wise and loving and true, and at the same time alert to the absurd and unsparingly critical." To the son's delight, the parental "yeshiveh bukher of Tarnów" and the (real, not the poseur) "yeshiveh bukher of Buczacz" became bound up in a tremendous fellowship though the two had never known one another. Both, unmistakably, were the sons of Jewish Galicia. Both had sprouted and matured in the soil of *lernen*, inhaled lungfuls of Galicia's edifying, scholarly air, and imbibed Torah from the same Galician wellspring.

Agnon's "yeshiveh bukherism" fooled no one, nor was there a single literary event in Jerusalem at the time where the "yeshiveh bukher" did not star on center stage. Just as he never turned down an invitation to the vanity fairs he was sure to regret in Talpiot afterwards, so — in this case with complete justification — he never missed a single lecture or intellectual discussion on the subject closest to his heart: Agnon. He had a fixed rule: never to personally intervene in discussions of his work or explain its meaning or latent ambiguities. As a sideline observer (though honored with a front-row seat), he would firmly deflect audience entreaties for his opinion of a lecturer's interpretation, his facial expression never betraying his true thoughts. To his neighbor's disappointment, he followed the same course after returning from a lecture. The young man's genuine interest in Agnon's work (as opposed to university gossip, of which he had had his fill), met with the same self-discipline Agnon reserved for lecture audiences, keeping his impressions to himself. At most, as a friendly gesture, he would respond to a question from his neighbor with the sort of grimace a child might make when asked to down a bowl of spinach.

One day, a few weeks after *Haaretz* started serializing *Hadam veKisei* (Stool and Chair) and "Agnonology frenzy" was at a high pitch as readers tried to solve the story's mystery, the author returned from a lecture in town devoted to the work.

"Nu-u-u...?" — his neighbor — for reasons of his own —

greeted him impatiently. At the event, marveling at the size of the male and female admirers who gathered very well that this was a triumph, Ankori persisted in his interpretation?" — he asked me

Astonishingly and most generously he replied to me. Apart from the "spinach" and "e-e-eh!" compounded by his hand. Meaning: look at that! It had harmed anyone, degraded, or brought heights to abysmal depths.

Their stroll continued in the park to himself. His companion energetically spun his web.

Encouraged by Agnon's (even if non-verbally) on a lecture he was emboldened to set a trap. In an ingratiating tone he could not resist. *Hadam veKisei*. Can I tell you the story? Finally, he waved his hand. It had meant: "Talk. When I return to my theory a day is more than a year. I chose to take it as consent."

When the young man finished his lecture, it seemed to him that the sun in the Judean Hills in the east spilled over the Sea and gleamed more than ever on the siblings' heads: the dark-top of the mountain wearily to the Coastal Plain; the shiny scales seemed brighter than ever; purer and more transparent. Agnon remarked in his story that the fish gobbled up by their feet, light

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greeted him impatiently. Agnon launched into an account of the event, marveling at the size of the audience, listing the cackling male and female admirers who had flocked around him. Knowing very well that this was a tried and tested Agnon ruse to evade the main point, Ankori persisted: "But what did you think of the interpretation?" — he asked mercilessly — for reasons of his own.

Astonishingly and most out of character, Agnon, for a change, was generous; he replied to the one question with three responses. Apart from the "spinach grimace", he boomed out a pregnant "e-e-eh!" compounded by a dismissive downward motion of the hand. Meaning: look at that poor simple story of mine that never harmed anyone, degraded, through no fault of its own, from dizzy heights to abysmal depths.

Their stroll continued in silence, Agnon keeping his thoughts to himself. His companion however — for reasons of his own — energetically spun his web.

Encouraged by Agnon's rare willingness to indicate his opinion (even if non-verbally) on a topic he had always muffled, Ankori was emboldened to set a trap: "Agnon" — he mustered the most ingratiating tone he could — "I have my own interpretation for *Hadom veKisei*. Can I tell it to you?" Agnon walked on without speaking. Finally, he waved indeterminately, a motion that might have meant: "Talk. When I'm lost, I'm lost". Or: "Let me be, one theory a day is more than enough for me". Ankori, in any case, chose to take it as consent. The trap snapped shut.

When the young man finished expounding on his interpretation, it seemed to him that the world was smiling. The gold-tipped Judean Hills in the east spilled down to dip their feet into the Dead Sea and gleamed more than usual in the setting sun above their siblings' heads: the dark-topped western Judean Hills that dropped wearily to the Coastal Plain and the Mediterranean. The Dead Sea's shiny scales seemed brighter and more silvery than before, the air purer and more transparent than any air in the whole world (as Agnon remarked in his story), and the Talpiot-Ramat Rachel road gobbled up by their feet, lighter, friendlier and singing more mer-

rily. Agnon walked on beside his neighbor, reflective and unspeaking. The latter welcomed the silence, congratulating himself on knowing "how Agnon's mind works": the novel interpretation was being absorbed, digested, and making the desired impression. Suddenly, without warning, Agnon stopped short. Turning towards Ankori, he said dryly: "*Kind-leben* [dear child, may you live (in happiness)], you understand nothing."

Not unusually for Eretz-Israel, the sun set in one fell swoop. And it was just as well, for one could see the lights of the Dead Sea scales being extinguished, the gold-tipped Judean Hills rising from their wash in the east, blackening. On the other hand, luckily the darkening face of the man who was sure he "knew how Agnon's mind works" could not be seen, nor the lights being extinguished in his arrogant eyes.

It was the first and last time he dared suggest to Agnon's face an interpretation of one of his stories which began to feature regularly in *Haaretz's* festive issues. And it was the first and only time that Agnon diverged from his sideline-observer status or spinach-grimace reaction to his solicited opinion of a given interpretation, ramming his opinion into the face of the self-appointed interpreter. The interpreter soon regained his composure. "In this sense, at least, I *have* achieved something of the unique" — he laughed without resentment, and Agnon, without a trace of embarrassment, joined in. So ended Ankori's brief career as interpreter of Agnon.

VI

The interpretation episode ended in good spirits. It left not a scratch and even drew the friends closer. Their daily walks continued as before, their conversations becoming more intimate ("at the President's reception, a nun wanted to talk only to me and asked to be photographed with me when suddenly that fat minister pushed himself in between us and said, 'take the picture!'. She wanted me and that uncouth slob shoved in! You get it? A nun! A virgin

complete!"); and more revolved around me, with one's prod of her nipple").

Agnon took to confessing of falling into the hands of ailments of the aged; fear of hotel who would meanly put Street to catch a bus; fear of Agnon is" and might attack has nowadays become a nat

Sometimes he steered ticism. Without detracting from travel, always take a Bible w (which he never permitted h the entertaining aspects of l It's raining, strong winds are in a closed, protected carri our *held* [hero] do? Disdain loins and dashes to Jezreel b. Ahab! What is he? Some Ol

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 surrounded me, with one standing so close that I actually felt the
 prod of her nipple”).

