

## CANDLES OVER TROUBLED WATER: *SEFER HAMA'ASIM* AND AGNON'S UNFINISHED BUSINESS

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Every book is founded on some mistake,  
And every method is constructed on one fundamental error; there is no  
matter in which chaos does not reign,  
And every clean robe scrubbed with soap and made pure, will become  
blackened and impure for tomorrow.  
Why all the toil? Why life, even, for that matter?  
Say so, if you know.

*Micha Josef Berdyczewski*<sup>1</sup>

The stories in Shmuel Yosef Agnon's *Sefer Hama'asim* are particularly enigmatic, and of them, it can be safely said that "Hanerot" (The Candles) is one of the most opaque and perplexing. The story's plot details the unfolding attempt of a characteristic Agnon protagonist to immerse in the sea just prior to the onset of the Sabbath—an attempt doomed to failure not because of any shortcoming on his part, but rather the result of a pre-ordained decree effective against him, one that he can neither understand nor resist. In this article, we will attempt to understand this decree and its roots in Agnon's biography as an emerging writer. Specifically, we will attempt to understand the story in light of Agnon's unrealized relationship with Micha Josef Berdyczewski, one of the most influential of the Hebrew-language thinkers and writers in Europe at the turn of the twentieth century and into its first two decades.

### *Sefer Hama'asim's* Underlying Motive

*Sefer Hama'asim*, of which "Hanerot" is a part, was already a literary enigma when the first five stories of the collection were published together in the May 13, 1932 literary supplement of the newspaper *Davar*.<sup>2</sup> One of the first to comment on them, apparently, was Berl Katznelson, *Davar's* editor, who said to the author, "While I know that most of my readers will be perplexed, since they never saw such a thing in Agnon, [even] I cannot boast by saying that I have plunged their depths."<sup>3</sup> These words appear in the letter that Katznelson sent Agnon after publishing the stories, but are only a confirmation of the argument that occurred prior to publication of the stories, which Katznelson had described as "strange." Agnon had apparently insisted intently on pub-

lishing all five of the stories as a single unit, despite their inordinate length relative to other items featured in the supplement, and despite the editor's concerns, which, I believe, Agnon shared. Nevertheless, the insistent writer prevailed over the editor of *Davar*.

Katznelson's fears materialized rapidly. The best of the responses were incredulity, while the more severe reactions were expressed by a retraction of support by leading critics, both of the author and his works. For example, Dov Sadan, in an article entitled, "Embarrassment and Its Manifestations," wrote:

Some two years ago, S.Y. Agnon began publishing some of his short stories ("Sefer Hama'asim," in the *Davar* supplement, and "Pat Shleimah" in a special issue of *Moznayim* honoring Bialik's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday)... the stories are of a strange type...and it must be admitted that in terms of art, they are not the highest level of his work and his ability.<sup>4</sup>

These harsh responses had no inhibitory effect on Agnon. Not only did he go on to publish additional stories in the series, but over the years, he republished the five original stories with additions, corrections, and editing changes. When the original stories were published as part of his book *Elu va-elu* (1941), he even added eight new stories to them in the format of the first five. In 1951, the stories "moved house," with the assimilation of five additional stories, bringing their number to twenty, and they were incorporated into the collection of his works entitled *Samuch Venireh*.<sup>5</sup>

Why did Agnon insist on publishing the stories in *Davar*, despite Katznelson's reservations (polite and restrained though they were), and particularly after his concerns proved mild relative to the reception of the first stories by key critics in Jewish Palestine of the 1930s? And in light of the unsympathetic reception, why did Agnon continue to refine the stories obsessively, adding new works to the collection, even though, as he attested to his son Hemdat, he didn't even like "his modern stories?"<sup>6</sup>

Baruch Kurzweil, in his article "Nituah hasippur 'Pat Shleima' kedugma lefianuah sippurei 'Sefer Hama'sim,'" was the first critic who succeeded in propping open a window to afford a preliminary glimpse into the innards of these stories, claiming that "Agnon's stories from *Sefer Hama'asim* are an introduction to an overall understanding of the brilliant storyteller."<sup>8</sup> In Kurzweil's analysis of the story "Pat shleimah" (A Whole Loaf),<sup>9</sup> he exposed the identity of Dr. Yekutiel Ne'eman as Moses: the "letter" (*mikhtav*) that the protagonist must deliver to its destination is "God's writing" (*mikhtav elohim*) (Gen. 32:16), or the tablets of the covenant (the first tablets) whose fate was to be broken and not reach their destination, and "the master" is none other than God. In offering this interpretation, Kurzweil presumably helped Agnon gain acceptance by giving the stories critical attention in the form of deciphering some cryptic aspects of his writing. On the other hand, Kurzweil's proposed solution to the riddle of the characters' identity did not address the enigma of their odd behavior or the surrealistic setting in which they were placed, and led to yet another round of critical bafflement that sometimes appeared even more extreme than the first. We shall continue where Kurzweil left off by addressing the cryptic nature of

these stories, and their inextricable connection to Agnon's biography.

To introduce this avenue of pursuit, we must take a long digression from "Hanerot," going backwards in time to a brief enigmatic episode in Agnon's early life as an author, and its solution will ultimately lead us back to Agnon's enigmatic stories.

### A Telling Omission

In 1921 (4 Sivan 5681), more than eleven years prior to publication of the initial stories in *Sefer Hama'asim*, and just ten days after the murder of Yosef Hayyim Brenner, Agnon sent a letter to author and critic David Aryeh Friedman. The letter included an appendix of the works Agnon had written to date (including a number of works yet unpublished.) The sense of urgency conveyed by Agnon's writing to Friedman, in what was essentially the period of mourning for Brenner, is striking in and of itself. The appended list, however, presents a true mystery, for anyone familiar with Agnon's work will readily notice Agnon's omission of the story "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor," a work that was his first to be accepted among the literary consensus in Palestine. It was this story that earned Agnon his place as a significant author in the heart of the circle of artists and thinkers concentrated in the neighborhoods of Ahuzat Bayit and Neveh Tzedek at the beginning of the Second Aliyah.

The death of Brenner, the patron who brought about the publication of Agnon's writing at this critical and initial juncture in the development of his work, the man who was truly kind to him at the beginning of his creative life, was likely for Agnon a sign that the time had come to take action to promote his career. Writing the letter to Friedman, with the list included, was an initial expression of Agnon's response to Brenner's murder

Precisely for this reason, it would certainly be reasonable to expect that "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor" would occupy a place of honor on such a list. It is inconceivable that it was chance forgetfulness that led to its non-mention. The likelihood that the omission was intentional and conscious only increases when we recall that "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor" — written in a four-day burst of creativity<sup>10</sup> and published in five installments in *Hapoel Hatsa'ir* from January through May 1912 — was published shortly afterwards as a book thanks to Brenner's support, at great personal economic, emotional, and physical investment.<sup>11</sup> Various critics, such as Judith Halevi-Zwick,<sup>12</sup> have noted this omission but have offered no possible explanations.

