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Relations Between Jews and Poles in S. Y. Agnon's Work
(review)

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drawing in part on Freudian psychoanalytic theories, Edna Amir Coffin's analysis of the story "Yedidut" ("Friendship") is based on an understanding that much of the meaning of the story is in the tension between the manifest motivations of the narrator and the latent issues with which he is dealing, but of which he is not consciously aware.

Unique among these papers is a personal statement by the Israeli writer Aharon Appelfeld. He describes how shortly after arriving in Israel in 1946, Agnon often visited him and his fellow Holocaust survivors in their settlement, which was located near Agnon's home in Jerusalem, "to ask questions and tell us jokes" (p. 207). Since Agnon's home town of Buczacz was not far from Appelfeld's home town of Czernowitz, the older writer was able to supply the younger writer with details about his past that he had repressed as a result of the trauma of the Holocaust. When in the 1950s Appelfeld turned to the writing of fiction in Hebrew, "probably," he writes, "to open the darkness in me, to say something of my experience" (p. 210), he could not find models in contemporary Israeli literature. Instead, the European-born writers Kafka and Agnon served as his models. "If Kafka introduced me to my assimilated parents," writes Appelfeld, "Agnon opened the gates of oblivion and brought me to my grandparents, to my hidden home where belief was in full flame" (p. 211).

Many of the works by Agnon discussed in these papers are available in English translation. (A notable exception is the novel *Temol shilshom*). This book, therefore, can serve not only as a resource for scholars active in the field of modern Hebrew literature, but also as an insightful guide for readers of Agnon in English translation as they seek to understand the complex fictional world of this unrivaled master of Hebrew fiction.

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Relations Between Jews and Poles in S. Y. Agnon's Work, by Shmuel Werses. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994. 128 pp.

What prominent features characterized the relations between Jews and Poles? What cultural elements were transferred between these two societies? How do Jews perceive their millennium-long sojourn among Poles? These are among the central questions addressed by Shmuel Werses in his study, *Relations Between Jews and Poles in S. Y. Agnon's Work*.

To describe that symbiotic state by relying on fiction as evidence, the approach taken by Werses in this study, threatens to jeopardize the thoroughness of the presentation, including that measure of "objectivity" we find in works of history. Yet there is nothing more fitting to enliven dry facts, to make people and events come alive, than a literary

presentation, particularly one by an accomplished storyteller such as Agnon. The pitfall, though, is dependence on the author's peculiar and stilted vision affecting the presentation's completeness and objectivity.

Were we to ask ourselves what thesis Werses is promoting, or what his argument may be (and against whom), our answer would have to be that this study seeks to map out the intricate, and often multivalent, relations between Jews and Polish society. Werses rightfully weights the scales against picturing an idyllic existence, presenting the period's traumatic experiences as affecting Jews' overall perception of their life in Polish society; this while most chose to remain there in the face of centuries of anti-Jewish feelings and policy culminating more than once in massacres. In referring to these events, Agnon adopts the role of chronicler, making his work ever more complex in its range of meaning. Rather than address these works critically, Werses accepts them as documentary testimony, thereby overlooking many nuanced attitudes.

Werses' choice to present Jews' existence in Poland and their relations with Poles is certainly promising. To use the fiction of S. Y. Agnon (1888–1970), Israel's most accomplished author, Nobel Prize laureate (1966) and himself a "*Galitzianer*," means relying on one of the most talented imaginations to foreground the central aspects of that experience. Agnon's works are, as Werses observes, heavily based on cultural and historical facts and constitute a significant corpus to map out many aspects of these contacts in depth and detail.

Werses constructs his work in a chronological fashion, beginning with a general discussion of Agnon's regard for Polish-Jewish history. Following this, he notes Agnon's depiction of early Jewish settlement in Poland followed by accounts of tensions manifested in blood libels and violence against Jews. This series of events culminates in the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648–49. Also addressed are Jews' relations with Polish royalty and nobility, their economic, social, and even interpersonal (sexual) affairs, culminating in the conditions of Jews in Buczacz, Agnon's home town, in recent generations and up to the Holocaust.

In each chapter, Werses focuses on the topic through a number of themes and sub-themes prevalent in Agnon's writings. He thereby offers a significant cross-section of the author's work as evidence. In discussing blood libels and their manifestations in Agnon's tales, he probes the fanaticism and intolerance of the Catholic church. Implicit in this is Agnon's incorporating these central events in Jewish memory into the cycle of martyrology and Jews' precarious existence in Christian society. Werses' treatment demonstrates the extent to which Agnon's fiction is permeated by memory and the cultural imprint of the clash of Jewish civilization with European cultures, matters which in and of themselves constitute a significant factor in defining the nature of Jewish literature.

Werses plots out a story of devastating and recurring recovery of Jewish communities in Poland, be it during the Chmielnicki terrors, the Swedish invasion, or the arrival of the Turks. Yet along with the impression that the Jews of Poland were a resilient population,

one is impressed by the dark message of enduring tensions, suspicions, and expectations which have figured so centrally in Polish Jewish memory, experiences which, ironically enough, contributed to the survival of that Jewish community until its utter annihilation by the Nazis.

So as not to seem negative throughout, Agnon, and Werses' account, takes note of positive and admiring attitudes by Jews of Polish royalty—primarily of King Sobieski—and the positive, reciprocal relations between Jews and members of the nobility, for whom the Jews served a useful purpose. In so doing, some redressing of the balance is attained against the tensions and evil decrees emanating from the same sources. Though one can find examples of good relations between Jews and nobles, Agnon's stories reflect the often precarious situation of the Jew's dependence on the caprices of the nobleman and the extent to which he needed Jewish services, talents, and benefits.

Though often not dependent on specific Jewish behavior, Christian views of Jews were also affected, implies Agnon (and Werses), by the Jews' practices limiting contact with their non-Jewish Polish community, whether because of limited linguistic skills, unfamiliarity with others' ways, or the suspicion among the groups. In this we discern the mutual demonization of the groups as being at the roots of many troubles, as one Other marginalized the other.

The book is an excellent illustration of Werses' erudition in matters pertaining to Agnon and Jewish culture. Yet the study's brevity, while supported by many illustrations, does not do the author service. This reader also found the index of works discussed to be of limited value, since page numbers to indicate location of such discussions were left out. There is no doubt that the book makes for good reading. It is informative and offers a broad sampling of Agnon's fiction, Ora Wiskind's translation being generally natural and unobtrusive (except for a few scattered instances, as in her translation of "tinoket" as baby, while the term "young girl" would have been more fitting, p. 46).

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Equivocal Dreams: Studies in Modern Hebrew Literature, by Lev Hakak. Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1994. 195 pp. \$19.95.

This volume consists of a variety of previously published essays on Israeli fiction and poetry. The prose section includes four essays on S. Y. Agnon and one on A. B. Yehoshua. The section on poetry includes essays on David Vogel and Natan Alterman, Natan Zach, and Near Eastern poets in Israel. Hakak offers us apparently disparate articles on diverse