Agnon took to confessing fears relating mostly to old age: fear
 of falling into the hands of a young doctor unsympathetic to the
 ailments of the aged; fear of Arab laborers working on a nearby
 hotel who would meanly push him over as they ran along Klausner
 Street to catch a bus; fear of Jewish thugs “who don’t know who
 Agnon is” and might attack him as they would anyone else (this last
 has nowadays become a national plague, as the papers report).

Sometimes he steered the conversation to quasi-biblical criti-
 cism. Without detracting from his fidelity to the Bible (“when you
 travel, always take a Bible with you!”), he liked to wonder out loud
 (which he never permitted himself in the presence of others) about
 the entertaining aspects of biblical tales: “Take Elijah for example.
 It’s raining, strong winds are blowing and Ahab is riding to Jezreel
 in a closed, protected carriage as befits a king — yet what does
 our *held* [hero] do? Disdainful of both rain and wind, he girds his
 loins and dashes to Jezreel breaking all records and arriving before
 Ahab! What is he? Some Olympic long-distance runner?”.

Sometimes he griped like a spoilt child whose toy has been
 taken away (“you think I can sue that musician whose name was
 also Czaczkes and he stole my Hebrew name, now calling himself
 Agnon?”). And sometimes, a japing, nonsensical spirit took hold of
 him and there was no containing his naughty mood and laughter,
 which could be cruel and low:

- “Meet the lady from Germany coming towards us. Good day
gnädige Frau, I would like to present my friend from the
 university.”
- “Ja-ja,”
- “I would like you to know that this is a most respectable
 matron.”
- “Ja-ja.”
- “She is a famous musicologist.”

- "Ja-ja."
- "And she is also deaf."
- "Ja-ja."

On the other hand, in a spirit of benevolence he would recall great personalities he had befriended, his face brushed by a soft, sincere humility. The memory of J.H. Brenner, the writer, had this effect, as did the memory of Rabbi Kook ("His wife said to me: *'aza heiliger guf'*. You understand? Can a wife pay her husband a greater compliment than to call his body holy?")

Intoxicated by the pure Talpiot air and its blend of pines and desert, the two would relax after their walk at the Ankori home: the house was shaded on the west by pines while five palms, one miniature, graced the sun-drenched garden on the east. The doors on the northern side were guarded by a row of dwarfed cypress, trees, that occasionally supplied Agnon with a green twig to leave on the door as a signal for his friend. Agnon, by his own admission, felt at home there. In the words of the Sages, he found it "a fine dwelling with fine appointments" (omitting, for modesty's sake, the Sages' third characteristic, "a fine woman"). Also the pleasant atmosphere created by the "fine woman" was to his liking, not to mention the tasty refreshments she offered. And just as he opened up in heart-to-heart chats when walking next to his friend outdoors, so he comported himself freely indoors: admiring the bust of the Greek goddess residing in the glass showcase, or the Aztec god acquired from a Mexican who swore that his ancestors were *conversos*, or the figurine of the Byzantine-Christian saint purchased in Crete and felicitously placed on the chest of drawers.

Only once did the "*yeshiveh bukher*" shrink from a display: when he came upon the box-like home-shrine containing an original Shintoist wooden icon and hanging above the shelf of Talmudic works, fragrant with Japanese incense. Agnon was repulsed not so much by the idolatry per se as by its proximity to the holy tomes. Not uttering a word, he approached the box and shut its doors. Only when he learned that the shrine had deliberately been placed

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At the start of the 1960s
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- "To Zvi Ankori, lon
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Ankori once asked Agnon
he composed, *Yamim Noi*
Schocken warehouse (offe

above the tractate of *Avodah Zara* (Idol Worship), did he acknowledge the jest and remove his objection to the open box-shrine.

Sometimes Agnon preferred to end the walk at his own free-standing home on the opposite side of Klausner Street. The house had a severe exterior and somewhat monastic interior, its gray walls devoid of stone facing and much like a mute fortress. Lest the beauty of the landscape divert him from his art, the writer shut himself off from the charms of his surroundings; like Odysseus, who sealed the ears of his seamen and ordered himself tied to the mast for fear that the sound of the singing Sirens would end in shipwreck.

Thus, a basically random acquaintance, originating in sheer neighborliness, became, in the second stage, a friendship stemming from likeminded erudition, which spawned and matured in the third and final stage into intimate closeness. Agnon also sensed the basic change in the three stages, giving them instinctive expression in the dedications he wrote on gifts of monographs and books he presented to his friend over the years.

In the first stage of acquaintance, in the 1950s, the dedications focused on good neighborliness. For example:

- "To the good neighbor Zvi Ankori, may God protect and preserve him — Shai Agnon." Or
- "How good is a good neighbor, Zvi Ankori is his name. Wishing you a Happy New Year, Shai Agnon."

At the start of the 1960s and the second stage of friendship, the word "neighbor" was dropped:

- "To Zvi Ankori, long life — Shai A." Or
- "To Zvi Ankori greetings — Shai Agnon."

Ankori once asked Agnon if he could obtain for him the anthology he composed, *Yamim Nora'im* (Days of Awe), directly from the Schocken warehouse (offering to pay of course). The book was no

longer on the market. It took some time before Agnon brought him a copy. Asked how much he owed him, Agnon began doodling with his pen as if figuring out complicated calculations. Finally, since a regular dedication was not called for, he wrote in dry prose on the title page: "This book belongs to Zvi Ankori, may God protect and preserve him. I gave it to him as a gift. Shai Agnon." Considering that Agnon never concealed his miserliness but, on the contrary, occasionally even boasted about it as if it were a great and proud virtue, the recipient appreciated the gift as an extraordinary expression of the giver's generosity, regarding the somewhat amusing formulation of the declaration and the misleading, ceremonial calculations as a typical Agnonian jest — which in themselves were a dear gift.

In the last, highest stage of the relationship, the wording of the dedications was altered to unfailingly read: "To my friend, to Ankori". The most moving of all was the final dedication in 1966 due to both surrounding circumstances and because of its insertions and omissions. Ankori was going through a bad patch as a senior lecturer at the Hebrew University. He was not the first to be put through this sort of grind which many of the conceders considered a necessary evil and procedural malice. Ankori refused to sanctify this form of routine malice as if it were decreed from above. He was unwilling to knuckle under and against his will accept the kind of behavior that struck him as essentially arbitrary, as thankless when viewed against the quality of his long years of work and the extent of his dedication, and as unjust by all objective criteria. The fact that the same injustice had been meted out to other faculty members in the course of their careers and was built into the academic structure did not seem to him reason enough to submit. He had always maintained his independence, contending that the injured party would do better to transfer to another institution or, if there was no choice, even to change professions so long as he did not have to waste his strength, energy and nerves on futile battles. As a result, he bade the Hebrew University farewell, slamming the door behind him. Since in any case he was soon

to leave on sabbatical, having Jewish Studies and Jewish decided to extend his exile until a suitable post opened

Agnon was thoroughly powers-that-be and the fully backed his friend's departure. He even tried, by listing the woes of early "the system", in the vein of however that his words were the comforter nor the object morning and headed for M ing gift — a pocket edition the inside cover he drew a dedication:

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To my friend
to Zvi Ankori,
Godspeed your return,
Shai Agnon

The written dedication was has it, with Oral Law: "Actu your departure and Godspee hard for me. So I'll wish th case if 'your return' goes wel went well. So go in peace and

The traveler made sure t house and every summer he daughters would know that th in Jerusalem.