Agnon's amnesia regarding this story, his intentional omission or forgetting, the timing of his letter, and the writing of *Sefer Hama'asim*, and specifically "Hanerot" were the direct result, I believe, of what I shall call "the Berdyczewski Incident." Agnon's unrealized relationship with Berdyczewski was perhaps one of the most formative in his identity as an aspiring writer. We will now trace this relationship on our quest to understand the unlikely omission, and to illuminate somewhat the obscurities of "Hanerot" and its fellow compositions in *Samukh Venireh*.

### The Berdyczewski Incident

Given Agnon's achieved status in Hebrew literature, it is difficult to imagine that the backdrop for the "Berdyczewski Incident" is Agnon's struggle to gain acceptance as a young writer on the Hebrew literary scene. Agnon first moved to Palestine in 1908, and left in 1912. His writing from this period did not leave much of an impression among the writers of the Second Aliyah and its critics, with the exception of his work "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor." As mentioned above, this work earned the enthusiastic support of Brenner, who had taken Agnon under his wing.<sup>13</sup> Among Agnon's goals in returning to Europe in 1912 was finding additional patrons. During this period, Berdyczewski was one of the most influential figures in Hebrew culture, and this was enough to induce Agnon to approach him and try, with the help of Brenner's recommendation, to establish a relationship of professional mentoring—perhaps even a friendship—with a man with literary experience, ties, and influence in cultural circles, who could offer him guidance and opportunities for advancement. The young writer, after returning to Europe following a several-year stay in Palestine, was confident that, as Brenner's protégé, he would be accepted by Berdyczewski as a promising writer.<sup>14</sup> Instead, as in a bad dream, he found himself knocking in vain on Berdyczewski's door during his entire stay in Europe. Throughout the next ten years, Berdyczewski consistently refused to meet with Agnon, despite a number of attempts on Brenner's part to intervene on his behalf.<sup>15</sup> Agnon did not receive the response that he so desired, and as we shall see, the matter ate at him from within.

This rejection culminated at the beginning of 1920, eight years after Agnon left Neveh Tzedek to make a name for himself in Europe, when he received a stinging slap in the face from Berdyczewski that overshadowed his work to his last day. Years of pandering to his elusive longed-for mentor were rewarded with a review of his story "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor," which appeared in the fifth issue of the journal *Hatequfah*.<sup>16</sup> Only, this review was not a gratifying acknowledgement for the young author, but rather a brief and scathing critique that became a constant "locus of pain" for Agnon.<sup>17</sup> In the review, Berdyczewski asserted that Agnon could be counted among those who "subordinated content to style, style being the object of their desire," a mere imitation of the ancient language of the Sages. The critic could not refrain from adding sarcastically that he was "stunned by the lightness of his [Agnon's] pen."<sup>18</sup>

The title of Berdyczewski's critical essay, "Crooked and Straight,"<sup>19</sup> wields the very same name of the work, which translates as "And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight," as an implement of assault, implying that Agnon's work was crooked, and might be resolved and "straightened out" only if he accepted the advice and demands of the critic that he from now on compose only in his own language, one that does not "subordinate content to style." The proposed solution would be achieved only "when the poet diverges from the trodden path...when he parts ways with his pretentious language of rabbinic piety...and begins telling us tales...[in a] language that is his own."<sup>20</sup>

Berdyczewski opens his critique of Agnon's work in a blatantly mocking tone: "The first chapter bewails the vagaries of time, 'when a man is beset by

tribulations,' and tells of a certain person who lost all of his worldly possessions, and traveled great distances to 'beg, with a letter of recommendation... in hand.'" Berdyczewski's attack has Agnon identified with his protagonist: knocking in vain on Berdyczewski's own door, armed with Brenner's recommendation, which is subsequently drained of any potency by Berdyczewski's critique. This was a cruel strike at Agnon's greatest vulnerability, written by the man Agnon was trying to woo.

Berdyczewski's disdain is at its peak when he states his shock at "the lightness of this young man's pen, or was it his linguistic talent?" and continues with his mocking paraphrase of "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor":

He tells us in truly pretentious language of rabbinic piety the incident of a single Jew, with all attending deeds and circumstances. This is no laughing matter, but more a dirge, a properly doleful tale...However, ultimately, when Menashe Hayyim's longing awakens him from the respite of his wandering... he then drinks from the cup of sorrow, as he is wont. **And if we do not feel sympathy for his plight on account of his qualities, the fault lies with the narrator, who chose this for him, and his style.**<sup>21</sup> [Emphasis added.]

The condescending reference to Agnon as a "young man" leads up to the condescending and insulting paraphrase of Agnon's story, reducing it to cheap romance.

Furthermore, the review's placement in the margins of the journal doubles the insult through its literal marginalization. The Table of Contents of this issue of *Hatequfah* (see below) graphically illustrates the full extent of the blow that Agnon most certainly felt upon reading this scathing review. Berdyczewski's critique of Agnon's work appears only in the sixth and final part of the volume, entitled "Notes," and it is not even directly mentioned in the Table of Contents. Rather, it is hidden between pages 484 and 485 as the fourth sub-article that concludes in a bibliographic survey.

The delayed release of the review also contributed to the insult. For while the seventh and final part of "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor" had been published eight years earlier in *Hapoel Hatsa'ir*, on May 19, 1912, this review appeared with critiques of works published in the early 1920s, a further affront to Agnon, implicitly presenting him as a newcomer to the literary scene.<sup>22</sup> The critique, therefore, constituted an attack on Agnon from every angle: content, disparaging language, location in the issue, timing, and above all, written by the very object of his admiration.

And yet, precisely because of the pain it caused, I would argue, this critique by Berdyczewski was a critical motivator for Agnon overall, particularly for the works that were written and published many years after Berdyczewski passed away. Moreover, I believe that it is almost impossible to imagine Agnon's work developing and gaining acceptance, let alone coming to occupy a place at the head of the Hebrew canon, had this incident not occurred.

In light of our familiarity with the Berdyczewski Incident, Agnon's omission of this important story "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor" in his letter to Friedman becomes more intelligible. The story was Agnon's first breakthrough as a

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Image 1: Table of Contents, Issue 5 of Hatequfah, Tishrei-Kislev, 1920.

writer of the Second Aliyah.<sup>23</sup> Brenner had taken the trouble to publish it in a separate edition that he financed independently. It is difficult to consider any explanation for its absence from the list sent to Friedman, other than Agnon's preference to avoid recalling the shameful mark associated with the work.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the review appeared in the very same issue that also published Friedman's groundbreaking monographic essay on Brenner's writing<sup>25</sup> must have increased Agnon's fear that the name of the story appearing on the list would have brought to mind that fifth issue of *Hatequfah*. It is difficult not to feel empathy for Agnon, whose appeal to Friedman was based on a hope that he would write a new monograph on his works that would appear in the same journal in which he had been so brutally cut down, while the memory of Brenner, his mentor, was still fresh, and while Berdyczewski would still be able to read it, before it was too late.

