

AGNON'S DOG, AND OTHER TALKING ANIMALS IN JEWISH LITERATURE

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/2018/12/agnons-dog-and-other-talking-animals-in-jewish-literature/>

All of them illustrate the predicament of Jewish identity, but not all in the same way.

December 17, 2018 | Dara Horn

This is a response to *The Matchless Master of Modern Hebrew Literature*, originally published in *Mosaic* in December 2018

Hillel Halkin's great gift, richly on display in his ten-part series for *Mosaic* on Hebrew writers of the 19th and early-20th centuries, is his ability to translate, in the deep sense of the term, the almost archaeological layers of modern Hebrew literature for the contemporary English reader, who without knowing where to start digging cannot possibly understand the *tel* of allusions beneath so many modern Hebrew works.



Wikipedia.

For a literary archaeologist like Halkin, the modern Hebrew master S.Y. Agnon, with whom he [concludes](#) his *Mosaic* series, must be an ideal writer, the writer for whom all of his knowledge has prepared him. And Agnon's meandering 1945 masterpiece, *Only Yesterday*, which adds to these linguistic layers the religious and secular dimensions of pre-state Israel, must be the ideal book. I'm with him. It was those archaeological layers that drew me as a young writer to the work of Agnon, and those layers are still the reason I keep returning to so many of his stories.

But *Only Yesterday* stays with me for one reason and one reason only, and it looks as if it's Halkin's reason, too: namely, the dog.

Balak the dog—a stray whom the novel's main character, the failed pioneer Yitzhak Kummer, idly paints with the Hebrew words “mad dog”—a fateful designation that casts the dog out from Jewish society—consumes an enormous amount of space in this already enormous book. Taking up the challenge faced by every critic who has ever read the novel, Halkin concludes his analysis of what this dog “means” by explaining that

he is, as has been observed [by others], a very Jewish dog, and nothing is more Jewish about him than the way the world fears him, reviles him, drives him into exile, hounds him from place to place, and seeks to kill him without any reason that he can discern.

I agree completely with Halkin's assessment of the dog as central to the story. I would only argue that this doesn't go quite far enough.

Halkin calls Balak “the second most famous animal in Jewish literature,” with the first being the talking donkey in the biblical book of Numbers—in the Torah portion titled, of course, “Balak.” That female donkey, like the Jewish people whom her rider has been sent to curse, is granted a unique opportunity to recognize holiness unnoticed by others. In a moment reminiscent of the patriarch Jacob (later “Israel”) who dreams of angels climbing a ladder and awakes to announce “God is in this place and I did not know it,” the donkey pauses in her journey because she perceives the presence of an angel of the Lord whom her human rider does not see. When her rider beats her for stopping, she speaks, saying, “What have I done to you that you have beaten me?” Only then does the rider see the angel before him.

Halkin also rightly recognizes, and Agnon's narrator openly discusses within the book, the “third most famous animal” in Jewish literature: the talking horse in *The Mare*, a novel by the foundational modern Yiddish and Hebrew author Mendele Mokher Seforim. In that work, an abused and bedraggled horse becomes the Yiddish Mr. Ed, unsubtly explaining to her abused and bedraggled Jewish human counterpart that she represents the Jewish people, thrown out by humankind and cursed to remain in her lowly state.

But the list of “most famous animals in Jewish literature” hardly stops with the biblical donkey and Mendele's horse. In fact there are many, many other works of Jewish literature in which animals take on human qualities—and all of them illustrate the unique predicament of Jewish identity.

One example that comes to mind is the 1920 epic poem by the Yiddish literary superstar H. Leyvik. Entitled “The Wolf,” it is about a rabbi who is his ravaged town's sole survivor of a horrific pogrom. Losing his mind, the rabbi ventures into the forest, where he undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes a wolf. When Jews expelled from elsewhere repopulate the ruined town, he returns to haunt it, howling all night long and finally entering the synagogue and biting the prayer leader at the conclusion of Yom Kippur. The terrified congregation then descends upon him and beats him to death.

Then there is the 1924 Yiddish poem by Moyshe Leyb Halpern (who was so famous that H. Leyvik, whose real name was Leyvik Halpern, chose his pseudonym to distinguish himself from the more established Halpern), entitled “The Bird.” Its talking bird, apparently fresh off the boat from Ellis Island, knocks on the American narrator's door, claiming to be his brother and begging for food and shelter. The narrator refuses to let him in, leading to an endless standoff in which the narrator is just as trapped as the bird.

Sholem Aleichem's showstopping, multi-chaptered story "The Haunted Tailor" features a goat who, through no fault of his own, starts a war between two towns, with parodies of the two factions and their quasi-religious pronouncements that are more than a little similar to what Agnon does in *Only Yesterday* with Jerusalem's warring factions arguing over the dog.

Each of these works would be superseded by what surely must qualify as the most famous humanlike animal in Jewish literature: Gregor Samsa, the cockroach in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, whose alarm at his sudden transformation is completely eclipsed by his desperate need to ingratiate himself with the society in which he lives.

And these are just a few examples that I happen to notice on my shelves right now. A comprehensive study would include many others.

There is a literary term for the stylistic technique in which highly distorted characters, including humans with animal-like traits and vice-versa, are used to elicit in the reader simultaneous disgust and empathy. The term is *grotesque*. These figures draw our attention to the ways we reject those who remind us of the things we want to reject about ourselves, even when they are essential to who we are. Balak the dog in *Only Yesterday* certainly qualifies. But in the hundreds of pages he spends in this novel, he also does much, much more.