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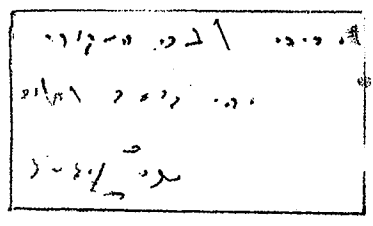
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to leave on sabbatical, having been invited to establish a Chair of Jewish Studies and Jewish History at an American university, he decided to extend his exile beyond the sabbatical and bide his time until a suitable post opened up at an Israeli institution.

Agnon was thoroughly familiar with the machinations of the powers-that-be and the quarrelsome lot at Hebrew University, and fully backed his friend's decision though he was saddened at his departure. He even tried, for a brief moment, to console Ankori by listing the woes of earlier infamous episodes and victims of "the system", in the vein of "misery loves company". He soon saw however that his words were a waste of time, convincing neither the comforter nor the object of the comfort. He therefore rose one morning and headed for Me'ah She'arim to buy his friend a parting gift — a pocket edition of the *Tfilat Yisrael* prayer book. On the inside cover he drew a box in which he wrote the following dedication:

סדר
 תפלת ישראל
 אשכנז

To my friend
 to Zvi Ankori,
 Godspeed your return,
 Shai Agnon



The written dedication was immediately elaborated, as tradition has it, with Oral Law: "Actually, I should have written 'Godspeed your departure and Godspeed your return', but 'your departure' is hard for me. So I'll wish that 'your return' goes well, since in any case if 'your return' goes well it presupposes that 'your departure' went well. So go in peace and quickly come back in peace."

The traveler made sure to continue the lease on the Talpiot house and every summer he brought his family back so that his daughters would know that their roots and their home were forever in Jerusalem.

VII

In time, the rest of the Ankori family came within the orbit of Agnon's friendship. "The man with the cane", four-year-old Gilat and two-year-old Gannit called him. On the eve of Rosh HaShana, their father took them across the street to wish the elderly couple a happy new year. Agnon amused himself with the children and they responded to him quite naturally, standing their ground fearlessly.

- "Where are your books?" — Gilat asked, accustomed to every corner of her parents' home being filled with books while, here, she felt surrounded by bare walls.

Agnon explained that he could not have anything, not even a book, distract his attention when he was writing. When he wrote, the desk and everything around him had to be bare. When younger, he used to write standing up and leaning against a wide lectern. Not only was the lectern's surface bare, it rested against a blank wall so that he should not be distracted by the exciting view staring into every Talpiot window.

"So where *do* you keep your books?" — Gilat stuck to the subject as toddler Gannit, without understanding a word, sidled up to lend her sister moral support, her position fraught with meaningful gibberish.

Instead of answering, Agnon led the two girls upstairs to the second floor. Six years later, Gilat immortalized what she remembered from that visit in an item she wrote for her school newspaper:

On the second floor, there is a library (she wrote), and it is a large room with an alcove on the side. The only furniture is a desk, a chair, shelves and bookcases all around. Everything is filled with all sorts of books! Thin, thick, big, small and medium in size, and a large part of them were written by the author, Shai Agnon.

When they came downstairs, they recited a copy of the popular, two-volume prayer book, dedicating it so:

"To the fair and fetching"

Some time later, the girls' book, "Emunim" (Pledge of Faith) was published. Ankoris, may they live long.

Their father was double-blind, holding "BiDemi Yameha" (Pledge of Faith) for the girls. It took Zvi back to the days of his boyhood and one of the first books he read in the great anthology. Did the girls know that their father would receive the author himself, Agnon in Jerusalem?

The girls could not yet read. Gilat began to join the men in the library. She went up to the corner of Klausner's abandoned building on the second floor (which had been earmarked for the library due to lack of funds). Gilat sat there with the adults in disciplined silence, her expression of superior wisdom. She had her big eyes, which, to him, were like the eyes of a child. At the end of her part in the play, she recited a sentence (which reminded him of Respighi's "Pini di Roma"), and returned home. Agnon, spontaneously joining them, made her forget her very presence. She was enjoying the sight of her girls.

There were however days

When they came downstairs, Agnon gave them each a gift — a copy of the popular, two-volume school-edition of *Tmol Shilshom*, dedicating it so:

“To the fair and fetching Gilat and Gannit — Shai Agnon.

Eve of Rosh HaShanah, 5720”

Some time later, the girls' bookcase incorporated the story “*Shvuat Emunim*” (Pledge of Faithfulness), a gift from Agnon “to the Ankoris, may they live long”.

Their father was doubly excited when they appeared one day holding “*BiDemi Yameha*” (In her Prime), dedicated to the “Ankori girls”. It took Zvi back to the early days of *HaTekufah* in his Tarnów boyhood and one of the first Agnon works that he had tasted in the great anthology. Did the Tarnów boy ever dream that one day his daughters would receive this very book from the hands of the author himself, Agnon in Jerusalem?

The girls could not yet read of course but, from time to time, Gilat began to join the men on the first lap of their walks — usually up to the corner of Klausner Street and sometimes as far as the abandoned building on the main street leading to Ramat Rachel (which had been earmarked as a synagogue but left unfinished due to lack of funds). Gilat would listen to the conversation of the adults in disciplined silence, which the happy parent took as an expression of superior wisdom, and would look all around with her big eyes, which, to him, only confirmed his initial assessment. At the end of her part in the walk, she would charmingly tweet out a sentence (which reminded her father of the nightingale's song in Respighi's “*Pini di Roma*”), ending with a politely uttered “*shalom*”, and return home. Agnon neither encouraged nor opposed her spontaneously joining them. The child's exemplary conduct made him forget her very presence, though sometimes he teased her, enjoying the sight of her give as good as she got.

There were however days when Gilat's conduct fell short of

exemplary. The climax by far came one miserable summer day when she walked beside her father and was simply intolerable: whining, wailing, refusing to go home; in a nutshell, “looking for attention” (as professional counselors would have it, their own children — suffering from split personalities and all the world’s complexes — urgently requiring instant and divine mercy). She did all she could to make her father regress from a serious, cultured parent to the dark ages of cave-dwellers. Embarrassed, he looked helplessly at Agnon’s face. But instead of sympathy and empathy, he imagined he saw contempt there along with disgust, anger and a challenge as if to say: “What kind of father are you?! Could you perhaps exercise your authority and silence the irksome scamp?!” Only for the sake of Agnon and the sake of Hebrew literature which, for its aggrandizement, needed a tranquil Agnon — only because of this did the father finally give her a light slap on her bottom — once and never again! In a twinkling, magically, she was quiet. An angelic smile suffused her calm face as if nothing had happened and, with alluring grace, she again began to tweet her maddening sentences as “*Pini di Roma*” returned to sing from the throat of Respighi’s nightingale.

