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FORUM

People of the Epistle: Letters in Jewish Intellectual Life Part I

Editor's Introduction: Translations, Triangular Relations, and Spiritual Permutations

Writing from Paris to his friend Gershom (Gerhard) Scholem in October 1936, the literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin ended his letter with a request: "Let me hear something about Agnon, for once."[1] Both Scholem and the Galician-born writer had been living in Jerusalem for over a decade, where the former taught at the newly founded Hebrew University. Scholem had known Benjamin (1892–1940), whom he had first met as a precocious teenager in their native Berlin, even longer than he knew Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970), whom he had also first met in Berlin.[2] On a Friday evening during the summer of 1918—the year following his first encounter with Agnon—Scholem read the Hebrew original of the latter's story about a Torah scribe to the newly married couple Walter and Dora Benjamin, neither of whom had yet achieved a working knowledge of the language. "I read it for perhaps the tenth time," Scholem later noted in his diary, "but as I already knew, it affects me more deeply each time . . . I trembled as if I had to kiss a girl. Perhaps I read well as a result."[3]

1. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, ed. G. Scholem, trans. G. Smith and A. Lefevere (New York, 1989), 187.

2. Gerold Necker, "Gershom Scholem and Shmu'el Yosef Agnon: Metamorphoses of a Friendship," in *Agnon in Germany*, ed. H.-J. Becker and H. Weiss (Ramat-Gan, 2010), 41–42.

3. Necker, "Gershom Scholem," 47. Max Strauss's translation of the story, under the title "Die Erzählung des Torahschreibers," appeared in *Der Jude* 2 (1917): 253–64. For a 1916 photo of Benjamin and Dora (then still Pollak), see *Benjaminia*, ed. H. Puttnes and G. Smith (Giessen, 1991), 56–57.

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The future scholar of Kabbalah had begun translating from Hebrew into German when he first gained mastery of Hebrew as a teenager, and he seems to have regarded translation as a means of truly internalizing the language—not only for purposes of scholarship but also for purposes of life (in Palestine). Scholem's first translation, rather curiously, was of the Song of Songs, which may also have caused him to tremble occasionally, and it was published privately in 1916, when he was not yet twenty.[4] Late in the following year, while residing in Jena, where he was studying mathematical logic under Frege, he began translating the book of Lamentations.[5] In 1917 Scholem sent both his first version of the former book as well as a later one to Benjamin, who was not overly enthusiastic about either, claiming somewhat paradoxically (as was his wont) that Scholem was "not as close to German" as he was to Hebrew and therefore had "not been *called*" to translate the Song of Songs—unlike the German poet Hölderlin's rendering of Pindar's Greek poems.[6] In a letter to another friend, Scholem referred to his recent translation of Lamentations as "different from my accursed translation of the Song of Songs," but Benjamin did not quite agree with this evaluation; writing in late March 1918, he informed Scholem that both he and Dora felt that the translation of Lamentations "has the character of an academic study," since its author had not allowed himself "to be inspired by the German language." Its weakness lay in that it was not intended "to save a text for the German language, but rather to relate it to German in terms of what is correct."[7]

Despite Benjamin's barbed responses, Scholem kept translating from

4. See *Lamentations: Poetry and Thought in Gershom Scholem's World*, ed. G. Shahar and I. Ferber (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2016), 127, n. 2.

5. On Scholem's translation of Lamentations, see now some of the essays collected in *Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives*, ed. I. Ferber and P. Schwebel (Berlin, 2014), particularly those by Schwebel, Bernd Witte, and Sigrid Weigel. For the translation itself, with facing Hebrew text, see Shahar and Ferber, eds. *Lamentations,* 48–87. For the date and place of its composition, see ibid., 32.

6. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin . . . 1910–1940,* ed. G. Scholem and T. W. Adorno, trans. M. R. Jacobson and E. M. Jacobson (Chicago, 1994), 48–49. J. C. F. Hölderlin had translated Pindar's odes late in the eighteenth century, but they were first published only by Norbert von Hellingrath in 1911. Benjamin later referred to Hölderlin's translations several times in his 1923 essay on "The Task of the Translator," the English version of which later appeared in his *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections,* ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (New York, 1968), 69–82.

7. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin . . . 1910–1940,* 69, 74.

Hebrew into German, moving from biblical texts to medieval and modern ones. In 1919 he published a translation, in Buber's *Der Jude*, of a poetic lament by R. Meir of Rothenberg (d. 1293),[8] and a year later his first translation of a story by Agnon appeared in those pages. Benjamin seems not to have responded to the former, perhaps because unlike Scholem's translations from the Bible, it could not be compared with Luther's version. Although he began studying Hebrew only during the summer of 1920, when writing to Scholem in early January of that year Benjamin praised the latter's recent translation of Agnon, describing it as "perfect," based on "the beauty of both the story and the language."[9]

Der Jude, in which both those translations had appeared, was cofounded in 1916 as a Zionist monthly by Martin Buber (1878–1965), then widely regarded as the leader of German Jewry's spiritual renewal, and the philanthropist Salman Schocken (1877–1959), co-owner of a chain of department stores.[10] Shortly after its founding, Buber invited Benjamin, whom he had first met some two years earlier, to work with him on the magazine. In his initial response, from May 1916, Benjamin wrote that although "the problem of the Jewish spirit" was "one of the most important and persistent objects" of his thinking, he could not yet commit himself. In a subsequent letter, from July of that year, he explained to Buber that he "had to wait until I had a conversation with Mr. Gerhard Scholem before making up my mind." Benjamin's reply, in the end, was negative, partially because of his deep disagreement "with so many of the contributions to the first volume—"especially their position on the European war"[11]—which, of course, was still going on.