### The Incident Replayed in *Sefer Hama'asim*

Numerous Israeli critics have considered the significance of the surrealist aspects of "Hanerot," which appear also in companion stories in *Sefer Hama'asim*.<sup>26</sup> In what follows, we will consider the story's dreamlike quality in the broader context of Agnon's biography, in hope that we can shed light not only on "Hanerot," but on the collection of *Sefer Hama'asim*, a distinct unit in Agnon's body of work that has perplexed readers and critics since the early days of its publication. Many of the enigmatic elements and themes in "Hanerot" and, in effect, in all of the stories in *Sefer Hama'asim* are illuminated in the context of the Berdyczewski episode and its profound effect on Agnon. It might be argued that these stories, in various and roundabout ways of which Agnon was likely only partially conscious, are a literary re-enactment of Agnon's failed attempts to induce Berdyczewski to accept him and his work.

In all the stories, the act that sets off the plot is performed at the wrong time and in the wrong way, always resulting in a tragic missed opportunity, mirroring and signifying Agnon's own tragic missed opportunity to gain Berdyczewski's favor. In each story, the tragedy is enhanced by a satanic figure who intercepts the narrator as he attempts to carry out the act. These figures are, I would argue, various representations of Berdyczewski's character, transformed in Agnon's artistic consciousness into obstacles preventing his characters from completing their work. "Hanerot" begins with a deceptively straightforward description, in which the narrator sets forth the time predicate of the story:<sup>27</sup>

Finally, finally, I have taken out the time to visit the sea. All during the six days of labor, I was busy and did not have time to bathe. On Sabbath eve after midday, I released myself from all of my affairs, took along some white clothes, and set out to bathe.

The reader is under the impression that the narrator, having completed his business, is now free to embark on a leisurely stroll to the sea, reasonably

in advance of the Sabbath, to immerse and calmly prepare himself for the holy day of rest. Unless one decodes the rich allusions provided with uncanny clairvoyance, there is no hint of tension or indication that this placid scene foreshadows surreal events yet to be unraveled.

The time setting, we are told, is "Sabbath eve after midday," echoing the time-predicate setting of the Mishnah in Tractate Shabbat (2:7):<sup>28</sup> "A person must say three things in his home on Sabbath eve as nightfall approaches: Have you separated the tithe? Have you prepared the *eruv*? Kindle the lights!"<sup>29</sup> But while we know that Agnon's narrator sets out to immerse "after midday," precisely how long after midday is not specified.

Immediately in the second paragraph, we are confronted with the first explicitly surreal event: an encounter with an intervening character, a kind of angel of destruction who enters the scene in order to hinder the narrator. All of the stories in *Sefer Hama'asim* follow this pattern: a protagonist on a quest has a "chance" meeting with a character who leads him astray,<sup>30</sup> as in a dream when one is deflected endlessly from one's destination: "Mr. Hayyim Apropos ran into me," says the narrator, who has just begun to make his way to the sea, without any intimation of surprise, and perhaps even suggesting that Apropos had intended to meet him. Gershon Shaked reads this encounter as a meeting with the unconscious, "one of the strange phenomena in the life of the soul...known as the 'fateful encounter'...an ostensibly chance event that speaks to a hidden connection between the participants in the encounter... the character with whom the protagonist meets might be likened to...a kind of introjected object in his own soul."<sup>31</sup> Delay by this interloper in the form of Mr. Apropos, or perhaps a projection of the narrator—adding to the dream-like element of the story—turns out, however, to be only the beginning of the entanglement that leads him further astray from his goal.

When Apropos asks the narrator if he is on his way to pray with the mystics, the embarrassed narrator—"as embarrassed as I am every time I see Mr. Apropos"—lies, insofar as he refrains from contradicting the former's conjecture regarding his actual doings. He says, "I nodded yes to him. And although no word was uttered from my lips, I had lied. I had not wanted to lie..." The defense of lying betrays the narrator's desperation and fear that should he answer honestly, he will lose Mr. Apropos' approval. His emotional agitation will prove significant for our unfolding analysis; for now, it is sufficient to note that the narrator is cornered and bewildered, his only available escape being to dissimilate.

Apropos' question about prayer with the mystics exposes the fact that the narrator's excursion to the sea occurs not on "Sabbath eve after midday," [emphasis added] as he blithely presented it, but is actually taking place very close to the onset of the Sabbath. When this parameter is made known, the story's overall surreal effect is enhanced for the reader, who has been misled and disoriented. It appears, then, that the narrator's lie to Apropos is in effect the second lie and surreal element of the story: the first was his misleading of the readers. The reader was never told precisely what time the excursion began, and was under the impression that his outing was leisurely, not during the twilight zone immediately prior to the "Sabbath eve as nightfall ap-



proaches," when the ill-prepared are in danger of falling behind in their tasks and desecrating the Sabbath.

Apropos' mention of the mystics moreover draws our attention to a detail in the illusion-saturated opening of the story, specifying that the narrator "took along some white clothes," which he had brought along to put on immediately after emerging from the water.<sup>32</sup> The original association of the white garments is biblical: during the *Avodah* service performed on the Day of Atonement in the Second Temple period—the ultimate Sabbath day, or "*Shabbat shabbaton*"—the priest would change into white garments as part of his purification for the ritual. White garments later came to be associated with ordinary Sabbath days, and preparing them, a symbol of fastidious advance preparation. It is related that Rabban Gamliel was known for the care he took to have his white garments washed mid-week, in order to be sure that they were clean in time for the Sabbath. Centuries later, in mid-sixteenth-century Safed, mystics adopted the practice of donning white clothes and venturing out of the city to greet the Sabbath Queen—hence Apropos' association. The mention of the clothes reinforces the theme of the pressured and often surreal transition time into the Sabbath, though, in any case, our narrator's white garments are clean, and it is apparently something else that is preventing him from completing his Sabbath preparations on time.

The dreamlike unfolding of events under the literal shadow of the dimming day continues when Apropos drops out and the protagonist's "old man" (here, Agnon uses a midrashic idiom, "*zkeni*"), his grandfather, appears suddenly, as if replacing the vanished interloper. They enter a house together—a house ready for the Sabbath, though its occupants are not—and a bookseller stands there, offering books in Samaritan. The narrator reports (for now, we will simply take note of the odd and fantastical nature of this description, returning later to the *ars poetica* reference to the writer's task):

I perused them and was surprised that I was reading and understanding, and surprised that I knew everything that was written therein. These included passages I myself had written that were copied into them, and passages that I had hoped to write and hadn't written, since my fountain pen had not absorbed them.

Finally, we are confronted with the object for which the story is named: the candles. While the narrator is examining the books, he notices that the Sabbath candles, which have already been lit, are about to fall. In his attempt to right them, or to "maintain the candles," he again appears helpless and unable to complete the task, at which he ought to be accustomed and proficient.<sup>33</sup> The narrator does not succeed in righting the candles: "One candle collapsed in my hand, and one candle was crushed between my fingers, and the other two candles also collapsed." In trying to set the candles right, "my hands went limp and my fingers fumbled." The collapse of candles is always dramatic, presenting the danger of conflagration and the transition from controlled fire to raging fire. The collapse of Sabbath candles, however, contributes uniquely to the surreal setting of the story. Firstly, because the fall of these markers of the beginning of the Sabbath suggests a collapse of cosmic time; and secondly

since the lighting and extinguishing of fire is forbidden on the Sabbath, the fall of the candles risks potential mishaps including those that might require violation of the law which cannot be rectified.