Proudly and with a sense of victory, Ankori looked at Agnon once more (“that’s the kind of father I am! I solve problems!”). The old fox however returned a cold look of contempt able to rouse the dead and all the denizens of the deep.

“You feel better now?” — Agnon asked, oozing honey. What went through Ankori’s tormented mind at that moment is best left to the imagination. He could certainly not put it into words, since the Sages defined Hebrew as a “clean language”. One thing was crystal clear: had he acted on his thoughts, the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature would not have had a laureate.

By the time Gilat reached school age in 1961, the mini marvels at her cleverness as well as the wee vexations at her behavior had retreated into childhood memories. At the age of six, she left the sheltered bubble of Talpiot and entered Israel’s real world at the Geulim School. The biography of Geulim is the biography of

Israel’s immigrant absorpti when it took in four times the story of Israel’s skies on aircraft bearing a Star-of-David of clandestine immigration crossings. From the inferno of survivors imprisoned by their I of Cyprus; Displaced Persons created concentration camps did returned from forced labor from the lands of Islam came rescue operations from Me their own steam by perilous the 1948 war the Arabs abandoned southern Jerusalem — low Greek Colonies and the Kabbalists grants were settled in the even housing blocks in open fields lished close by.

It must have been the Geulim School at its unique a main intersection — where and Bethlehem roads were rising to Talpiot, Arnona a redeemed from isolation in the old neighborhood of Me railway tracks from Turkish beautiful building of pink s faced the lovely neighborhood change and it backed onto “pot” for the local children had wrong, the concept of “melting involved at the time. The very was the historic mission of the and counselors conscientious

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Israel's immigrant absorption in its early years as a sovereign state when it took in four times the size of its veteran population. It is the story of Israel's skies opening up to mass immigration waves on aircraft bearing a Star-of-David after the trials and tribulations of clandestine immigration via rickety ships or dangerous desert crossings. From the inferno of Europe's Holocaust they came: survivors imprisoned by their liberators in British detention camps in Cyprus; Displaced Persons, forced to remain in Germany's liberated concentration camps due to Britain's anti-*aliya* policy; refugees returned from forced labor camps in the Soviet Union, etc. And from the lands of Islam came immigrants airlifted in incredible rescue operations from Morocco, Yemen and Iraq or arriving on their own steam by perilous back roads. When under pressure of the 1948 war the Arabs abandoned the lovely neighborhoods of southern Jerusalem — lower and upper Bak'a, the German and Greek Colonies and the Katamon ridge — numerous new immigrants were settled in the evacuated homes, in hastily-constructed housing blocks in open fields or ... in the transit tent-camp established close by.

It must have been the hand of Providence that placed the Geulim School at its unique location to fulfill a mission. It was at a main intersection — where the southward stretching Hebron and Bethlehem roads were crossed by another, its eastern part rising to Talpiot, Arnona and the old Ramat Rachel which were redeemed from isolation in 1948; its western part descending to the old neighborhood of Mekor Hayim, next to the Jerusalem-Jaffa railway tracks from Turkish times, and still isolated. Housed in a beautiful building of pink stone (formerly an Arab residence), it faced the lovely neighborhoods that had undergone an identity change and it backed onto the transit camp, a daytime "melting pot" for the local children hailing from diverse diasporas. Right or wrong, the concept of "melting pot" was shared by all the educators involved at the time. The vision of leveling diaspora differences was the historic mission of the generation of rebirth, and teachers and counselors conscientiously strove to accomplish it. Nor did

the building stand empty in the evening. There, Gilat's father ran a school for adult education where, for the first time in their lives, Yemenite women sat on a school bench, often against the wishes of their husbands. Topographically and culturally, Geulim thus connected the newcomers, inhabiting the southern part of town, and the neighborhood of Talpiot, inhabited by old-timers, who had immigrated forty years earlier.

In the spring of 1966, fifth-graders were asked to choose a well-known, neighborhood figure to interview for the school newspaper. On her own initiative, ten-year-old Gilat asked her father's friend for permission to interview him. Agnon, who by his own testimony was not in the habit of giving press interviews, went out of his way on this occasion. As pre-arranged, he waited at home for the youngest member of the media community, having even prepared a bag of sweets for her. But the tyro journalist became alarmed by her own daring: after quietly knocking on his door and without allowing for the knocks to be heard within, she turned on her heels and ran home. Agnon dispensed with ceremony: he took the trouble to come to her, bag of sweets in hand, and declared himself ready and willing to answer all her questions. The interview was published in the school paper. Through their classmate's eyes, it afforded Geulim's children, immigrants and sabras alike, a glimpse of the author of "*Sippur HaEz* [The Tale of the Goat]" about Diaspora children longing for Eretz-Israel, which they had read in class.

That year Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize (a hope he had often expressed to his neighbor), and the Ministry of Education put out a school compendium to mark the event. Gilat's interview was included in it though the name of the young interviewer was not: for "educational reasons" (as the Minister of Education told her protesting parent). The "exiled" Ankori was not in Israel when Agnon's prize was announced. He and his family were in Columbus, Ohio, at the invitation of the State University, which had decided to establish its first Chair in Jewish History and Jewish Studies and had appointed Ankori its first incumbent. He was therefore unable

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At the end of spring 196 the Hebrew University on a l events in Israel and the Mic abroad, as well as the two plans. Thrilled at the sight c War, which was screened o had already lectured before New York and had attended canceled the rest of his sche Israelis in the thousands, ar

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to personally shake Agnon's hand on the great day. All he could do was congratulate him in writing, and spread knowledge of his works on foreign soil. He organized festive programs devoted to him, for both the public and the academic community, and published an article on his work in the university newspaper.

At the end of spring 1967, Agnon was invited by the Friends of the Hebrew University on a lecture tour in the United States. Fateful events in Israel and the Middle East however caused most Israelis abroad, as well as the two friends, to immediately change their plans. Thrilled at the sight of Jerusalem's liberation in the Six-Day War, which was screened on American television — Agnon, who had already lectured before Friends of the Hebrew University in New York and had attended a rabbinical conference in Washington, canceled the rest of his scheduled U.S. appearances and, like other Israelis in the thousands, arranged to return home!

On the fourth or fifth day of the war, he and his entourage boarded an airplane and, the next day, landed at Lydda Airport. Ankori too had decided to return at once. He canceled a trip to the Far East but was delayed by a day at the request of the Israeli consulate who asked him to fill in for General Laskov (already recalled to Israel) at an emergency assembly of the United Jewish Appeal in Columbus. After his talk on the eve of the second day of war, he hurried home with his family, preceding Agnon's arrival in Jerusalem by three days.

VIII

Those were heady days.

The new realities of the State of Israel and especially of Jerusalem, and the spiritual uplifting radiating from them, reordered all accepted yardsticks even in mundane matters. All personal pursuits dwarfed as small Israel became Greater Israel, the Eretz-Israel of the Bible. Internal grievances, just or unjust, were toned down, resentments large or small were forgotten. Every face

boasted an exultant, tranquil smile. The events of the day far out-sized the day-to-day and the people living it.

