
RELIGIOUS ECSTASY, EROTIC TURMOIL, AND
CHRISTIAN INNUENDOS IN S. Y. AGNON'S
"HANESHIQAH HARISHONAH" ("FIRST KISS")

Dalia Dromi

נודעזע לבי ודבק פי בפיה ופיה דבק בפי ונעימות נועם באה מפיה לפי,
ואולי אף מפי לפיה. לפעולה זו קוראים בלשון הקודש נשיקת פה
לגבי כאן יש להוסיף, נשיקה זו נשיקה ראשונה היתה שנשקתי אני
לנערה. וקרוב בעיני שאף נשיקתה נשיקה ראשונה היתה, נשיקת בתולים
שאינ עמה מכאוב, אלא טובה וברכה וחיים וחן וחסד, שאיש ואשה
חיים בהם עד זקנה ושיבה. (161)

My heart thundered and my mouth fastened to hers, and her mouth to mine. And the purest sweetness flowed from her mouth to mine and—it is possible—from my mouth to hers. We call this in Hebrew "the kiss of the mouth".... I should say here that this was the first time I ever kissed a young girl, and it seems almost certain to me that it was her first kiss as well: a kiss of innocence that carries with it no pain, but goodness and blessing, life, grace, and kindness, whereby a man and a woman live together till calm old age. (276)¹

S. Y. Agnon's "Haneshiqah harishonah" is a somewhat enigmatic and puzzling story. The ecstatic kiss described above² is the climax of a bizarre experience that leaves the reader with many unanswered questions. Is the

¹ S. Y. Agnon, "Haneshiqah harishonah," in *Pithei devarim* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1977), 158–61; S. Y. Agnon, "The First Kiss," in Nahum N. Glatzer, ed., *Twenty-One Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 271–76. All references are to the English version.

² In the Hebrew version, the ecstatic nature of that kiss is accentuated in the language: the word "mouth" is repeated eight times in one short sentence, and the word "kiss" is repeated seven times in the course of four sentences.

story about erotic love or religious ecstasy? What do the Christian figures, appearing prior to that kiss, represent in this fiction? What is their relationship, if any, to the first kiss? The clue to these questions lies in the specific perspective from which the entire experience unfolds and, obviously, in the significance of that occurrence.

The story is located in an Eastern European *shtetl* around the beginning of the century. The narrator, an adult, tells us that when he was a youth his father had to leave town on a Friday and asked him to look after their shop. Most of the day the boy sat listlessly at the shop. However, in the afternoon as he was about to close for the Sabbath, three priests³ appeared and asked to have a word with him. The boy hesitated at first, but then he closed the shop and went with them. When they approached his home, the child invited them in. He hosted them, conversed with them, and offered them food that his mother had prepared for the Sabbath. Amazed at their extraordinary knowledge of Jewish customs, the boy completely lost track of time. After a while, he realized that the Sabbath was about to begin. Yet time seemed to have stopped mysteriously: the sun stood still, and so did the clock. Eventually the three priests left, and two other priests, who appeared from nowhere, came looking for them. As the boy was speaking to them, a bizarre event occurred: the two priests became one figure that appeared to be a Jewish boy but turned out to be a Jewish girl. Upon learning that the Jewish girl was the daughter of the Zaddik from Likowitz, the protagonist recalled hearing a sermon by her father that described the coming together of all nations under the Jewish God. The boy and the girl united in an ecstatic kiss, and the story ends with the bliss of love and harmony.

Although little has been written on this intriguing story, the few articles that have appeared present differing, even polarized opinions. Judith Weiss regards the story as the incessant struggle of the protagonist, who belongs to neither the old world nor the new, to locate himself.⁴ She suggests that the departure of the father, who symbolizes the old world, leaves the boy exposed to the temptations of the new world. For Weiss, the dream is the realization of forbidden desires. According to her, the young man lives in sin yet aspires to purity and sanctity that are beyond his reach. He is the keeper of the shop who, like Adam in Eden, fails.⁵ Yoav Elstein holds

³ Although in the English translation of the story the three are referred to as monks (and they may very well be monks), in the Hebrew version, they are specifically termed priests.