The gaze of the old man "whose lower lip protruded and hung down, as one who is dissatisfied by what he sees," restores the narrator to his senses and he leaves the house, as if the house had previously held him against his will, in order to complete that which he had set out to do, to immerse in the sea.

The Berdyczewski episode helps us understand the enigmatic form of *Sefer Hama'asim*, which neither seeks nor allows resolution. We might say that these dead ends had little to do with readership or actual critics who, for the most part, found the stories to be utterly perplexing; rather, they were intended to be a public response to the late Berdyczewski. The presumed reader is absent from the diegetic reality, while the intended reader, Berdyczewski, is absent from the actual reality.

Agnon's publication of the damaging stories, and his persistent preoccupation with them, including adding new works to the series over a protracted period, might be viewed as a manifestation of fate neurosis, a phenomenon described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.<sup>34</sup> This pattern is echoed in a theme repeated in all the stories in *Sefer Hama'asim*, namely the ritual of self-sacrifice of the narrator—killing, wounding, imprisonment in the form of live burial, and other manifestations—who knows that he has been sentenced in advance to not complete that which he had set out to accomplish. A conjecture as to the meaning of this macabre element is inseparable from the riddle of Agnon's own self-harm, namely, his insistence that the stories be published in *Davar* despite Katznelson's reservations. Agnon was aware of the compulsion (at least in part) and its detrimental effect, but he did not desist, while continuing his main literary undertakings, from continuing to work on the collection variously until his last day. We shall return shortly to the self-sacrificial nature of this compulsion.

Fate neurosis, interestingly, is a theme that Berdyczewski introduces in fictional parallel in his story "Garei Rehov." (The story opened the fifth issue of *Hatequfah*, in which the pulverizing critique of Agnon's work also appeared). The protagonist of Berdyczewski's "Garei Rehov" provides us with a description of the phenomenon: "I do not believe in the revival of the dead, but I believe in the revival of something that has passed and gone or has died in the mind of man. The poet is omnipotent." [Emphasis added.] Agnon, in the fashion thus described, revived in the stories of the Book of Deeds "something" that had "passed and gone."<sup>35</sup> Berdyczewski captures the phenomenon most poignantly in the following passage:

The paths of the devil have multiplied, and the straight path has not been blazed at all. God warns, the Sages warn and warn again. Hell is so deep; the fires of Hell burn incessantly; and pieces of evidence in the thousands attest that the evil is absolute evil, and despite this, people run after it. The creator unceasingly creates, and it is the evil impulse that destroys. One turns to the right, and desire arouses the heart; one turns left, and there, too, lust glitters.<sup>36</sup> [Emphasis added.]

What is this glittering lust that draws Agnon to write these stories? It is the yearning for the approval of his longed-for demiurge.

### "A language of one's own": Agnon's Dialogue with "Garei Rehov" and Berdyczewski's Other Works

We might dismiss the significance of the fate neurosis theme appearing both in "Hanerot" and in "Garei rehov" as coincidence, if it were not for the outstanding number of resemblances between the texts, suggesting that "Hanerot" was heavily influenced by "Garei Rehov."

In his well-known article, "Berdyczewski and Agnon: Another Face,"<sup>37</sup> Avner Holzman was among the first to point out the extreme dissonance between the "cold and reserved relationship of each towards the other's works,"<sup>38</sup> and proximity via the prominent presence of Berdyczewski's pen (and perhaps even his persona)—"his manner of creating and styling of characters"—in Agnon's writing. Their literary style, beyond the parallels in "Garei rehov" and "Hanerot," shared many similarities, among them: overlapping fields of discourse and use of literary allusions; the way both identified the central issues at stake for Jewish-Hebrew culture; and the practices that both undertook in resolving conflicts on matters of culture, ethics, and theology in Hebrew culture.<sup>39</sup> These points of similarity, however, were ultimately overshadowed by the dynamic between the two men. This influence might be traced to Berdyczewski's critique of "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor," in which Berdyczewski advised Agnon as to how he should amend his ways in the future. He wrote:

When the poet diverges from the trodden path and seeks out a way to express his lyrics and to voice his thoughts, he should do so from the new strength confined within him, boundary-breaking strength....<sup>40</sup>

He advises Agnon to, "diverge... from his pretentious language of rabbinic piety, not drinking from a well he has not dug himself," and to "begin telling us tales [*ma'asim*] as an ordinary person in everyday language, but a language that is his own."<sup>41</sup> [Emphasis added.]

Agnon seems to have heeded Berdyczewski's call, beginning with the very title of his collection of surreal stories, *Sefer Hama'asim*, which takes the word "tales" (*ma'asim*)—using it with its second meaning, "deeds,"—echoing Berdyczewski's painful words that Agnon "begin telling us tales (*ma'asim*)." The phenomenon is not, however, limited to the title of the story. A close reading of the text reveals a repertoire of metaphors, terms, and poetical underpinnings that Agnon borrowed from Berdyczewski and inserted into "Hanerot" (and in all of the stories in *Sefer Hama'asim*.) The result is a style rife with strange idiomatic speech and numerous theological phenomena and aesthetic practices that make these stories enigmatic, likely intended as a protest against the deceased Berdyczewski, as if to say, "Come see what a morass is created when a work dealing with the ambivalences of modern Jewish culture is fashioned in the manner that you have proscribed for me."

I will limit myself here to a few examples of the unassailable resemblance between "Garei Rehov" and *Sefer Hama'asim*, focusing specifically on questions regarding "Hanerot" raised at the beginning of this article,<sup>42</sup> including the identification of Apropos.

### Apropos Unmasked

The self-destructive compulsion recalling Freud's observations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) that impelled Agnon to continue his relentless revision and publication of the stories is unmistakably echoed in the dynamic between the narrator and the character of Mr. Hayyim Apropos. To recall, at the beginning of the story, Apropos lures the narrator into a strange house, drawing him away from his pressing affairs, despite his daunting and off-putting appearance.

Who is this Apropos who drew the narrator into a house not his own? Apropos, it should now be clear, is none other than Berdyczewski himself, who nearly extinguished Agnon's own creative fire. Berdyczewski, like Apropos, lured Agnon, under duress, to obsessively reshape his writing by conforming to the elder writer's demands of style. Indeed, the narrator desires to please Apropos, to the point that he is induced to lie regarding the purpose of his walk, silently nodding in response to Apropos asking if he was going out to pray with the mystics.

I did not want to lie, but my heart did not desire to say something that was not from his own words. I was embarrassed, as embarrassed as I am every time I see Mr. Apropos, since I knew that he was not satisfied with me, and perhaps because I had set my eyes on his daughter, and she was not available to me. [Emphasis added]<sup>43</sup>

The narrator's impotence is an intensified version of the profound pain that Berdyczewski's rejection must have inflicted on Agnon's soul, to the point that the latter lost ownership over his most important medium. Agnon, embarrassed by Berdyczewski, who has denied him "his daughter"—i.e. his creative work and his support—finds himself lying and confined to Berdyczewski's words, subverting his writing into a pattern that is "not available" to him and to which his pen and his readership are unaccustomed.

The name Apropos itself appears to be borrowed from Berdyczewski,<sup>44</sup> based on a passage in "Be'ad heHalon" in which the author describes the terrible loneliness of a man who "left a wife and two children and went abroad to complete his studies. He left them!"