Those were heady days, and Talpiot was beside itself with celebration.

Overnight, the ominous Talpiot border "absconded", along with the no-man's land just beyond it. Gone with the two was the constant unease of life on the state's barbed wire fence. This was a novel comfort. For decades, long prior to statehood and even after the War of Independence, Talpiot had fostered a frontier complex. After it found itself suddenly, since June 7, in the center of the country, it became a bright, open window onto the second half of Eretz-Israel. And Bethlehem, which despite its geographic proximity to Ramat Rachel, had looked like a tempting mirage on the horizon, was now the destination of easy summer outings, by bus or on foot.

The joy at opening spaces was compounded by the joy at Old Jerusalem's reopening to Jews after a forced interruption of nineteen years.

Anyone who did not see the joy of the Shavuot holiday pilgrimage of 5727 (1967) has never seen joy in his life. People who had known the Western Wall (the "Kotel") in the pre-state period rubbed their eyes in disbelief.

Certainly, an amazing sight! The topography changed. Even though the sign "El Buraq" (affixed by the Jordanians to commemorate their Prophet's legendary horse) was still immured in one of the Kotel stones, the area in front of the Kotel was no longer the narrow lane of old, forced on Jewish worshipers for centuries to humiliate them and accessed via the Arab Mughrabi neighborhood amid hostile youth. Now it was replaced by a spacious plaza appropriate to its stately status and welcoming the Jewish masses. It is not likely that pilgrims paused at the time to wonder what had become of the residents living there before the plaza was built. Moreover, if there were pangs of conscience, these soon dissolved at the sight of the ruined Jewish Quarter and the plunder of devastated synagogues. The Mughrabis had not sat idly by as the Quarter was destroyed

and the homes of their Jews blinked when the Quarter's square above the neighborhood and led off into Jordanian control to the winds. The Mughrabi the day would come and the expulsion. When the Jews' compassion left in their hearts, compassion to others.

Over and beyond all the miraculous development: that on June 19, 1967. Ungainly buildings were dismantled, leaving narrow streets were filled in, and the filthy obstructed alleys and the narrow Jerusalem's heart in two, divided into two mighty streams of people began to flow towards one another, and with one another and back again. As if all at once long-standing hostility was overcome were imminent. That, in any case, overflowed with too much pride of accomplishment to understand the "other". Yes, and haughtier and fatter and not notice — that victory for the "other", even if the "other" and had brought down the door one spelled humiliation for the intent.

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and the homes of their Jewish neighbors pillaged. Nor had they blinked when the Quarter's survivors had been rounded up at the square above the neighborhood, on the approach to Zion Gate, and led off into Jordanian captivity, abandoning their possessions to the winds. The Mughrabis had probably never imagined that the day would come and the exiles would return to the site of their expulsion. When the Jews returned to the *Kotel*, there was little compassion left in their hearts for people who had failed to show compassion to others.

Over and beyond all this, hearts were stirred by yet another miraculous development: the amazing reunification of Jerusalem on June 19, 1967. Ungainly barbed wire fences and concrete blocks were dismantled, leaving no trace. Ditches, pits and trenches were filled in, and the filth of nineteen years cleared away from obstructed alleys and the no-man's land that had neglectfully torn Jerusalem's heart in two, dividing the Old City from the new. And two mighty streams of people, Jews and Arabs, spontaneously began to flow towards one another, into one another, alongside one another, and with one another, from the one city to its twin and back again. As if all at once war and severance were forgotten, long-standing hostility was uprooted, and peace and brotherhood were imminent. That, in any case, was how the Jews felt. The heart overflowed with too much joy, a sense of historical continuum and pride of accomplishment, to be able to rise above itself and understand the "other". Yes, it rejoiced and perhaps it grew taller and haughtier and fatter and thicker and, in its obtuseness, it did not notice — that victory for the one side necessarily meant defeat for the "other", even if the "other" side had been warned in advance and had brought down the defeat on itself; or that the pride of the one spelled humiliation for the "other", even if this had not been the intent.

In this general atmosphere of euphoria, the old friendship between the two neighbors re-blossomed. Ankori refused to take part in the tours that the self-appointed guardians of the Holy City arranged in both their own and Agnon's honor. Once again, as soon

as the author returned home, he headed straight for his friend's home where, exhausted though excited by the experiences of his renewed encounter with Jerusalem's Old City he gave his thoughts free rein. He weighed actively joining a movement for the integrity of Greater Israel; he protested that his rabbinical hosts did not grasp the greatness of the hour, claiming that we were all impure and thereby barring observant Jews from going up to the Temple Mount. In his friend's home he could disburden himself of everything he had not dared say to his distinguished law-adjudicators who had honored him and been honored by his company: "How are we to convince the world that the Temple Mount must stay in our hands if we ourselves suspend our right to tread on its ground?!"

The friendship of the two neighbors grew stronger in the following year, 1968, when the Ankori family returned not merely for the summer but for the entire academic year, resuming their life in the Talpiot home. The small stone house amid the pines and palms on the northern side of Klausner Street flourished once more while on the southern side, Agnon's two-storey residence continued to show a dark face and gray exterior. Inside, too, where a noble asceticism had always reigned, a dual grayness now descended, making it even more ascetic, severe and cold, following the hospitalization of Esterlein, the writer's wife.

Agnon now lived in the house all alone, though this did not seem to overly disturb him. His needs were few and his food simple. His work regime made his days disciplined and unchanging. Friends and family concerned for his welfare begged him to hire a live-in help, but he would not hear of it. He merely agreed for the long-standing maid to continue as before, coming on a weekly basis to keep the house clean. In these circumstances, the everyday contact between the two households took on added significance. For the Ankoris, the daily stroll and Agnon's subsequent visit to their home were an exciting intellectual experience; for Agnon, the close eye kept on his health and safety became increasingly vital.

During the 1968-69 academic year, when the American uni-

versity freed the Israeli professor from the region on the history of the Temple Mount, Agnon and Ankori gathered together and had to be away, photocopying the enormous archives of Venetian rulers and generations, which had ruled the region. His family remained in Jerusalem. His wife, took over the family customary afternoon walks.

Agnon had always abided by the law. He always made sure to enter the house in company so that his intent could be understood. This was the reason that he conducted in public, only on Kfar Ramat Rachel. Ora, for her part, with her Emuna, about any change in the household, unobtrusively handling a week's worth of days, without violating his privacy.

Agnon was grateful to Ora for the she showed in advising or demonstrating the ambivalence he had always felt. His relationship with Zvi had progressed in a way that was upgraded from neighborly to not at all easy for him. Even her creative household management and the welcome she gave him, and the charm, he could hardly deny, difficulty was his not hers; it was his "ism", that hump of old-fashioned personality traits that molded the fore even in his attitude

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versity freed the Israeli professor for a study in the Mediterranean region on the history of the Jews of Crete, the friendship between Agnon and Ankori gathered pace. But as part of the study, Ankori had to be away, photocopying thousands of documents in the enormous archives of Venice, the Queen of the Seas in earlier generations, which had ruled Crete for four hundred and fifty years. His family remained in Jerusalem and, in his absence, Ora, his wife, took over the family custom of accompanying Agnon on his afternoon walks.