⁴ Judith Weiss, "Haneshiqah harishonah leS. Y. Agnon," *Biqoret ufarshanut* 4-5 (1974): 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

that the story is about the realization of wishes, of yearnings for unity. Perfect love, according to Elstein, is at once mundane and metaphysical.⁶ Hillel Barzel finds in the story a yearning for the perfection of primary, innocent experiences, which coalesce in the narrator's mind with the religious perfection of the End of Days.⁷ I would like to suggest a different reading of the story, one that unites all these polarities—temptation and innocence, forbidden desires and perfection—in one specific experience.

"Haneshiqah harishonah" is autobiographical and personal in nature: told in the first person, an adult relates the story of an event from his childhood. Although never openly stated, the story seems to be formulated as a dream. An earlier, unpublished version of this tale, "Halom" ("Dream"),⁸ explicitly puts the narrative in a dream setting. Agnon uses these techniques—an adult narrating his childhood and the dream setting—in "Hamitpaḥat" ("The Kerchief"), as well as in most of the stories in *Sefer hama'asim*.⁹ "Haneshiqah harishonah" offers a glimpse into the psyche of a Jewish lad who, like the child in "Hamitpaḥat,"¹⁰ goes through an experience that marks the shift from childhood to maturity.

In general, the shift from childhood to adulthood entails a psychological severing of the child from his family. The father's absence from home and from the shop furnishes, in "Haneshiqah harishonah," an ideal setting for the Jewish boy to acquire his independence.¹¹ The story captures that moment of change, the experience that marks the shift from childhood to maturity. This change seems to occur on the religious as well as the erotic level.

Ordinarily, prior to maturation a child's notions of his Jewishness are predominantly associated with religious customs and images of family

⁶ Yoav Elstein, "Hazarut hamitmateqet," *De'ot* 34 (1967): 263-66.

⁷ Hillel Barzel, ed., S. Y. Agnon: *miḥar ma'amarim al yetsirato* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982), 38-39.

⁸ S. Y. Agnon, "Halom," unpublished, Agnon's archive, #1270 4. See Weiss, "Haneshiqah harishonah," 35 n. 61.

⁹ S. Y. Agnon, "Sefer hama'asim," in *Samukh venireh* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), 103-221.

¹⁰ The parallelism between "Haneshiqah harishonah" and "Hamitpaḥat" was suggested by Arnold Band in a conversation. S. Y. Agnon, "Hamitpaḥat," in *Elu ve'eli* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 256-67; S. Y. Agnon, "The Kerchief," in Nahum N. Glatzer, ed., *Twenty-One Stories*, trans. I. M. Lask, 45-59.

¹¹ This is also the case in Agnon's "Hamitpaḥat": a child on the verge of his bar mitzvah goes through a certain experience of maturation, while his father is away from home.

life. The process of maturation involves the development of an independent Jewish identity. In "Haneshiqah harishonah" the boy, exposed probably for the first time to the world outside his Jewish milieu, faces the issue of his religious identity. The budding of an independent Jewish consciousness entails, in his case, an imaginary encounter with three priests who represent, in his mind, temptation. This encounter presumably occurs while the boy is daydreaming at the shop.

At the beginning, the boy's relations with the priests are described in terms of two opposing parties:

I thought to myself, if *they've* come to do business, Friday afternoon close to sunset is no time to do business; and if *they've* come to talk, I'm not the man for them. . . . I was hesitant to reply and *they* smiled. (271)
 . . . *They* began to talk and I kept quiet. (272; emphasis added)

Yet, later on, the boy hosts the priests and lingers with them. He is simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to the priests: "I stood there . . . *neither here nor there*, like a man with nothing to do" (274; emphasis added), says the adult narrator. This vacillation results in the boy's neglect of his Jewish obligations: he fails to prepare for the Sabbath and, still worse, fails to arrive at the synagogue. Significantly, when his mother enters the room, the priests leave. The priests can function only in the presence of one whose identity has not yet fully matured. It takes a rude, entirely unexpected push by one of the priests to shake the boy and remind him that he is hated by them.