It is all burdensome and painful. There is no coordination, no system from top to bottom, no watchful eye. Everything happens by chance ["apropos"] and the great book of life has no punctuation, no vocalization or incantation marks. What are you reading? What do you want? What is your desire and your salvation, sons of Adam, sons of man?...Darkness comes from the abyss of nothingness, covering it with everything and folding everything into it.<sup>45</sup> [Emphasis added.]

The despair described by Berdyczewski is replicated in the despairing character of Agnon's narrator, as well as in the author who caused this narrator's despair.

The physical appearance of Apropos is also largely borrowed from Berdyczewski, fashioned after the shape of Rabbi Aaron's home in "Garei Rehov." Mr. Apropos, in "Hanerot," is described as a person "whose height is below average, and his belly is round, or perhaps square, and his back is bent and his head rests on his heart and his face is always happy, a smile never budging from his lips."<sup>46</sup> The first of the five houses described in Berdyczewski's work is that of Rabbi Aaron:

Protruding from the row was a large house with a broad roof covered with red shingles, which weighed heavily on the walls and the windows and pushed them down towards the foundation. **Imagine, a dwarf made of flesh and oil, on his head a giant sloping hat, and eyes not under his forehead, but rather in his broad belly.** [Emphasis added.]<sup>47</sup>

Agnon's narrator paints the reader an image of Apropos as a blood-and-oil dwarf whose "belly is round, or perhaps square," just as the walls of Rabbi Aaron's house in "Garei Rehov" buckled under the pressure of the roof of the house, which pushed them down and rounded out the squareness of the house. Rather than personify a house as Berdyczewski did in his story, however, Agnon forces the geometry of the house onto a person, squaring Apropos' round belly and leading the helpless narrator into a home he has never seen, just as Agnon pushed his writing forcefully into the mold that Berdyczewski lay forth for him: "That very smile drew my heart after him, even though I knew that it was not intended at me."<sup>48</sup>

The connotation of "Apropos" as referring to the incidental is underscored in Agnon's use of the Hebrew verb *p-g-a'* to describe the fact of their meeting. "*Paga' bi*," in this context is read in the Talmudic sense of "he ran into me" or "met me." An additional layer is revealed, however, by reading it in its original sense of harming or injuring, or worse, harm that leads to death, as in the description of David's revenge on the Amalekite responsible for Saul's assisted suicide: "Thereupon David called one of the attendants and said to him, 'Come over and strike him [*gash pega' bo*]' and he struck him down and he died." (II Sam. 1:15.) [Emphasis added.] In the case of Apropos, the terrifying dwarf, his intrusion [*pegia'*] into the narrator's life appears to be both an intentional infliction of harm, but also incidental, as the narrator is "dragged" after Mr. hayyim Apropos into a house that he had not planned to enter.

### "My Old Man"

The old man in "Hanerot," whose identity has yet to be established, appears when the narrator is looking through books written in Samaritan. In them, he identifies "passages I myself had written and were copied into them, and passages that I had hoped to write and hadn't written, since my fountain

pen had not absorbed them." The old man appears as a mournful expression of Agnon's ultimate pain, the alienation that he felt vis-à-vis his writing, the destruction that prevented him from writing as he wished. As the old man stood, "a sadness from another world rested on him," like the sadness weighing on the soul of the narrator, who had stolen into a strange house. The old man joins the narrator as a second literary representation of an old and worn Agnon, who is mourning having been led astray by Berdyczewski to realms not his own, and distanced by him from the source of his own writing.

While the narrator is reading, he notices that the candles are about to fall. He tries to prevent this, but in his attempt, as in all of his other unsuccessful acts, "one candle collapsed in my hand, and one candle was crushed between my fingers, and the other two candles also collapsed." He tries, again, to set the candle right, but "my hands went limp, and my fingers fumbled." The expression of the old man witnessing this is clearly disapproving, and the narrator returns to his senses and leaves the house, in order to carry out his original intention, to bathe in the sea. We now have one possible answer to our earlier question of why the candles collapse in the narrator's hands: that is what happens when one forces Agnon to write according to Berdyczewski's instructions. At first, he tries to "maintain" the candles with one hand (as per Berdyczewski's recommendations for Agnon to improve his writing, etc.), since his other hand is holding the books, i.e. restrained by the words of another. The attempt to maintain the chronically unsteady candles is Agnon's Sisyphean effort to rectify that which his predecessor lay to ruin. Righting the candles is not just a physical act, but symbolic of the possibility or impossibility of repair.

### **The Futility of Repair: "And every clean robe...will become blackened."<sup>49</sup>**

Berdyczewski, in "Be'ad heHalon,"<sup>50</sup> draws a connection between candles and the inability to "repair and improve" human nature:

A candle was now lit in the room, everything returned to its place, and he returned to his languor. He sat and looked through the book, or jotted down notes on small pieces of paper for his work, and the notepapers themselves had no order or content. What was the point of his research? He was not going to bring about the amelioration of society or the rectification of man today. As for tomorrow, one could only wait.<sup>51</sup>

In "Hanerot," the desire for repair accompanies the narrator throughout the story, beginning at the outset when he takes "white clothes" with him to wear after bathing. Most simply, repair translates as cleanliness, the desire for which is marked explicitly in the sentence that opens the story's final paragraph: "I began to fear that after [emerging], I would not know which of the garments was the clean one: that which I had just taken off, or that which I had taken along to wear after bathing."<sup>52</sup> The time predicate, however, also inheres—as mentioned—in the white garment, since washing it is one of the

tasks that must be performed during the day before the Sabbath begins, leaving enough time to avoid the risk of desecrating the Sabbath. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel said:

Thus was it customary in the House of Rabban Gamaliel. The white garments were given to the non-Jewish launderer **three days before the Sabbath**. (Mishnah, Shabbat 1:9) [Emphasis added.]

The narrator sought to be like Rabban Gamliel. However, as in all of Agnon's stories in *Sefer Hama'asim*, a desired act is not performed on time, sometimes due to a tragic delay, sometimes because it is performed improperly. The timing and execution are bungled beyond rectification.

Likewise, Agnon writes *Sefer Hama'asim* too late for actually responding to Berdyczewski, who has already passed from this world. Therefore, it no longer matters with what Agnon covers himself; even if he has time to immerse himself in a new writing style, it is futile. The very image of the clothes is perhaps taken from Berdyczewski's own claim in his story "Be'ad heHalon":

Every book is founded on some mistake. And every method is constructed on one fundamental error. There is no matter in which chaos does not reign. **And every clean robe scrubbed with soap and made pure, will become blackened and impure for tomorrow.** Why all the toil? Why life, even, for that matter?

—Say so, if you know. [Emphasis added.]

### Sacrificial Ritual and the Chain of Transmission

Earlier we asked why the narrator needed this garment on an ordinary Friday night that was not Yom Kippur, given that he was not going to pray with the mystics. While associated with the mystics, the "white garment," as mentioned, originates much earlier with the cloth garment in Leviticus 6:1-6:

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Charge Aaron and his sons, saying: This is the teaching of the burnt offering...And the priest shall wear his linen garb and linen breeches he shall wear on his body...and he shall take off his clothes and wear other clothes.