IX

Agnon had always abided by modesty; this was the reason that he always made sure to enter a room before a woman in his company so that his intent could not be misconstrued as coming to her. This was the reason that his walks with Ora were always conducted in public, only on Klausner Street and never stretching to Ramat Rachel. Ora, for her part, carefully reported to his daughter, Emuna, about any change in the condition of the eighty-year-old, unobtrusively handling a wealth of small details to ease his autumn days, without violating his privacy.

Agnon was grateful to Ora for her gentle concern and the tact she showed in advising or doing for him. At long last, he shed the ambivalence he had always shown her and just as his relationship with Zvi had progressed in stages, so his relationship with Ora was upgraded from neighborliness to friendship. The change was not at all easy for him. Even though from the first he had admired her creative household management, her fine taste as a hostess and the welcome she gave him, comporting herself with prudence and charm, he could hardly number her among his friends. The difficulty was his not hers; it harkened back to his "*yeshiveh bukherism*", that hump of old-fashioned ideas, opinions and, very likely, personality traits that molded his attitude to women, and came to the fore even in his attitude to Esterlein.

Zvi had always been pained by Ora's exclusion from the orbit of Agnon's friendship. He felt torn between his loyalty to her and his friendship with Agnon and was at a loss as to how to broach the subject to Agnon. Finally, in the early 1960s at the start of the close friendship between the two men, Agnon himself, inadvertently furnished an opening.

A soft summer evening cradled the pine tops when, in response to the double rap and invitation, "Come!", Ankori joined Agnon for their late afternoon walk. Agnon was inordinately pleased with himself. He rubbed his hands in open pleasure and chuckled in satisfaction as if he had been uncommonly clever. "How we escaped from our wives!" — he whispered as if confiding a secret. Ankori was taken aback. He did not share the sense of liberation that excited his old friend. He decided, seeing as the opportunity had presented itself, to take the bull by the horns and lay the problem on the table:

"The truth is, Agnon" — he said seriously, his tone diametrically opposed to Agnon's puckishness — "that's the very fly in the ointment that bothers me about our walks. I have no desire whatsoever to escape from Ora. On the contrary, nothing would make me happier than to include her in our walks and our talks, for two reasons: firstly, because it's hard for me to leave her alone in the evenings and, secondly, because I know her, I know how much she would enjoy joining our conversations and how much she could contribute to them."

Agnon gave no response or sign that the words had sunk in or embarrassed him. "As an opening volley, I have said enough" — Ankori felt, quickly changing the subject. But the next evening, as though nothing had ever happened, the tinny "rap-rap" again sounded at the door. "He apparently ignored it altogether" — Zvi guessed resentfully before opening the door, his pride wounded. "Should I be offended or ignore it?" For surely, the old man had not meant to give offense, he was simply unable to change his ways.

Before he could make up his mind, however, Ankori was already at the door and, to his utter astonishment, found not one figure but

two standing there: Agnon himself. He took Agnon's friend's words to heart after a moment's reflection and came up with a solution for the first time. It was hard for Ora to be alone in the evening and to keep her company. The second

Ora, like Esterlein, had enjoyed the evening company but had been withdrawn but after she opened up. She was broadly educated and broad-minded. Zvi, as opposed to the others, was going down to a topic he had

He told Agnon that for different editions of his *Kelev* were fond of the affair of Balak, that in her efforts to obtain the first edition he doubted if a first edition from the *Haaretz Yearbook* returned from their walk, warm, pleasant evening at a momentary embarrassment

Not many days passed in another limited edition of *K* year earlier, 1960, by Tarshi Ora had not been aware of it

"To my good neighbor and good wishes, Shai Agnon" using the phrasing of dedication the first stage of their acquaintance

The attitude Agnon developed was different, the neighborly stage of the last days of June — they were to set out for Venice to the States — Agnon told Ora that to obtain a copy of the first edition a definite surprise: firstly, th

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two standing there: Agnon had brought Esterlein. He had taken his
 friend's words to heart after all — though selectively. He had come
 up with a solution for the first reason Ankori had given — if it was
 hard for Ora to be alone in the evenings, Esterlein would come
 keep her company. The second reason he totally ignored.

Ora, like Esterlein, had not been part of the tussle and she
 enjoyed the evening company. She found Esther Agnon somewhat
 withdrawn but after she opened up, very interesting. She was both
 broadly educated and broad-minded, a personage in her own
 right. Zvi, as opposed to them, began his walk with Agnon by get-
 ting down to a topic he had long wished to raise.

He told Agnon that for years Ora had been collecting the dif-
 ferent editions of his *Kelev Hutzot* (A Stray Dog), being especially
 fond of the affair of Balak, the dog. But she had been unsuccessful
 in her efforts to obtain the first edition of the story. Agnon said
 he doubted if a first edition — which had been a mere offprint
 from the *Haaretz Yearbook* — was still obtainable. When the men
 returned from their walk, the two couples together enjoyed a
 warm, pleasant evening at the Ankori home with no trace of the
 momentary embarrassment of earlier.

Not many days passed before Agnon brought Ora a copy of
 another limited edition of *Kelev Hutzot* that had been published a
 year earlier, 1960, by Tarshish and illustrated by Avidgor Arikha;
 Ora had not been aware of its appearance.

"To my good neighbor to Ora Ankori, may she live long, with
 good wishes, Shai Agnon" — the author wrote in dedication,
 using the phrasing of dedications he had written to Zvi during the
 first stage of their acquaintance, the stage of neighborliness.

The attitude Agnon developed in the course of 1969 was utterly
 different, the neighborly stage making way for friendship. On one
 of the last days of June — a few weeks before Ora and the girls
 were to set out for Venice to join Zvi en route back to the United
 States — Agnon told Ora that, after much effort, he had managed
 to obtain a copy of the first edition of the story of Balak. It came as
 a definite surprise: firstly, the very fact itself; after all, Agnon had

confirmed that there was slim chance of locating a copy of the rare offprint; and secondly, the presentation of the gift after all this time. Eight years had passed since the request had been made at the start of the 1960s. It had never been repeated and Ora had assumed that Agnon had forgotten all about it. Momentous events had taken place in the author's life in this period — including his winning of the Nobel Prize. It was not to be expected that the greatest of Hebrew writers would waste his time on a flighty, girlish hobby.

Ora thanked Agnon for the unanticipated addition to her collection, but Agnon did not yet hand over the small, thin, light-blue booklet. He explained that he had meanwhile penned in only the first line of the dedication, and he wished to add three more lines for a complete verse. Apart from its personal uniqueness, the verse was a nod to the Weekly Torah Portion that month of ^{*}Tammuz, which — wonder of wonders! — was about Balak; could one have imagined a more suitable time for the gift of the Balak monograph? He also intended to evoke the story's original title, "*Oro shel Balak*" (Balak's Hide), as printed in the first edition, the title having been changed to "*Kelev Hutzot*" only in recent editions. For various reasons, Agnon and Ora did not get a chance to pursue their neighborhood walks in the first week of July, and the gift of the book to her was delayed. Meanwhile, on Monday evening, July 7, Ora saw Agnon alight from the No. 7 bus at a late hour, and turn towards home. Agnon caught sight of her and instead of entering his own house, fell into step alongside her on Klausner Street, strolling back and forth as if to make up for the walks he had missed during the week.