The letters heretofore quoted from Benjamin, Scholem, and Buber reflect not only individual epistolary relationships among the three but also the existence of what might be called an "epistolary community" of overlapping relationships, so that Scholem is mentioned deferentially in

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8. For the German translation, with facing Hebrew text, see Shahar and Ferber, eds., *Lamentations*, 112–23. For a (problematic) English translation of Scholem's German rendering (with the latter facing), see *Lament in Jewish Thought*, 341–47.

9. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin . . . 1910–1940*, 155, 165. For Benjamin's study of Hebrew with Erich Gutkind, Scholem's former pupil, see also Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. H. Zohn (Philadelphia, 1981), 110. See also Dora's letter to Scholem from July 6, 1920, reporting that her husband was already making jokes in Hebrew (in *Benjaminia*, 66).

10. On Schocken, see Anthony David Skinner, *The Patron: A Life of Salman Schocken, 1877–1959* (New York, 2003).

11. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin . . . 1910–1940*, 62, 79.

Benjamin's 1916 letter to Buber, and Agnon, whom Scholem later translated, is asked after in Benjamin's 1936 letter to his friend in Jerusalem. Significantly, much of the discussion in Scholem's early correspondence revolves around issues of translation. Just as Benjamin reacted quite critically to his early translations from the Hebrew scriptures, so too would Scholem later comment quite critically, in his own letters, on Buber's 1926 translation (with Franz Rosenzweig) of the book of Genesis into German—a subject to which I will return.

Benjamin's intellectually dense criticisms of those early translations, whatever their impact on Scholem's subsequent efforts, seem to have affected the spirit, if not the content, of his own response to Rosenzweig's German version of the Hebrew grace after meals. Writing to the latter in March 1921, Scholem called the translation "seminal," noting its "almost blessed richness" and "profound harmony." He then inserted the (Zionist) dagger, describing it also as "fundamentally problematic" on account of its "highly systematic tendency to adopt the language and terminology of the Church," transforming the prayer's chaste and precise language "into the nuance-rich colorfulness and demonic ambiguity of the terminology of salvation."[12]

Scholem's sharply critical comments elicited from Rosenzweig his now classic statement about the nature of translation: "Only someone who is inwardly convinced of its impossibility can be a translator." Less well known is another statement by Rosenzweig later in that same letter: "He who translates into German must in one way or another translate into a Christian language."[13] That assertion must have later reverberated in his own mind while he was working with Buber at putting Genesis into the language in which Luther had previously, and most famously, rendered it. Three years before their translation of Genesis appeared, Benjamin published his essay "The Task of the Translator," which came to the attention of the Anglo-American world, however, only decades later through the 1968 collection of his writings edited by Hannah Arendt (1906–75).

CHESS IN PARIS, SUICIDE IN PORT ABOU

By that time Arendt and Scholem were neither friends nor correspondents, but during the 1930s and 1940s they were very much part of the

12. Anthony David Skinner, ed., *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters, 1914–1982* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 117. In Skinner's translation the German is rendered as "the prayer said at mealtimes," but I assume what is intended is "after mealtimes."

13. Ibid., 118. It is quoted, however, by M. H. Benjamin in her *Rosenzweig's Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (Cambridge, 2009), 110, who discusses the entire 1921 letter to Scholem.

same epistolary community, largely through their mutual friendship with Benjamin, to whom she was briefly related through her (first) marriage to Günther Stern, a cousin of his mother's. Both German-born Jewish intellectuals came to Paris from Nazi Germany during the 1930s, as did Arendt's future husband Heinrich Blücher, who was not Jewish but whose communist credentials forced him to flee to the French capital, where he played chess with Benjamin. One of the earliest letters Arendt received from Blücher was sent in September 1937, while she was in Geneva at a meeting of the Jewish World Congress. Blücher reported that on the previous day his chess partner had noted that *Le Temps,* then the local newspaper of record, "had accused Hitler of, among other things, an "antisémitisme sectaire," to which Benjamin "aptly added" that "we have come to the point where anti-Semitism needs a deprecatory adjective to be denounced." In late October 1938 Blücher reported to Arendt that "Benji" had become "strongly interested in Jewish matters," having told him: "I am studying to be a Jew, because I've finally come to the realization that I am one."[14]