The boy's problematic religious identity at this stage is implied in the priest's remark at the sight of the two Sabbath candles: "There's you, your father, and your mother. Why doesn't your mother light a third candle for her son?" (272). The absence of that candle suggests that the boy does not yet exist as an independent Jewish consciousness. The episode with the priests at the boy's home recalls the biblical scene of Abraham and the three angels who heralded the birth of Isaac. That biblical echo comes, perhaps, to alert the reader to the imminent birth of a Jewish identity. At this point, however, the boy is still wavering. This is suggested by the fact that side by side with the biblical reverberations there are also Christian insinuations. The priest's comment on the third candle for the son may also imply the holy family: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Moreover, the biblical episode of Abraham and the three angels is indirectly significant also to the Christians: the binding of Isaac is perceived by them as a prefiguration of Jesus' crucifixion.

In fact, throughout the story Christian and Jewish images and echoes are interwoven. Reverberations of Abraham, Isaac, and Jesus underlie the hosting of the three priests by the boy, as mentioned above. The sun that

does not set while the boy dallies with the priests recalls the biblical phenomenon of the sun that stood still over Gibeon: "The sun stood still, and the moon stopped, till the people had revenge upon their enemies" (Joshua 10:13). Significantly, the context of that phenomenon is one of confrontation between two faiths, Judaism and paganism. The number two is another significant symbol in Jewish tradition: the two candles that possibly represent the Written Torah and the Oral Torah; the two entrances to the house that may stand for the duality of *qodesh* (holy) and *hol* (common). On the other hand, the recurring number three—three priests and the pointing with three fingers—alludes to the Trinity. The Jewish boy is himself associated, as previously noted, with Jesus. The priests likewise import both Christian and Jewish overtones. The three Christian priests are exceptionally knowledgeable of Jewish laws and customs and are referred to as "fathers." Although this is a regular term within the church, it is odd for a Jew, for whom "fathers" signify the three biblical patriarchs.

In the framework of the old world, Jesus and Christianity have always been unequivocally rejected by Jews. The boy's attitude toward the priests is, however, confused and indecisive. The combination of a Jew and a non-Jew in a Jewish protagonist often indicates a problem in Agnon's stories. This is the case, for example, in the figure of the old man in "Maglei tsedeq" ("Paths of Righteousness, or The Vinegar Maker")¹² and the peddler in "Ha'adonit veharokhel" ("The Lady and the Peddler"),¹³ who are naïve and shortsighted. The fluidity and interchange of Jewish and Christian images and scenes in "Haneshiqah harishonah" likewise reflect the boy's unsettled state of mind, signifying a problematic phase in the process of his maturation.¹⁴

The boy's preoccupation with his identity is further highlighted in the exchange between the boy and the priest who becomes a Jew, and in his recurring question regarding the priest's identity:

¹² S. Y. Agnon, "Maglei tsedeq," in *Elu ve'elu*, 383–88; S. Y. Agnon, "Paths of Righteousness, or The Vinegar Maker," in Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman, eds., *A Book That Was Lost and Other Stories*, trans. Ariel Gurt (New York: Schocken, 1995), 192–97.

¹³ S. Y. Agnon, "Ha'adonit veharokhel," in *Samukh venireh*, 92–102; S. Y. Agnon, "The Lady and the Peddler" in Mintz and Hoffman, *A Book That Was Lost*, trans. Robert Alter, 198–210.

¹⁴ In the stories mentioned above, interchange of Jewish and Christian images and identities have a bearing on the collective level as well. It suggests, often ironically, the inherent tension within Jewish-Christian relations: the proximity between Christianity and Judaism, on the one hand, and the reality of an unbridgeable dichotomy, on the other.

"Listen, my brother, aren't you a Jew?" ... "Tell me," I repeated my question, "aren't you a Jew?" ... I said to him, "if you're a Jew what are you doing with them?" (275)

The priest who transforms into a Jew/ess can be perceived as the boy's alter ego. In that case, the last question—"What are you doing with them?"—harks back to the boy's former association with the priests and to his as yet unsettled religious identity. At this stage, the Christian option still exists alongside the Jewish one.