During the sacrifices, the High Priest changes his clothes repeatedly as he passes from one stage of the ritual to another.

Why does Agnon invoke this association with sacrifice? Throughout the history of biblical and halakhic literature, various ritual images appear for the transmission of religious authority: heavenly voices and lightning, laying of the hands, appearance of angels, making of sacrifices, bequeathal from father to son, kissing the student's head, and various coronation ceremonies. Agnon's letter to Friedman was in a sense an attempted act of self-coronation, in which Agnon sought to ensure his place in the chain of transmission after Brenner's death, an outgrowth of Agnon's desire to finally be accepted at Berdyczewski's table, to be crowned by Berdyczewski while he was still alive. Placing himself in the chain of authority turns out to be impossible, however,

and Berdyczewski passes away without having "laid his hands" in ceremonial ordination on Agnon's head. The "ceremony" that was supposed to have signified Agnon's acceptance into the literary elite of Israel is prevented.

Agnon then creates a new ritual of (dis)continuity by writing *Sefer Hama'asim* as a single canonical unit in *Davar*. This second ritual is a form of self-sacrifice: he publishes unintelligible stories with weak plots, thereby intentionally disrupting the relationship between a writer and his readers. In each of the stories, he returns to that same moment of crisis and degradation that becomes a foundational moment in his work itself. He tries to reach the arena where Berdyczewski is bound to listen, the arena of those who are not present, located beyond the system of normal ties between an author and his audience. Considered in this context, the white robes join other evidence that makes it possible to read the entire *Sefer Hama'asim* as a sacrificial act in which Agnon sacrifices himself through attempted suicide.

The publication of *Sefer Hama'asim* is an additional fiasco in the series of Agnon's failures to be accepted and become a fixture among the literary elite in Palestine. In performing this act of self-sacrifice, Agnon actively participates in what is inevitably at times a painful, even cruel aspect of the set of rituals of transmission of authority.

In his book, *Theory of Religion*,<sup>53</sup> Georges Bataille speaks about "sacrifice, the festival, and the principles of the sacred world," claiming that although the principle underlying the infrastructure of the sacrificial act is destruction, and although it often reaches the point of total destruction (as in the biblical "whole offering" — *korban olah* — which was totally consumed by fire), the destruction it seeks is not annihilation. Rather, sacrifice intends to destroy only one thing — the thing itself (that is, its thing-ness.)<sup>54</sup>

Sacrifice...draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice...The sacrificer needs the sacrifice in order to separate himself from the world of things, and the victim could not be separated from it in turn if the sacrificer was not already separated in advance. The sacrificer declares: 'Intimately I belong to the sovereign world of gods and myths, to the world of violent and uncalculated generosity...I call you back to the intimacy of the divine world, of the profound immanence of all that is.'<sup>55</sup>

In the sacrificial act, in order to connect with God, one must disconnect from time and place, and venture into a separate space and temporal zone. In the sacrificial ritual, the human being carrying out the act suspends the predicate of presence in the world, his title as an object that occupies space and time — his realness. Agnon performs such a ritual: he suspends himself from the reality of the aesthetic world of writing in Palestine in order to meet not God, but Berdyczewski.

In the Binding of Isaac, the ram replaces the child as the victim. This is the prototype for every sacrificial act — the sacrificial object is a replacement for the human. In publishing the stories of the "Book of Deeds," Agnon wishes to achieve something quite similar. A need arises for self-sacrifice, and Agnon sacrifices his story, his oeuvre, and his good name; in essence, he is sacrific-



ing his artistic self, as an act of professional suicide. Negating “thingness” creates parity between that which was meant to have been sacrificed, and the replacement object, to the point that the difference between the sacrificer and the sacrificed object is erased.<sup>56</sup>

By his act of writing and publication—almost a ritual itself in this understanding, we might say—Agnon sacrifices himself in the chain of authority in order to be worthy of acceptance by the only one who has the power to bestow this authority upon him. In publishing *Sefer Hama'asim*, he continues the hegemony of key figures in Jewish culture, without gaining any conferred authority; that will come much later. The man capable of crowning him is absent from the ritual, and none of the witnesses—the *Davar* readership, including the hegemonic group, which is the actual the philosophical and cultural-aesthetic authority—understand the real significance of what they have read. It is only the Nobel Prize award ceremony,<sup>57</sup> three decades after the publication in *Davar*, that is for Agnon the authority-conferring ritual that finally signifies the completion of his acceptance into the culturally hegemonic power elite.

### Eros and Demiurge

As we saw earlier, the sentence “Mr. Hayyim Apropos ran into me,” which uses the rabbinic Hebrew expression “*paga bi*,” is not only a way of provoking Berdyczewski by flouting his demand that Agnon stop using Talmudic language. It is also meant to convey a real infliction of harm, and even alludes to the well-known Amora, referred to as “Rav” (Aba bar Aybo): “He who speaks mockingly of a Torah scholar has no remedy for his wound,” (BT Tractate Shabbat, 119b), referring to an actual wound. But the subject of this statement is ambiguous. Is he who does not find “a remedy for his wound” the person who strikes or the person who is struck? Is there no forgiveness for the assailant, or is there no remedy for the assailed, the humiliated Torah scholar? As far as we are concerned, there is no remedy for the wound inflicted by Agnon’s mentor and teacher, and at the same time, nothing exceeds it in importance.

What induces the writer to take pen to paper? What is the force that spurs the poet and the writer to overcome all obstacles and to declare, “Here I am!”? Or, as Oscar Wilde asks, what is it that motivates an artist to make “perfect use of an imperfect medium?”<sup>58</sup> There is one single common denominator to all attempts to respond to this essential question: distress. The poet Natan Zach bids wise lovers close their doors to the poet, even to himself, since the poet ushers woe into their house that is greater than the cold and wind of a stormy and dark winter night: “the poet, out of distress, not abundance, sings.”<sup>59</sup> The poet will have to remain outside the door of those who are wise, since he needs (and thus brings, and even fosters) distress in order to create.

Who caused the terrible distress that brought Agnon to write in the way he did? If we say that every poet has a formative demiurge, Berdyczewski was the demiurge of Agnon’s eros. Most of Agnon’s great works were written after the critique in *Hatequfah*, and after the stories in *Sefer Hama'asim* were written. But for the rest of his literary life, Agnon revisited that event, per-

haps not always with full consciousness. The first negative creative force replaces the original, naïve eros that Berdyczewski trampled under his heels in a coarse and even violent manner. The consequent anger and severe distress ultimately led Agnon to be motivated by a transformed creative force (one which emerged from and developed in the context of his woundedness<sup>60</sup>), serving as a complex and powerful motivation for this author who thirty years later finally earned his assured place at the head of the Israeli cultural canon, but thirty years too late.

### Appendix: Berdyczewski's Critique of "Vehaya he'aqov lemishor"

#### "Crooked and Straight" by M.J. Berdyczewski

Many days ago, a young man, who was living in the Holy Land, sent me a short story by the name, "Vehaya he'Aqov leMishor" [And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight] and scribbled on it: "To you, sir, from me, the author... and I have read the opening: There was once a man, whose name was Menashe Hayim from the holy community of Buczacz, may God protect it, who lost all his material possessions, heaven help us, and poverty turned him into a transgressor of his Lord's commandments. He was censured, pressed, and shaken up etc. — of him and those like him the fable relates.