This, of course, was meant with some irony, as more than two decades earlier Benjamin had written to Buber that "the problem of the Jewish spirit" was "one of the most important and persistent objects" of his thinking, but during his subsequent Marxist phase Jewish identity had become—to Scholem's chagrin—less of a persistent concern. It was apparently as part of his "rediscovery" of his Jewishness that Benjamin took an interest in Arendt's (then) unpublished manuscript on Rahel Varnhagen (née Markus, 1777–1833), the Berlin salonnière who converted to Christianity before marrying Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, a work which he then brought to the attention of his friend in Jerusalem. In February 1939, by which time Scholem and his (second) wife Fania had spent "a couple of very pleasant hours" in Paris with Arendt and Blücher, Benjamin wrote to his friend reporting that he had suggested to Arendt that "she make her book on Rahel Varnhagen available to you." The book, he added, "swims with powerful strokes against the current of edifying and apologetic Judaic studies."[15] Late in the following June the

14. *Within Four Walls: The Correspondence between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher, 1936–1968,* ed. L. Kolker, trans. P. Constantine (New York, 1996), 36, 39, 44. Note, however, Steven E. Aschheim's more literal rendition of Benjamin's words: "I am learning Jewish [*Ich lerne Jude*] because I have finally grasped that I am one." See Aschheim, *Scholem, Arendt, and Klemperer: Intimate Chronicles in Turbulent Times* (Bloomington, Ind., 2001), 11.

15. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin . . . 1910–1940,* 233, 244. Arendt's book, though originally written in German, appeared first in English in 1956. The German original appeared three years later.

Jerusalem scholar replied that he "was *very* pleased" with Arendt's book, even though he had "presumably read it with a different emphasis than the one [with] which she wrote it." In Scholem's view it was "a superb analysis of what took place" in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries "and shows that a relationship built on fraud, such as the German Jews' relationship to 'Germanness,' could not end without misfortune."[16]

Unlike the lives of Scholem and Arendt, that of their mutual friend Benjamin ended in misfortune; it was Arendt who, shortly before departing for the United States, informed Scholem of his close friend's death by suicide at Port Abou in September 1940. "Jews die in Europe," Arendt commented, "and they are buried like dogs."[17] Several months earlier, in one of his last letters, Benjamin had encouraged Scholem to move ahead with the publication (in English) of his recently delivered New York lectures, which, under the title *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism,* would be dedicated, as he could not yet know, to his own memory: "Every line we succeed in publishing today—no matter how uncertain the future to which we entrust it—is a victory wrenched from the powers of darkness."[18]

In the absence, perhaps, of their mutual friendship with Benjamin, the relationship between Scholem and Arendt began to unravel after the publication of her 1945 essay "Zionism Reconsidered,"[19] and it effectively came to an end during the 1960s with the appearance of Arendt's controversial accounts of the Eichmann trial.[20] As Steven Aschheim has aptly observed, "Each regarded the other as megalomaniacally arrogant and self-obsessed."[21] After visiting Jerusalem in 1957 Arendt wrote about Scholem to their mutual friend Kurt Blumenfeld (1884–1963): "Basically

16. Ibid., 257. By "fraud" Scholem explained that he meant "the assumption that everything had to come from one side, and that the other [Jewish] side was only ever allowed to deny itself . . . and to be receptive" (p. 257).

17. Ibid., 268. Arendt's complete correspondence with Scholem has been published by M. L. Knott and D. Heredia, *Der Briefwechsel: Hannah Arendt, Gershom Scholem* (Frankfurt a.M., 2010). See the review by Steven Aschheim in the *Jewish Review of Books* (Winter, 2011).

18. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin . . . 1910–1940,* 262. On Scholem's immediate plan to dedicate *Major Trends* to Benjamin's memory, see his letter to Theodor Adorno in Skinner, ed., *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters,* 308–9.

19. The essay originally appeared in the *Menorah Journal* 33 (1945): 162–96 and has been reprinted at least twice.

20. For the latter, see *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York, 1963).

21. Aschheim, *Scholem, Arendt, and Klemperer*, 67.

he believes the midpoint of the world is Israel; the midpoint of Israel is Jerusalem; the midpoint of Jerusalem is the [Hebrew] university; and the midpoint of the university is Scholem."[22]

(ALMOST) ALL ROADS LEAD TO SCHOLEM

Whether or not Scholem was then, or ever, "the midpoint" of Jerusalem's university, he is, in certain ways, the midpoint of this forum, the second part of which will appear early in 2018. His letters, some previously unpublished, are quoted in the contributions by Brian Collins, Shaul Magid, and Nancy Sinkoff. Collins, whose essay is devoted to the Viennese-born scholar of religion Robert Eisler (1882–1949), discusses Scholem's 1926 visit (with Benjamin) to Eisler, then residing in Paris, and their attendance at the latter's Sorbonne lectures on the political activities of Jesus. Magid discusses Scholem's epistolary relationship with the Hungarian-born Joseph Weiss (1918–64), who had been perhaps his most brilliant student in Jerusalem before relocating to England, where, tragically, he died by suicide. Sinkoff, who is writing a biography of the American scholar Lucy S. Dawidowicz (1915–90), presents the letters Dawidowicz exchanged with Scholem concerning Arendt. Sinkoff also discusses Dawidowicz's and Scholem's mutual interest in the figure of Nathan Birnbaum (1864–1937), like Eisler a native of Vienna, who had converted from secular Zionism to ultra-Orthodoxy early in the twentieth century. In the remainder of this essay I will return to the epistolary relationships, many of them overlapping, of some of the heretofore mentioned scholars and writers. Its midpoint will not be Scholem himself but rather the city in which he and Agnon resided from the 1920s, and in which they were later joined by Martin Buber, with whom both had previously corresponded.