From the moment the scene turns Jewish, the boy's manner changes entirely. He becomes freer and more confident. He talks to the Jewish "boy," he touches him, he puts his hand on his shoulder and his lips to his, "as if to transfer my sense of hearing to my mouth" (275). This rapprochement culminates in a kiss of archetypal proportions. Described in religious terms,¹⁵ the kiss signifies religious innocence and perfection. It is a metaphorical kiss that epitomizes the uniting of the believer with the *shekhinah* (the female aspect of God in the Kabbalah). This first kiss marks the moment of maturity and the birth of an independent Jewish consciousness.

Alongside the boy's religious maturation, the experience he undergoes yields also an erotic interpretation. The boy seems to have faced, probably for the first time as the story's title suggests, a surge of sexual sensations that bewilder him. The frame of reference of an Eastern European Jewish child at the beginning of the twentieth century was predominantly religious. It is therefore not improbable to surmise that a primary confrontation with the unfamiliar would be conveyed in religious terms. Erotic temptation, deemed by the boy as illegitimate, is transposed in his mind to the religious sphere and perceived as the neglect of the Torah and perhaps even as a threat of conversion. The encounter with the three priests is then a manifestation of the boy's erotic confusion. Judith Weiss suggests that the traits and physiognomy of the three priests imply erotic temptation. The first priest's passion for food represents, according to Weiss, all passions; the red-colored stain on the forehead of the second priest conveys eroticism; the bizarre Adam's apple of the third alludes to Adam's sin and his temptation by a woman.¹⁶ Hillel Barzel points out that Agnon's story, "Harofei ugerushato" ("The Doctor and His Divorcée"), also introduces Jesus in connection with the erotic in its negative sense, namely, adultery. "Harofei ugerushato" recounts a primary erotic experience that has been desecrated, while

¹⁵ These religious terms are especially conspicuous in the Hebrew version.

¹⁶ Weiss, "Haneshiqah harishonah," 30.

"Haneshiqah harishonah" delineates a primary erotic experience that has been realized.¹⁷

If the Christian priests embody the boy's anxiety in the face of erotic sensations, the change of identity—a priest becoming a Jew/ess—and the return to the Jewish ambiance suggest the beginning of an acceptance of these sensations. The extraordinary change in the boy's conduct and attitude toward his interlocutor, the esteemed status of his beloved, the daughter of a Zaddik, and the ensuing archetypal kiss "of innocence ... and blessing" (276) imply the ultimate vindication in the boy's mind of his feelings. Yoav Elstein correlates the cosmic arrest in the story when time stands still to this rapturous moment that exists beyond the flow of time.¹⁸ The primary erotic experience has become an epitome of love and marital harmony.

In Agnon's stories, the blurring of distinctions between Jews and Christians often culminates in some sort of an eruption or an anxiety that, for the most part, ends up in a restored order of separation. This is the case, for example, in "Nifle'ot shamash beit hamidrash hayashan" ("Wonders of the Sexton of the Old Beit Midrash"),¹⁹ "Ha'adonit veharokhel," and "Maglei tsedeq." In "Haneshiqah harishonah," Jesus and Christianity represent, in the psyche of the maturing boy, the antithesis, the "other," whose rejection is vital to the budding of the boy's Jewish identity. While order is again restored, this story, unlike the other stories, goes a step further. Beginning with a Jewish boy who almost yields to three Christian priests, the story ends with the Christians joining the Jewish God. In the boy's mind, if sin was aligned with Christianity, the uniting of the two lovers in a kiss merges with the prophecy of the End of Days.

These reminiscences of the narrator's experience of maturation uncover his longing for the impossible, that is, the recapturing of that innocence that enables the powerful experience of "primariness," whether religious or erotic. These recollections also import longings for the religious innocence of old times, which in the post-Enlightenment era is problematic: "He [the priest who transforms into a Jew] had the kind of beauty you used to be able to see in every Jewish town, the beauty of

¹⁷ Barzel, *S. Y. Agnon*, 37.