Ora was concerned that the late hour would be detrimental to his health and wondered what had kept him in town so long. She ruled out the possibility of his having joined the ceremony performed by Rabbi Goren that day — the burial of bones uncovered at Massada and declared to be the bones of the defenders of old. Perhaps, he had taken part in the Bialik Commemorative Conference — for wasn't it the 21st of the Hebrew Tammuz, the anniversary of Bialik's death? He may tell her about it tomorrow.

In any case, since Agnon loo day before, she stopped worr

For his part, Agnon told versions of a dedication the p note lying about his desk. He and if Ora could wait a few m the three lines beneath the ex

אגון ראה את אורא
ביום ראשון ערב
ב-7 ביולי
ב-7 ביולי
ב-7 ביולי

Version a:

For Ora,¹ Light of the lights
Hide of the hides
Of Hawaja Balak —
Sabbath Eve, Portion "Balak"²

Agnon must have been in go with the two versions. The q obviously touched on the do not hard to imagine Agnon t a wily smile in the minute w brow deeply grooved: *Who an* and should thus be crowned *l* and should be denominated *H*

1. Ora in Hebrew means "light".
2. Counting time according to Sabbath

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ell her about it tomorrow.

In any case, since Agnon looked just as well and energetic as the day before, she stopped worrying and asked nothing.

For his part, Agnon told Ora that he had drafted two parallel versions of a dedication the previous day, in pencil and on an old note lying about his desk. He merely had to decide which to use, and if Ora could wait a few minutes, he would go upstairs and add the three lines beneath the existing one in the book.

אור קולות
הידים
הואהווא באלק
שבת ערב, פרשת "באלק"

אור קולות
שבת ערב פרשת "באלק"
הידים
של ידידינו רב באלק

Version a:

For Ora,¹ Light of the lights
Hide of the hides
Of Hawaja Balak —
Sabbath Eve, Portion "Balak"²

Version b:

For Ora, Light of the lights
Sabbath Eve Portion "Balak" —
Hide of the hides
Of our acquaintance Reb Balak

Agnon must have been in good spirits when he amused himself with the two versions. The question was not purely literary but obviously touched on the dog's "national-religious" identity. It's not hard to imagine Agnon tackling the earth-shaking question, a wily smile in the minute wrinkles at his eyes and mouth, his brow deeply grooved: *Who are you Balak? Are you a Jewish dog, and should thus be crowned Reb Balak? Or are you an Arab dog, and should be denominated Hawaja Balak?* (His daughter, Emuna,

1. Ora in Hebrew means "light".
2. Counting time according to the weekly Torah portion read on the Sabbath

helped later to decipher the almost unreadable note and photographed it for the "Agnon Archive".)

"I'm in no hurry, Agnon" — Ora replied, happy at the infectious lightheartedness radiating from the two versions and from Agnon himself. "There's no need to rush to add it tonight" — she laughed — "I'm willing to give you till tomorrow to make up your mind."

What the morrow brought, however, totally defied the mood of the two in parting.

That bitter morning, Tuesday, July 8, Agnon was found — some say by the maid who came to work that day, others say by his grandson — lying helpless on the floor; the stroke robbed him of his speech and paralyzed part of his body, but he was fully conscious. The fear of something like this was the very reason that family and friends had urged him to hire a nighttime companion. One dreads to think what would have happened had it not been the maid's regular weekly cleaning day. Waiting on his desk at that moment was the orphaned light-blue monograph he had prepared for Ora and, near it, the note, each side of which had a penciled verse, handwritten by Agnon, who had not managed to ink them into the book. The note also carried a random address ("Penina 3 Reines"), probably scribbled down on another occasion and upside-down from the verse. In addition, an unknown hand, unconnected to the other jottings, had immortalized a phone number.

Ora kept close tabs on Agnon's condition whether via his daughter, Emuna, or by talking to neighbors. A few days later, when his hospital care became routine, she told Emuna about the offprint and the dedication. In vain did Emuna's son try to identify the booklet and the note on his grandfather's desk. Numerous letters of consolation had piled up on the desk, hiding the sought-after booklet and note. He therefore invited Ora to come help him search for the elusive items, and she had no problem finding them. What a pity that the chosen version never made it onto the book's dedication page but remained separate, with its rival version, on

an old slip of paper. Both, the pure friendship Agnon had in his life — a friendship that had suffered an unexpected paralysis performing its duty by suppressing it.

Whether or not Agnon gave Ora the key to the iron gate to his home that day is unknown. In any case, Ora was in the hospital before he was laid low. And the two versions on the slip of paper were the last lines that the 1966 Nobel laureate held in his own hand.

Ora managed to visit Agnon in the hospital before sailing to Venetia to join Zvi on their overseas journey. She walks with Agnon to look out the window so that she could immediately draw his attention, so also on her hospital visit, the moment of his that might indicate his condition.

Indeed, right during her first visit, Agnon kept his eyes on the sun. The nurse hired for him, nervously following him, thought. Though the woman may have had a sin, her unfortunate outward appearance, Emuna her impressions, even if she might be doing the nursing, suggested that the nurse be replaced. On her second visit, Ora felt the weight of anxiety having disappeared.

"A hospital nurse arrived months later, recalling that in *Shira*, published posthumously, she had written and known years ago that her spectacles protruding arr

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an old slip of paper. Both, the booklet and the slip, are marks of the pure friendship Agnon enjoyed with Ora towards the end of his life — a friendship that had sprouted suddenly, and though his unexpected paralysis perforce curtailed it, it did not succeed in suppressing it.

Whether or not Agnon glanced at the dedication, after he shut the iron gate to his home that night, and made his choice remains unknown. In any case, Ora was the last person to talk to Agnon before he was laid low. And the three short lines of each of the versions on the slip of paper kept now by Ora, overnight became the last lines that the 1966 Nobel Laureate in Literature ever wrote in his own hand.

Ora managed to visit Agnon twice at Hadassah Hospital in Ein Karem before sailing to Venice with her daughters, as arranged, to join Zvi on their overseas flight. Just as she had learned on her walks with Agnon to look out for any signs of discomfort or pain, so that she could immediately alert Emuna to the need for medical attention, so also on her hospital visits she followed every movement of his that might indicate how he felt.

Indeed, right during her first visit to Hadassah, she noticed that Agnon kept his eyes on the substantial private nurse the family had hired for him, nervously following her every step towards him. Though the woman may have been a model nurse and her only sin, her unfortunate outward appearance, Ora decided to relate to Emuna her impressions, even though her conscience pricked that she might be doing the nurse an injustice. Speaking plainly, she suggested that the nurse be replaced. Emuna took her advice and on her second visit, Ora felt that Agnon was more relaxed, all signs of anxiety having disappeared.