Shortly before Purim of 1925, by which time Agnon had been in Jerusalem (on his own) for several months, Scholem penned a somewhat jocose Hebrew letter to Agnon's wife Esther, then still in Germany with their young children, imploring her—by way of her husband—to join him soon, "for every single month that you delay will cause much damage, we are certain, both to your lives and to your husband's work." The "we" referred presumably to Scholem and his wife, the former Escha (Elsa) Burchhardt. Not long afterward Agnon confided to Esther, in a letter written in late March, that "Escha and Scholem are not a happy couple."[23]

22. Quoted in ibid., 67.

23. S. Y. Agnon, *Esterlein Yekirati*, ed. E. Yaron (Tel Aviv, 1983), 73–74, 82. For a photo of Gershom and Escha Scholem, the latter looking decidedly morose, taken during Sukkot of 1926, see Puttnies and Smith ed., *Benjaminiana*, 79.

A bit more than a decade later Scholem informed Benjamin, then in Paris, that he and Escha were divorced, and that she would marry his (older) Hebrew University colleague, the philosopher Hugo Bergmann (1883–1975)—who was also the university's rector—"if the latter succeeds in procuring his divorce (which is a terribly complicated matter)."[24] Despite his divorce from Escha, her subsequent remarriage to Bergmann, and his own remarriage (in the same year) to his former student Fania Freud, Scholem managed to maintain more than cordial relations with both Bergmanns, partially because of his great respect for the Prague-born philosopher, who had moved to Palestine even before he and Escha had. In 1947, after Bergmann published an essay in honor of his colleague's fiftieth birthday, Scholem responded with a gracious (Hebrew) letter to both Hugo and Escha. It is characteristic, however, that in doing so he also showed his (often concealed) enmity toward another Hebrew University colleague, referring in his letter to "Buber's phony Elijah mantle."[25]

Scholem's ambivalence toward Buber had earlier been evident in his reply to the 1936 letter from Benjamin, quoted at the outset of this essay, in which the latter had inquired after Agnon. Earlier in that letter Benjamin had commented rather acerbically about Buber, who, he asserted, "has shown himself capable of seamlessly transposing the terminology of National Socialism into debates about Jewish questions." Although Scholem did not quite agree, he did acknowledge in response that "after 20 years of studying this Buber, I am still not able to give a categorical reply to the question of whether there is something of substance in what he writes or not."[26] Scholem's ambivalence was clearly related not only to Buber's writings and ideas[27] but also to the continuing delay of the Zionist leader's arrival in Palestine. In August 1933, several months after Hitler's rise to power, he had written from Jerusalem to the person he still called "Herr Buber," stressing that he and his (German-born) local friends found it "extremely difficult to comprehend the spiritual and

24. Skinner, ed., *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters*, 274. The letter was written on April 19, 1936. By late December of that year Escha and Hugo Bergmann were married and were living in the house she had earlier shared with Scholem (ibid., 277).

25. Ibid., 340–41.

26. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin . . . 1910–1940*, 187, 189.

27. On one of their disagreements, see recently Rachel White, "Recovering the Past, Renewing the Present: The Buber-Scholem Controversy over Hasidism Reinterpreted," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 14 (2007): 364–92.

moral attitude of German Jews to their own fate." It almost seemed, Scholem added somewhat prophetically, "as if large segments of German Jewry have failed to grasp what is happening, and as if even more horrors must occur before they're roused."[28]

Some three years later Scholem again wrote to Buber from Jerusalem, thanking him for having sent a recently published collection of essays, which he described (proleptically) as "something like a farewell gift for German Jewry," adding, less subtly: "we here are very hopeful of seeing you among us soon."[29] When in 1938 Scholem wrote to congratulate Buber on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, he opened by expressing sorrow that "the hopes of your friends to see you here [in Jerusalem] on your sixtieth birthday have not been fulfilled." Later in that letter he expressed the wish "with all my heart that in the coming year you may be granted the opportunity to take up the struggle here."[30] The "struggle" to which Scholem referred was not merely the struggle for a Jewish state but the greater challenge (still today) to create one in which Jews and Arabs would be equal partners.[31] That struggle was one more thing that he and Bergmann had shared long before Mrs. Scholem became Mrs. Bergmann.

Just as both Scholem and Buber were both on close terms with Bergmann—who unlike the former was not shy about (politely) criticizing the latter's writings in their direct correspondence[32]—so too did they share a friendship (and correspondence) with Agnon, to whom Buber always wrote in German and Scholem in Hebrew. In December 1924, shortly after the Hebrew writer had returned to Palestine after more than a decade in Germany, Buber wrote to Scholem in Jerusalem, asking, "can anything be done from here for poor Agnon?"[33] Agnon and Buber had first corresponded during the writer's first period of residence in Palestine, where he had arrived in 1908 from his native Galicia, settling in the port city of Jaffa. The two saw each other frequently during Agnon's years in Germany, where in 1920 he married Esther, and where his two children were born. It was also in Germany that Agnon and Buber began collaboration on a Hebrew anthology of Hasidic tales, on which the latter

28. Skinner, ed., *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters*, 245.

29. N. N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber*, trans. R. and C. Winston and H. Zohn (New York, 1991), 445.