¹⁸ Yoav Elstein compares that cosmic moment in "Haneshiqah harishonah" to a similar phenomenon in Agnon's "Hamitpahat," which occurs when the boy hands his mother's kerchief to the beggar. See Elstein, "Hazarut hamitmateget," 264.

¹⁹ S. Y. Agnon, "Nifle'ot shamash beit hamidrash hayashan," in *Elu ve'elu*, 375-78.

young Jewish boys who have never tasted the taste of sin" (274). The first kiss, signifying innocence and perfection, momentarily resolves these longings by uniting the adult narrator with the child in himself and the modern man with the unwavering faith of the past. "Halom," the earlier, unpublished version of "Haneshiqah harishonah," specifically suggests this reuniting of the adult with the experiences of the maturing child: "And when I woke up, I felt a certain sweetness in my mouth, *which I have not felt for many years.*"²⁰ Indeed, the unique taste of that moment of unity between the adult and the child could only be retrieved by the adult in a dream, or reproduced in an act of narration in "Haneshiqah harishonah."

²⁰ S. Y. Agnon, "Halom." Italics are mine.

FLIRTATION IN S. Y. AGNON'S SHIRA

Nancy Ezer

יֹשֵׁב לוֹ מִנְפֹרֵד הֶרְבֵּסְט בְּלֵילָה בְּבֵיתוֹ וְאִינוֹ הוֹלֵךְ לְעִיר. וְדָבָר זֶה טוֹב,
שֶׁאִם בָּא לְעִיר נִכְנָס אֶצֶל שִׁירָה, וְלִכְנֹס אֶצֶל שִׁירָה אִינוֹ רֹצֵה. לְשׁוֹן אַחֵר,
רֹצֵה וְאִינוֹ רֹצֵה, וְהוֹאִיל וְאִין הֶרְצוֹן שְׁלֵם סָבוֹר הוּא שְׂבָאֵמֶת אִינוֹ רֹצֵה.

Manfred Herbst sits at home nights and doesn't go into town. Which is a good thing, for, if he were to go there, he would stop at Shira's, and he doesn't want to stop at Shira's. In other words, he does and he doesn't want to, and since he is ambivalent, he assumes he really doesn't want to. (95)¹

יֵצֵא הֶרְבֵּסְט מִבֵּית הַחֹלִים כְּלֹא שֶׁרָאָה אֶת שִׁירָה. לִכְּנֹס הִיא מְעוֹרָבֵב וְלֹא
יָדַע אִם מְרוֹצֵה הוּא שְׁלֹא רָאָה אֶת שִׁירָה אִם אִינוֹ מְרוֹצֵה שְׁלֹא רָאָה אֶת
שִׁירָה. וְשׁוֹב אוֹתָהּ מְדָה שְׂמִצּוּיָה כְּרוֹב בְּנֵי אָדָם וְלֹא כְּהֶרְבֵּסְט כְּלִבְדּוֹ.
כְּשֶׁהֶחְלִיטָה דַעְתּוֹ שֶׁמְרוֹצֵה הוּא שְׁלֹא רָאָה אֶת שִׁירָה בָּאָה דַעַת אַחֵרֶת
וְאִמְרָה לוֹ כִּאֵן הֵייתָ יָכוֹל לְרְאוֹתָהּ. אִילוֹ בִקְשָׁת אוֹתָהּ הֵייתָ מוֹצֵאָהּ.

Herbst left the hospital without seeing Shira. He had mixed feelings. He didn't know whether he was pleased not to have seen Shira or whether he was displeased not to have seen Shira. Once again, a quality common not only to Herbst but to most people was manifest. When he decided he was pleased not to have seen Shira, an alternate view asserted itself: You could have seen her here. If you had searched, you would have found her. (387)

In his book *On Flirtation*, the English psychoanalyst Adam Phillips observes that in any shift of allegiance, in any transition, there is some flirtation. Flirtation sustains the game of uncertainty and sabotages the vocabulary of commitment. It is often an unconscious form of

¹All citations of English translations from the novel are from S. Y. Agnon, *Shira*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York: Schocken, 1989).