"A hospital nurse arrived" — [Ora was to reflect some months later, recalling two lines from the first page of *Shira*, published posthumously, but for the most part written and known years earlier] — "tall, masculine, her spectacles protruding arrogantly from her eyes and light-

ing up the freckles on her gray cheeks like the heads of nails on an old wall..."

Ora smiled to herself: had Agnon written the words in prophecy of falling into the hands of such a nurse one day? Or, was the description an immediate release from inner fears and nightmares — as psychologists tend to explain the children's love of Grimm's fairytales and other horror stories?

X

Ora returned with her husband and children to America, and never saw Agnon again.

But on Monday, February 9, 1970, Zvi Ankori flew to Israel for a quick visit on academic business. As he had hoped, he managed to cram all his talks and meetings into six full days, leaving the whole of Sunday, February 15 — two days before he was to return to his post in the U.S. — free to visit with Agnon, who for months had been hospitalized at the Beit Harzfeld nursing home in Gadera.

Was it the *joy of a longed-for friends' reunion* after a break of almost a year? Or the *sadness of final parting*, which they both knew was unavoidable? Thirty years later, Ankori mercilessly presses his memory again and again, coercing it to relive every minute, every second, exactly as it was at that unforgettable five-hour meeting with his friend.

To this day his shirtsleeve and upper arm still feel Agnon's nails and fingers clutching them spasmodically during the long hospital hours of that spring afternoon in Gadera —

— clutching, clutching, not letting go, with all the strength and passion that a sick eighty-two-year-old could muster, whether when the two sat in the lobby or in the room, or whether when they took their places at the quasi-supper table in the dining room or strolled up and down the corridor, to and fro, to and fro, like then, from Klausner Street to Ramat Rachel and back. Except that

now Agnon was in a wheelch
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The sorrow in the eyes... t
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now Agnon was in a wheelchair and the friend that had come from
across the seas to visit him pushed the motorized chair from place
to place, his heart weeping tearlessly — —

— clutching, clutching, deeper and deeper, without end, refus-
ing, refusing, refusing to part. From what? From the friend? From
life?

And to this day the friend can't forget the sorrow that glazed the
eyes of one who, to him and his friends, had been a master conver-
sationalist just as, to his readers, he had been a master penman. The
visiting friend spoke at length about his impressions of teaching
in America, and Agnon listened and understood every word. He
wanted to take part in the conversation but the stroke had stolen
his power of speech. All he could do in response was desperately
point to his forcibly stilled mouth and idle lips — the soundless cry
of one who yearned to speak, to express himself, to say something
— but couldn't. Ah, the silent sorrow that glazed the eyes!

The sorrow in the eyes... the sorrow of one who sees all, hears
all, feels all and understands all that is happening around him,
and can't do anything except nod to the human shadows stirring
nearby, nod to their suffering and their helplessness, which was his
helplessness as well.

The tall windows of the dining room opened onto the spec-
tacular spring of Eretz-Israel in the month of Second Adar that
leap year. But just as he had kept out the Talpiot scenery from
his home "so that it would not distract him in his writing," so he
was oblivious to the landscape of the Judean lowlands creeping in
through the window; landscape that three years before the birth
of the infant Shmuel Joseph Czaczkes in Buczacz had enchanted
the Bilu-ites. They had come to the Land of Israel to grace the soil
of Gadera and, there, to renew the Hebrew language of which the
infant of Buczacz was to become its virtuoso once he grew up.

No, instead of scenery in the sunlit dining room, Agnon saw
the human mire into which he himself had unavoidably been cast.
Thus he saw the foolish smile of the handicapped who sat across
the table. Agnon was well aware that the smile of the unknown

man was not meant for him personally; it came to mask the man's embarrassment as he realized that he had wet his pants and a puddle was forming beneath his seat. How else, if not with sorrow, was Agnon to respond to the embarrassment of a grown man who had wet himself like a child? But what did this appalling sorrow signify? Was it compassion for the poor man who had lost control of his muscles? Or did it contain a touch of helpless wrath for himself, Agnon, being here amid human wrecks who urinate in public?

"What am I doing here?" — the rebellious sorrow cried from his eyes — "get me out of here! I do not belong with this human flotsam! *I am Agnon!* I merely *can't speak*, but I have so much to say still! So much to write!"

The two friends went back out to the corridor and took up a convenient vantage point — Agnon in his wheelchair and Ankori next to him, on one of the chairs deliberately set for the occasion against the wall. It was the hour of the "great promenade", the last organized activity of the day. When it was over, the residents would part from the institution's daily routine and plunge into the loneliness of their private nights.

The corridor became now a two-way "corso". On the row of seats along the wall visiting relatives and friends sat with residents of unimpaired mobility. Young girls who looked like candy strippers — or simply good Jewish girls who volunteered in the service of the institution — pushed wheelchairs of the handicapped and wheelchairs of the detached from reality, chair by chair, their occupants sunk in the stillness of their own worlds. The angels of mercy pushed the chair and the rider from behind — the rider anonymous, the helper anonymous, and the silence between them deepened the anonymity.

Suddenly the visitor's astounded eyes discerned from some distance a familiar figure in the motorized line of driven wheelchairs approaching the two friends. Had the innocent caretaker forgotten that she was not to come just then down the left side of the corridor? Or had she not been told anything at all, this being another example of institutional obtuseness — or remissness — having no

remedy in our alienated society somehow Agnon's wheelchair seeing all and understanding apathetically, as if to say, "Lea

Thus, wrapped in an oster three — Agnon, his friend and sat watching Esterlein pass th on an invisible hanger in mic had betrayed her and was gor insisted on remaining here a to live, to live, to live, no mat between the world of life ar strangers met, or didn't, each together, a husband and wife, last for generations, and now Language had meant when he

The next morning Ankori his emotional visit in Gadera than twenty-four hours later the living.



Shai Agnon at the Ankori home
photographed by Grace Goldin (Jer

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remedy in our alienated society? The companion tried to maneuver somehow Agnon's wheelchair to spare him the sight. But the latter, seeing all and understanding all and feeling all, merely nodded apathetically, as if to say, "Leave it, my friend, I know, I know"...

Thus, wrapped in an ostensibly resigned mantle of disguise, the three — Agnon, his friend and... the defeated sorrow in the eyes — sat watching Esterlein pass them in a wheelchair, her eyes pinned on an invisible hanger in mid-air and searching for the mind that had betrayed her and was gone. Only her frail and shrunken body insisted on remaining here and now, to breathe, to eat, to digest, to live, to live, to live, no matter what... In this mysterious limbo between the world of life and the world's cessation of life, two strangers met, or didn't, each once a cultural giant, and the two together, a husband and wife, who had built a home in Talpiot to last for generations, and now — a-h-h-h... Is that what the Lord of Language had meant when he coined the term "eclipse"?

The next morning Ankori phoned Emuna and told her about his emotional visit in Gadera. Neither of them imagined that less than twenty-four hours later Agnon would no longer be among the living.



Shai Agnon at the Ankori home
 photographed by Grace Goldin (Jerusalem 1960)