30. Skinner, ed., *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters*, 285.

31. See Scholem's 1930 letter to Buber in Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber*, 377.

32. See, for example, ibid., 144, 223–24, 525, 538–40.

33. Ibid., 323.

continued to work after Agnon's departure for Jerusalem. Agnon, however, eventually lost interest in the project,[34] though not, as is well known, in the world of Hasidism in which he had been raised. In fact, it may well have been Agnon's own incipient return to that world, toward the end of his years in Germany, that made it difficult for him to collaborate with Buber, who was quite removed from traditional Jewish life and observance.

One of the continuing enigmas of Agnon scholarship is the question of his attitude, at various points in life, toward the strict religious observance into which he was born, and to which he ostensibly later returned. Although the writer's return to religious observance is often linked with his return to the land of Israel,[35] there are signs, as we will see, that it began earlier. In March 1920, Agnon wrote to Buber from Leipzig, where he had evidently gone for the annual book fair and absorbed, as he informed his collaborator (in Hebrew), "handfuls" of both Hasidism and "hatred of Hasidism."[36] The Hasidism was absorbed from the local prayer houses serving the many Eastern European Jews of or passing through Leipzig, which was no less central to the fur trade than it was to the book business. The "hatred of Hasidism," however, may have come from within Agnon himself, who even before giving up Jewish religious observance had parted ways—as did many young Zionists—with his native Hasidism.

During the previous Sabbath, Agnon informed Buber, he had gone for the "third meal" to the (local) "Boyaner Rebbe" (Rabbi Israel Friedman [1878–1951]),[37] where he had been called to the Torah during the afternoon service. He remained for the Havdalah service, after which he sat

34. See Dan Laor, "Agnon and Buber: The Story of a Friendship, or: The Rise and Fall of the Corpus Hasidicum," in *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. P. Mendes-Flohr (Jerusalem, 2002), 61–86; Martina Urban, *Aesthetics of Renewal: Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as* Kulturkritik (Chicago, 2008), 60–62.

35. See, for example, A. G. Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany, N.Y., 1991), 71. Ilana Pardes, *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle, Wash., 2013), 4.

36. Agnon's letters to Buber from his period of residence in Germany were published in Emuna Yaron et al., eds., *Kovets Agnon: An Agnon Miscellany*, 2 vols. (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1994–2000), 1:55–99. For the 1920 letter, see there 76–77, as well as Laor, "Agnon and Buber," 59–60. My translations from the letter differ somewhat from Laor's. For the term "handfuls," see Eccl 4.6.

37. One of the three sons of R. Isaac Friedman (1850–1917), founder of the Boyan dynasty, upon whose death each established a court in a different European city. He moved from Leipzig to Tel Aviv in 1939.

at the *melaveh malkah* meal with a "grandson of the Sanzer [Rebbe]."[38] From the latter Agnon heard a Hasidic discourse that was difficult for him to put into writing, as his "nerves were afire," and he was "beset with troubles and confusion." He did, however, relate a story, partly in Yiddish, about the "original" Sanzer Rebbe and concluded his letter by asking that Buber forgive his "strange style," explaining again that he was "troubled and bit confused, without rest," and hoped for God's mercy.[39] Agnon's inner torments in Leipzig—his "handfuls" of both love and hate—were ostensibly related to conflicted feelings, especially before his upcoming marriage to Esther, as to whether to return to the familiar world of the Rebbe's *tisch,* not merely as an occasional participant-observer but as a full participant on a regular basis.

This, of course, entailed a return to Jewish religious practice, in which Agnon presumably planned to raise his future children, as Esther—the daughter of a Koenigsberg banker—was also from a traditional home. In November 1921, the couple moved into a new and spacious apartment in Bad Homburg (near Frankfurt), whose rent was largely covered by Esther's father. Shortly after moving in, Agnon wrote (in Hebrew) to his patron Salman Schocken reporting on the new apartment and his new study, noting piously that in recent days God had given him "strength and desire to serve Him, may he be blessed." He also noted that although the apartment was equipped with a kitchen (by no means standard in post–World War I Germany) he and Esther were without a proper set of dishes, a matter concerning which he planned to write to Schocken's wife (the former Zerline Ehrmann). In Agnon's subsequent (German) letter to Mrs. Schocken he reported that "since our household is kosher we have not been able to use the kitchen utensils" and politely reminded his patroness of her offer to provide them with a dining service from one of the family's department stores. As a consequence of his letter, the Agnon family received some furniture as well.[40]

In late 1923, by which time his second child was born, Agnon wrote from Bad Homburg to his friend Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), an edition of whose poems was then being printed in Germany—a complicated process the former had agreed to oversee. In his letter reporting the edition's progress Agnon noted, in characteristic fashion, that on the

38. R. Hayyim Halberstam (d. 1876), founder of the Sandz Hasidic dynasty, fathered fifteen children from two wives, so it is not clear to which one Agnon referred.