The booklet itself I shall describe briefly, chapter by chapter. The first chapter bewails the vagaries of time, "when a man is beset by tribulations," and tells of a certain man who lost all of his worldly possessions, and traveled great distances to beg, with a letter of recommendation from his rabbi in hand. The second chapter details how this same Menashe Hayyim labored and travailed, living off the bread of charity, full of shame, and forgetting, for the meanwhile, his wife, whom he had left in poverty. He sold his letter [of recommendation] to another man, etc. The third chapter speaks of the contemptibility of the beggar who purchased the letter of recommendation from the rabbi, and relates how he died a strange death, etc. In the fourth chapter, it is written of this wretched beggar's embalmment and eulogy, and how, while dealing with the body of the impoverished dead man they found Menashe Hayyim's letter of recommendation in the beggar's bag, and sent it to the place of residence of Menashe's wife, and annulled the marriage in the rabbinic court. The woman was consoled, and she married a second husband, and bore him offspring, while from her first marriage, she had had no child. After many days had passed, Menashe Hayyim returned home. On the way "he met a poor man who intercepted him and drew his bow, and Menashe Hayyim turned back on his heels, confounded by his shame... The end of the matter: life devoured Menashe Hayyim, and he did not forbid her to her husband, etc. His sanity wavering and failing, he thought about the day of death; all of his mighty and powerful acts are offered in this chapter."

I was stunned by the lightness of this young man's pen, or was it his linguistic talent? He tells us in truly pretentious language of rabbinic piety the

incident of a single Jew, with all attending deeds and circumstances. This is no laughing matter, but more a dirge, a properly doleful tale. The woman, a homemaker, worked hard as was the practice, and will be redeemed by the passing of time. Her husband, who had been insignificant to her, became the focus of the fable. He was not a great soul—to the contrary, he was a pathetic soul. He rolled with life's punches and never did the punching. He grabbed from the table of life, the prayer-shawl of poverty draped over his shoulder. In walking from city to city, he saw much along the way, and also heard much. He was, after all, a human being, and when a human being's finger is injured, drops of blood are spilled...however, ultimately, when his longing awakens him from the respite of his wandering, and he comes to the place of his wife, whom he had lawfully wed, and he hears that she—due to his own fault—has been given to another, he then drinks from the cup of sorrow, as he is wont. And if we do not feel sympathy for his plight on account of his qualities, the fault lies with the narrator, who chose this for him, and his style.

Mendel of Satanov, M.H. Luzzatto and the entire entourage that wrote us a new Book of Psalms, a new Book of Parables, a new Zohar and new Epistles of Nachmanides, all of these who gave us "Tractate Poverty," "Tractate Purim," "Tractate Scribes," and more, seeking to show their greatness in the arts of imitation, subordinated content to style, style being the object of their desire. However, whoever composed this incident and set it down in writing, wished to place a vision before our eyes, wished to tell a story. When the poet diverges from the trodden path and seeks out a way to express his lyrics and to voice his thoughts, he should do so from the new strength confined within him, boundary-breaking strength; or, conversely—[perhaps] the content of his story is insignificant, and the writer has come to drag us with linguistic ropes, resplendent in his new garment? To which of these does said author belong? This we will know when he parts ways with his pretentious language of rabbinic piety, not drinking from a well he has not dug himself, and [when he] begins telling us tales as an ordinary person in everyday language, but a language that is his own.<sup>61</sup>

## Endnotes

- 1 Micha Josef Berdyczewski, "Be'ad hehalon," in Kitvei M.Y. Bin-Gorion: Ma-amarim (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishers, 1960), 72.
- 2 The difficulty of critics of Hebrew literature in understanding *Sefer Hama'asim* was also a weapon in the hands of Yizhar, in his work *Likro Sippur*, in terms of proving the lack of need for the profession of incompetent criticism, with which he had a running account since the publication of *Yemei Tsiklag*. Regarding a similar issue of a criticized author's handling of his critics, see: Nurit Guvrin, "Gilgulo hasifrut shel heshbon ishi: bein mayim le-mayim," A. Shen'an, ed., *Biqoret uFarshanut* 17 (1982): 111–131.
- 3 Dan Laor, *hayyei Agnon: Biographia* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1998.)
- 4 In this article Sadan claims that Agnon's protagonists in the stories from *Sefer Hama'asim* are weak and infinitely less convincing than the characters created by Charlie Chaplin's intentional self-parody in cinema. Sadan's article from 1934 was republished in: Dov Sadan, *Avnei bohan* (Tel Aviv: Maḥbarot lesifrut, 1951), 209.
- 5 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Samuch Venireh* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1951.)
- 6 In a conversation with hemdat Agnon, Dan Laor cites him as recalling his father saying: "I have a problem. Kurzweil is going to turn sixty, and I have to give him something, and I don't know what." hemdat inquired as to the problem, and Agnon explained, "Kurzweil only understands my modern things. As for my truly good things, he does not understand them. And I cannot be occupied just now with the things that Kurzweil is interested in." Dan Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 613.
- 7 Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sippurei Shay Agnon* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1970), 74–85.
- 8 Kurzweil, *Masot al sippurei Shay Agnon*, 142–143. See also Dan Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 259. Dov Sadan, the first to see these stories, also initially received them well, his critique in "Embarrassment and Its Manifestations" coming only later.
- 9 Baruch Kurzweil, "Nituah hasippur 'Pat shleima' kedugma lefianuah sippurei 'Sefer hama'sim," in *Masot al sippurei S. Y. Agnon* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1963,) 85–94.
- 10 Laor, *hayyei Agnon*, 74
- 11 Laor, *hayyei Agnon*, 78–79.
- 12 Judith Halevi-Zwick, *Reishitah shel biqoret 'Agnon* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1984.)
- 13 Zwick, *Reishita*, 27–30.
- 14 Dan Laor, *hayyei Agnon*, 135–136.
- 15 Avner Holzman, "Berdyczewski ve'Agnon: panim aherot," *Dapim lemehqar besifrut*, 3 (Haifa: Haifa University, Department of Comparative Literature, 1986), 167–174.
- 16 *Hatequfah*, Book Five (Warsaw, Tishrei-Kislev, 1920.)
- 17 "Makom ke'evvo," to borrow R. Yehudah HaLevi's term from *The Kuzari*.
- 18 In using this expression, Berdyczewski's insult was compounded via the unavoidable association between "lightness of the pen" (*qalut ha-'et*) and frivolity (*qalut da'at*).
- 19 M.J. Berdyczewski, "Vehaya he'aqov," *Hatequfah* 5, 484–85.
- 20 Berdyczewski, "Vehaya he'aqov," 485.
- 21 See full text of the critical review in the Appendix at the end of this paper.
- 22 Berdyczewski's critique was published as a result of the reprinting of "Vehaya he'aqov lemishor" at the outset of 1920 in the *Jüdischer Verlag*. (See Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 130–136.)
- 23 It also marked the reacceptance of Agnon as a promising Hebrew writer towards the end of 1919 when the story was republished, with a few amendments by Agnon, in the *Jüdischer Verlag*. See Laor, *Hayyei Agnon*, 135–136.
- 24 Berdyczewski's critique was published approximately a year and a half before Agnon wrote the letter to Friedman.
- 25 D.A. Friedman, "Y.H. Brenner vegiborav" [Y.H. Brenner and his Heroes], David Frishman, ed., *Hatequfah* 5 (Tishrei-Kislev), 397–447.
- 26 Among them: Baruch Kurzweil, Yoav Elstein, Yaakov Bahat, Meshullam Tochner, Dov Sadan and Gershon Shaked. To them I should add the well-known writer S. Yizhar, who in his book *Likro Sippur* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, Sifriyyat Ofaqim, 1982), charges that the shortfalls of Israeli literary criticism on "Hanerot" is emblematic of the inferiority of Hebrew literary criticism as a whole.
- 27 This and all quotes taken from S.Y. Agnon, "Hanerot," in *Samukh venireh* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), 118–119. Translations are mine.