Halkin classifies Balak as a "Jewish dog" because of his maltreatment by others. As I've suggested, this interpretation is true as far as it goes, but it runs the risk of locating him in the category of "Jewish literature" of the Philip Roth variety that so frustrated me as a young reader—a view of Jewish identity divorced from the content of Judaism and defined solely by gradations of anti-Semitism. Balak is not merely a "Jewish dog" because he is persecuted like a Roth character whose Jewish identity consists almost entirely of alienation. Instead, like an Agnon character, this dog is actively engaged with Jewish tradition. He seeks out kosher food. He worries in talmudic terms about adjudicating unfair weights used in the marketplace. When he suspects he is somehow tainted, he goes looking for a mikveh in which to cleanse himself. In an echo of the talmudic sage Ḥoni the Circle-Maker, he makes a circle to try to stop a drought. He composes Hebrew poetry in the style of medieval Spanish Hebrew poets, and then in the style of modern Hebrew poets. He sits, literally, at the feet of Torah scholars and drinks in their words.

Balak quests after truth, and struggles with its absence: not the absence of God, but the absence of an explanation for his suffering. The fact that we readers know exactly the reason for his suffering, and that the reason—the two words, "mad dog," painted on him by Yitzhak Krummer—is something amazingly stupid, senseless, and cruel, does not make the suffering any less real.

Here Halkin's point that this novel is essentially a response to the Holocaust is, if anything, understated. Discussions of the Holocaust in *non*-Jewish contexts often dwell on theological issues. Where the original Yiddish version of Elie Wiesel's Auschwitz memoir was titled *And the World Was Silent*, emphasizing human culpability, the non-Jewish (French) version was titled *Night*, emphasizing divine absence—as though the main question at hand were how God could have allowed this to happen. The latter is an altogether more appealing way to look at history if

one happens to be from any of the nations actually responsible for or implicated in the slaughter. The reality is that it is no mystery why this happened: people chose to be cruel, as they have chosen to be on a smaller scale for thousands of years.

The simplistic version of the founding of the state of Israel is likewise mired in false supernatural explanations: that it was a miracle, whether bestowed by God or by the United Nations, and a kind of cosmic reward for the Holocaust. No reader of *Only Yesterday*, with its almost endless rehashing of the agonies of pre-state Israel and the dramas and compromises of the famed generation of the Second Aliyah (1904-1914), could make this mistake—not only because of the obvious enormous human effort expended in those years and reflected in these pages, but because the book's story ends so amazingly badly. The great catastrophe echoed in the novel's last pages, with Yitzhak's pointless death, is that when we consider Zionism's political goal of rescuing the Jewish people, it is clear that, for the Jews of Europe, it did not succeed in time.

In the novel, Agnon's narrator openly and derisively jokes about the interpretation of the dog as a *mashal*, or parable, "like Mendele's horse and other stories of livestock and animals and birds, which a person reads for pleasure and if he's intelligent, he applies his intelligence to the moral." The narrator spends several pages defusing this reading by offering an absurd series of parodies of different groups—religious, secular, etc.— who "interpret" the dog in ways that serve their own purposes. All of this can only be designed to convince us that sometimes a dog is just a dog, and that the joke's on us.

Not that Yitzhak's death, caused by this dog who finally goes mad, is a joke. Neither is the Torah—an alarming percentage of which is occupied with the details of animal sacrifice. In one of the many attempts in the novel to explain the "mad dog" to the people of Jerusalem, a local scholar hypothesizes that writing on dogs is a custom by means of which one makes atonement for one's sins, "as Jews do on the eve of the Day of Atonement, with chickens they swirl around their heads."

That ritual, known as *kapores*, is a modern substitute for the scapegoat, the animal on which the High Priest in the ancient Temple would place the sins of the people before entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Yitzhak, we are told, has also entered the Holy of Holies, for at a point in his life when he was not religiously observant he is hired by Arabs to paint the inside of the Mosque of Omar on the site of the ancient Temple, and violates rabbinic proscription by walking freely on the sacred site. So it is perhaps not totally coincidental that by the book's end he winds up bizarrely smitten.

Animal sacrifice was a core practice of ancient Judaism and the people's main means of contact with God. Unlike most of Jewish culture today, animal sacrifice was visceral and bloody and elemental and physical, involving little in the way of language and ideas. In other words, it was not a metaphor. Agnon's mad dog is not a metaphor, either, and neither are Agnon's human characters. They are physical creatures in a physical world, digging into holy ground for things they have lost and cannot find.

Several other dogs appear in the novel, including one embroidered on the bedspread of Yitzhak's first girlfriend. But my favorite dog in the book is the opposite of the stray mad dog Balak. The pet of a successful and carefree pioneer who grows his own food and survives an animal bite—himself the opposite of Yitzhak, a tormented failed pioneer who doesn't till the soil and dies from an animal bite—this dog, blissfully unnamed, loves his human owner and faithfully fulfills his wishes.

At one point, the pioneer locks the door of his hut, hands his dog the key, and tells him, "Run. Put it away." The dog puts away the key and returns. The scene is the opposite of dramatic, and unlike nearly every other paragraph in Agnon's oeuvre, it is devoid of textual allusions of any kind. It is simple and unmetaphorical. It is just a dog holding a key.

For the characters in this novel, both animal and human, language is the only key to everything they have lost. Fortunately for Agnon's readers, it is our key, too, and we need only dig a bit to find it. In the words of that great intertextual master of Jewish literary sources, Groucho Marx: "Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."