39. *Kovets Agnon,* 77.

40. *The Correspondence between S. Y. Agnon and S. Z. Schocken* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1991), 126–27; Dan Laor, *Ḥaye Agnon* (Jerusalem, 1998), 148.

recent fast day of *10 Tevet* he had not forgotten the poet's birthday, "even during the reading of *va-yehal*."[41] This does not necessarily mean, as Bialik presumably understood, that the younger writer actually fasted that day, or that he had attended afternoon services (when passages from Exodus 22–24 were read), but it was perhaps a way of signaling to the poet who had also been raised in strict Orthodoxy that the fast day had again, or would soon, become part of his life.

In September 1924, after visiting his native Galicia for the last time, Agnon spent a Sabbath in Vienna en route to Trieste, whence he would travel by boat to Egypt. Writing to Esther late on the Friday afternoon of September 19, he noted that he was smoking his last pipe before going off to pray with the Belz Hasidim in their local synagogue. On the next day, however, his activities in Vienna included visiting both a cafe and a theater, neither of which necessarily involved transgressing the Sabbath, but neither of which was the kind of place he later frequented during his "Orthodox" period.[42]

The following November, after having spent some two weeks in Jerusalem, Agnon informed Esther, with whom he had clearly discussed his return to observance, that "in the matter of Sabbath things are very easy for me, I have not yet transgressed the Sabbath even in a small matter, and my conscience is clear."[43] Things turned out to be more difficult, though, when he spent a weekend several months later with a group of scholars at the Dead Sea, sleeping near Wadi Zarka on what is now its Jordanian side. Saturday's activities, he dutifully reported to Esther, included swimming in the sea and traveling by boat to Wadi Mujib, which he referred to by its biblical name *Nahal Arnon*.[44] Agnon's detailed report included no comments concerning his conscience, but he may have been less concerned with observing Sabbath outside Jerusalem than inside the holy city.

In December 1924, shortly before Hanukkah, Agnon wrote to Schocken from "Jerusalem the holy and hallowed," which he now found that he much preferred to Tel Aviv, and from which he tried not to remove himself even for a single day. He promised to write at greater length on the following Saturday evening, "after concluding the weekly

41. S. Y. Agnon, *Mi-sod ḥakhamim: Letters, 1909–1970*, ed. E. Yaron (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2002), 44.

42. Agnon, *Esterlein,* 18–19.

43. Ibid., 31. It is interesting that for conscience he used the German word *Gewissen*, which was more familiar to Esther, rather than the (postbiblical) Hebrew word *matspun*.

44. Ibid., 76.

portion."[45] Soon Agnon settled into a "Jerusalemite" Sabbath routine, usually praying at the Western Wall on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings and sometimes going there for *minḥah* and *ma'ariv* on weekdays. Exceptions could be made when such luminaries as the Modzhitzer Rebbe (Shaul Yedidya Taub, 1886–1947) were visiting from Eastern Europe. On the last Friday night of June 1925, Agnon reported to Esther, he prayed with disciples of the Rebbe, who had never previously visited Jerusalem and was famously musical.[46]

Agnon continued in a similar vein over the following months, informing Esther after Passover of 1926 that he had spent the last days of the holiday in Safed, singing and dancing (as well as drinking) with the Sanz Hasidim until late on the seventh night, and visiting the town's Sadgora Hasidim on the morrow.[47] "We talked and told stories," he reported, but none of those stories made their way into the anthology Buber still thought they were working on. Agnon had evidently become too much of a participant to be an observer. Although he still corresponded amicably with Buber, he was worlds away from the man who had recently written to Rosenzweig: "For me the one question that is sounded in my soul from abyss to abyss is: Is the Law God's Law?"[48]

"THE TOMBSTONE OF A RELATIONSHIP THAT WAS EXTINGUISHED IN UNSPEAKABLE HORROR."

Early in 1926, only a few months before Agnon's somewhat bacchanalian stay in Safed, Buber and Rosenzweig's controversial German translation of the book of Genesis appeared, under the title *Im Anfang.* Even before formal publication, excerpts had appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung and Jüdische Rundschau.* On New Year's Day of 1926 Ernst Simon (1899–1988), who was involved with both Buber and Rosenzweig in the Frankfurt *Lehrhaus* and coedited *Der Jude* (by then no longer a monthly) with the former, commented on the translation to his friend Scholem in Jerusalem, where he would soon join him: "Taken as a whole, I think of it as a Jewish Luther-Bible," which was intended, of course, as a compliment. Simon, who clearly knew his future neighbor quite well, archly expressed his fear that Scholem would hold his positive opinion against him "in the event (which is likely) that you arrive at an opposing viewpoint." Indeed,

45. *The Correspondence between S. Y. Agnon and S. Z. Schocken,* 170–71. According to the *Shulḥan 'arukh (Oraḥ ḥayim, 285)* one who failed to complete the tripartite reading before Sabbath's end could do so until Wednesday.