- 28 In the Ashkenazi version of the Kabbalat Shabbat service, and in some of the Oriental traditions, this text from the Mishnah is a kind of intermezzo of study, recited between the psalms of the Kabbalat Shabbat service and the Evening (*ma'ariv*) service on Friday night.
- 29 Bartenura (Obadiah of Bertinoro), a fifteenth-century commentator on the Mishnah, explains: "as nightfall approaches": tithe and prepare the eruv when it is close to nightfall and day still lingers—but not too much prior to nightfall, lest one transgress and say: "there is still time in the day." The very posing of the two questions is inseparable from the injunction to kindle the lights. But when asked prematurely, they are likely to lead to a transgression, which is above all a kind of laxity, expressed by "there is still time in the day."
- 30 Regarding the characters responsible for the delays who divert the protagonists of the stories in *Sefer Hama'asim* from their paths, see Gershon Shaked, "Hastiya mehaderekh hayashar," *Omanut hasippur shel Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1973), 65–71:  
 'Pat shleima,' 'Leveit Abba,' 'Yedidut,' 'Hate'udah,' and 'Hanerot'—all of these deal with a destiny that was not realized due to a diversion. The name of the diverting hero in 'Hanerot' [i.e. the character who diverts the narrator] is hayyim Apropos, who 'happened to meet' the protagonist-narrator. The diversion itself is borderline-comic. The chance and the concatenation of events at the manifest level elicit a comical response; but the latent connection between the hidden events awakens our sense of terror. (71.)
- 31 Gershon Shaked, "Tiqbolot vezimunim," in *Omanut hasippur*, 57.
- 32 Though, towards the end of the story, it turns out that he is already wearing white: "I began to fear that after [emerging], I would not know which of the garments was the clean one: that which I had just taken off, or that which I had taken along to wear after bathing."
- 33 "Maintaining the candles" refers to the Talmudic term "lehativ," to better, or to maintain the candles in the tabernacle. The act of maintaining the candles comprises the activity of removing the ashes that remained in the vessels after the candles have burned out, cleaning the candles and filling the vessels with new oil (according to Maimonides and *Sefer Ha-hinukh*, maintaining the candles also includes lighting them.) The source of this commandment from the Torah appears in Exodus (27:20-21):  
 As for you, you shall command the Israelites, that they take you clear oil of beaten olives for the light, to kindle a lamp perpetually. In the Tent of Meeting outside the curtain which is over the Ark of the Covenant, Aaron with his sons shall lay it out, from evening to morning before the Lord, an everlasting statue for your generations incumbent on the Israelites.
- 34 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; trans. and ed., James Strachey (New York: Liv-eright Pub. Corp., 1961.)
- 35 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.
- 36 Micha Josef Berdyczewski, "Garei rehov," David Frishman, ed., *Hatequfah*, Vol. 5 (Tishrei-Kislev), (Warsaw: Shtibel, 1920), 10.
- 37 Avner Holzman, "Berdyczewski ve'Agnon: panim aherot," *Dapim lemeḥqar besifrut*, 3, Haifa University, Department of Comparative Literature, (1986): 167–174.
- 38 Avner Holzman, "Berdyczewski ve'Agnon: panim aherot," 166.
- 39 Though they took wildly divergent positions on the relationship between tradition and modernity, or as many critics formulated it, between tradition and secularization.
- 40 Berdyczewski, "Vehaya he'agov" 485.
- 41 David Frishman, *Hatequfah*, 485.
- 42 An additional example of the connection between *Sefer Hama'asim* and "Garei rehov" is how R. Aron, the pathetic protagonist in Berdyczewski's story, becomes a central fixture in the home of the narrator's sick friend in a different story from the collection, "Ha'otobus ha'aharon."
- 43 Agnon, "Hanerot," 117.
- 44 See note 29 regarding Shaked's interpretation of the name "Apropos," the "diverting hero," whom he also refers to as "agav orḥa."
- 45 Micha Josef Berdyczewski, "Be'ad hehalon," in *Kitvei M.Y. Bin-Gorion* (Tel Aviv: Dvir Publishers, 1960), 72. Not coincidentally, the ending of this paragraph is almost identical to the conclusion of Agnon's "Hanerot." I note that although my source for Berdyczewski's work in the present paper is from the Schocken edition of his collected writings, it is helpful to recall that during the time of Agnon's return to Europe, a number of Berdyczewski's works

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- and philosophical monographs were published in Leipzig in 1920 by A.Y. Shtibel, publisher of *Hatequfah*. One can easily imagine Agnon possessing and reading these early editions.
- 46 All quotes in the paragraph are from S.Y. Agnon, "Hanerot," in *Samuch venireh* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), 117.
- 47 Berdyczewski, "Garei rehov," 8.
- 48 Agnon, "Hanerot," 117.
- 49 Berdyczewski, "Be'ad hehalon," 72.
- 50 Berdyczewski's "Be'ad hehalon" is also referred to in "Hanerot":  
A man bent over toward the window and looked outwards, then brought his head back behind him and said 'naharayim' [also the name of a work by Berdyczewski]. The meaning of 'naharayim' was not relevant [since it was close to sunset], but I understood that it means darkness. In other words, that person spoke euphemistically in order not to embarrass me. I panicked, and headed out for the sea.  
Agnon, "Hanerot," 118.
- 51 Berdyczewski, "Be'ad hehalon."
- 52 Agnon, "Hanerot," 118–119.
- 53 Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 43–63.
- 54 Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, 28.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 The term in modern German is *Sachlichkeit*, which would be most accurately rendered in English as "suchness."
- 57 Agnon's speech was delivered at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1966.
- 58 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and other Writings* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005), 3.
- 59 Natan Zakh, "Shir la'ohavim hanevonim."
- 60 Regarding this matter see my article: "Sefat haza'am shel Aharon Appelfeld," Avidov Lipsker and Avi Sagi, eds., *Aharon Appelfeld, 24 Qeriot hadashot* (Bar Ilan University Press, Ofqei Meḥqar Series, in conjunction with the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, 2011.)
- 61 Berdyczewski, "Vehaya he'aqov" *Hatequfah* 5, 484–485. Translation is mine.