46. Agnon, *Esterlein,* 103–4.

47. Ibid., 131.

48. Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber,* 327.

replying later that month Scholem sharply commented that "the excerpts have an *unmistakably false pathos* without the slightest trace of the Luther Bible." Luther himself, Scholem added, "had a fine and genuine sense for the musical pitch of language; and in this regard Buber and Rosenzweig are totally off key—to say nothing of the wild pretentiousness of their language."[49]

In late April 1926, several months after conveying to Simon his candid opinion of the Genesis translation (on the basis of its published excerpts), Scholem wrote to Buber himself, praising its "magnificent objective clarity," while expressing doubt concerning its "excessive *tone*" which he felt could best be described by the Hebrew word *nigun.* Scholem informed Buber that he was "planning to attempt a coherent presentation of the thoughts stirred by your translation in a Hebrew debate with another reader, Agnon," and promised to send a transcript, "if it materializes." Less than a month later Buber replied, thanking Scholem for his "detailed letter about our translation," which had pleased him and Rosenzweig "no less than Agnon's unqualified approval did."[50]

It is not clear on what basis Buber and Rosenzweig believed that their translation had received Agnon's "unqualified approval." Agnon, who received a copy from Buber inscribed in January 1926, clearly had written to the latter upon its arrival, as we will see below, but his letter is to be found neither in his own archive, in Jerusalem, nor in Buber's (at the National Library of Israel).

Buber may well have passed it on to Rosenzweig. Writing to Agnon in July 1926, on behalf of both himself and his collaborator, Buber acknowledged that his having "received our Bible translation with such great approval and such a profound and warm understanding of its nature made me and Rosenzweig very happy."[51]

In February 1958, by which time Buber had been living in Jerusalem for some two decades, Agnon published an essay in *Haaretz* in honor of his eightieth birthday. In that essay he made a point of addressing the Bible translation which Buber had begun with Rosenzweig and continued on his own after the latter's untimely death in 1929, but had not yet quite completed. "Out of my love of the Scriptures," Agnon wrote, "I shall mention here what I wrote to Buber when he sent me his Genesis translation," but his subsequent remarks indicated that he would be quoting from memory, as he had retained no copy of the letter. "I wrote more

49. Skinner, ed., *Gershom Scholem: A Life in Letters,* 151–52.

50. Ibid., 153.

51. Glatzer and Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber,* 343–44.

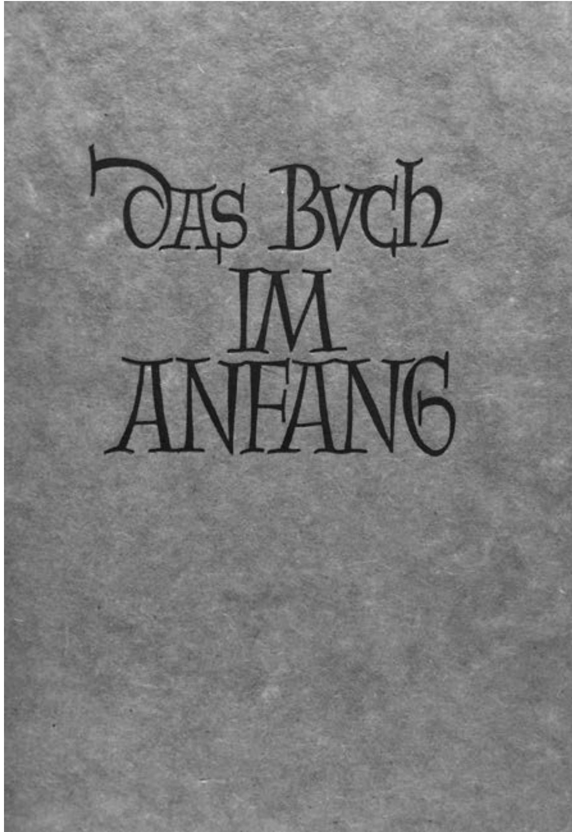

Figure 1. Cover of *Im Anfang,* a 1926 translation of Genesis by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig.

or less the following," Agnon continued: "Every generation that has not elucidated the Torah may be regarded as never having received the Torah." He then went on to add a further observation, namely, that whereas the Torah's first translation, the Septuagint, had been carried out early in the Jewish people's exile, that of Buber and Rosenzweig had originated "early in the process of our redemption."[52] Those last words echoed the prayer for the State of Israel composed by Chief Rabbi Herzog (1888–1959), an early draft of which had been reviewed by Agnon himself. As Israel's tenth anniversary approached, Agnon was more preoccupied with how the messianic process had recently played itself out

52. S. Y. Agnon in *Haaretz,* February 7, 1958, reprinted in idem, *Me-ʿatsmi el ʿatsmi* (Tel Aviv, 1976), 259. I thank Rabbi Jeffrey Saks, director of the Agnon archive, for bringing this essay (as well as its reprint) to my attention.

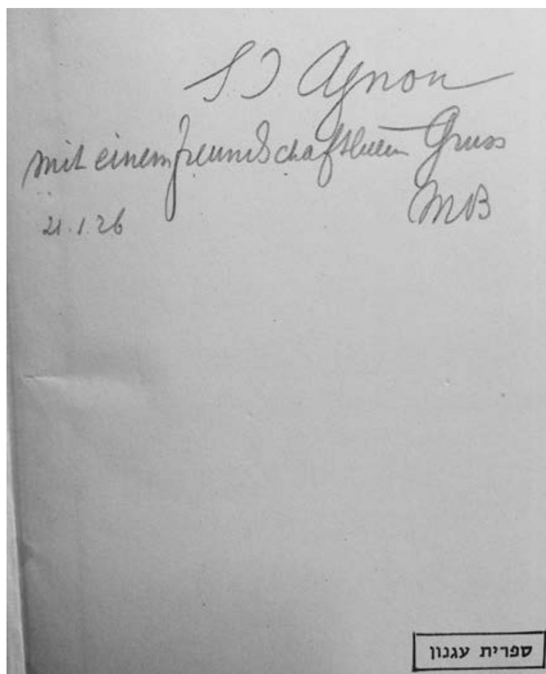

Figure 2. Dedication by Martin Buber to S. Y. Agnon in *Im Anfang* (1926).

than with the tragic fate of those German-speaking Jews who had been the translation's primary intended audience.

Rather different were Gershom Scholem's remarks delivered some three years later in Buber's home, upon the latter's completion of his translation of Deuteronomy. In February 1961, only a few months before Adolf Eichmann's trial opened in Jerusalem, Scholem spoke in German and presented his remarks in epistolary fashion, just as he had his expressed his earlier opinions of the Genesis translation in separate letters to Simon and Buber. In his 1961 comments Scholem described the completed translation as essentially a "new edition," since some passages from the early volumes had been revised. Although he acknowledged not having thoroughly compared the two editions, Scholem praised "the extraordinary urbanity" of the later one, allowing himself thus to adhere to some of his earlier criticisms of the first, not all of which Buber had been party to. "The first edition, in all its grandeur, contains also an element of fanaticism," Scholem asserted, which was aimed, he explained, "at driving words to their limit, extracting . . . from the language . . . an excess of toughness and precision." That assertion complemented Scholem's earlier

one in his remarks on that occasion, namely, that Buber and Rosenzweig had not sought "to raise the Bible, through the medium of the German language, to a level of clear comprehensibility" but had rather taken "special care not to make the Bible simpler than it is." In their original version "what is clear remains clear, what is difficult remains difficult, and what is incomprehensible remains incomprehensible."[53]

Scholem, in his concluding remarks to Buber on that festive occasion, posed some pointed questions, presumably inspired at least partly by Eichmann's upcoming trial in Jerusalem: "When you and Rosenzweig began this undertaking," Scholem noted somberly, "there was a German Jewry; your work was intended to have a vital influence on them, to arouse them, and to lead them to the original." He then asked rhetorically: "For whom is this translation now intended, and whom will it influence?" It was, he replied, "no longer a *Gastgeschenk* [hospitality gift] of the Jews to the Germans, but rather—and it is not easy for me to say this—the tombstone of a relationship that was extinguished in unspeakable horror."[54]

This essay opened with Benjamin's criticisms of Scholem's early efforts at translation from biblical Hebrew into modern German, and it closes with Scholem's painful reflections, some four decades later, on the fate of Buber's Torah translation, which had become a "tombstone" of German Jewry's once-vital relationship with German culture, a relationship reflected also in many of the letters I have quoted. In this essay, completed only a few minutes' walk from where Scholem delivered his open letter to Buber, I have sought to shed light both on their complicated epistolary relationship and their relationships with such shared correspondents as Agnon. I have also sometimes chosen, however, to allow the difficult to remain difficult and the incomprehensible to remain incomprehensible.

ELLIOTT HOROWITZ

POST SCRIPT

It seems at once haunting and apt that this essay by Elliott Horowitz z"l should be his last for *JQR*. The two-part forum on epistolary relationships

53. Gershom Scholem, "At the Completion of Buber's Translation of the Bible," trans. M. A. Meyer, in Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York, 1971), 315–17. The essay/epistle originally appeared in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (March 31, 1963), some two years after Scholem delivered his remarks.

54. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, 318.

that it introduces (the second part will appear in *JQR* 108.1) was close to his heart. The genre of the letter, as a source for Jewish history, amplifies the unique commitments that marked Elliott's own career. An anthropologist of the archive, he sensed keenly the vital, but finally permeable, borderline separating religious, private, and intellectual life, and his work demonstrates again and again that the often hidden networks of personal and domestic relationships inform and enrich the "idea"—and if ignored, they leave historical and philosophical research bereft of some of its subtlety and complexity. We see in his essay, for example, the tragedy of the casual—and not so casual—curse on the psyche of a young scholar that could be delivered through a mentoring relationship made up of admiration, love, and agon. These curses become like heirlooms, passed on between intimate friends, borne forward through generations. Elliott chronicles how Benjamin wounded and drove Scholem and, in the essays that follow, we see Scholem visiting his own barbed love upon Weiss, Dawidowicz, and Arendt in turn. These moments, revealed in correspondence, are visceral hooks that snare us as we read. At once public and private, letters offer a glimpse of the scholar not fully armored, letting us touch the fleshy spaces between the published words of these great minds. Elliott had a connoisseur's eye for human details, and he insisted that the best thinking, like the best friendship, has at its core something wonderful and difficult. Something incomprehensible, indeed.

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