

# Agnon In Jerusalem: A Reminiscence and a Teaching

Herman Wouk

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(NOTE: This is an edited and expanded transcript of an extemporaneous address.)

My thanks first of all to Bar Ilan University, home of the Rennert Center for Jerusalem Studies which sponsors this distinguished lecture series; to Ingeborg and Ira Rennert, the generous patrons of the Guardian of Zion Award, and to the Overseers of the Award who have chosen me for this honor. My heartfelt thanks as well to my dear old friend, Chancellor Emeritus Rabbi Emanuel Rackman, for his warm tribute to my works, and to His Honor, Mayor Ehud Olmert, for his kind praise of my writings on Jerusalem.

In this Lecture Series the one requirement is that the speaker address some aspect of Jerusalem. The title of my lecture is *Agnon in Jerusalem: A Reminiscence and a Teaching*, and for my part, I could hardly have hit on a happier topic. It has called up vivid memories of a beloved friend, and has sent me back to re-reading his masterpieces. In reminiscing I daresay I will ramble a bit, before coming to the crux of my talk, the teaching of Agnon. Let me start by telling how I came to know Shmuel Yosef Agnon, far apart though we were in age and in background.

Early in June 1967, some thirty-one years ago, the rabbi at the morning minyan in my Washington shule greeted me with stunning news: "*Agnon is here.*" Agnon! He had just won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He was scheduled to speak at the luncheon of a conference of Conservative rabbis, so I secured invitations for myself and my wife. At that lunch, the first speaker was not Agnon but Abraham Harman, of blessed memory. Zeena Harman is here this evening, and I want to tell you, Zeena, that seldom was Abe more magnificent than on that occasion.

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Abe Harman was then Ambassador to the United States. The *hamtana*, the nerve-wracking wait that preceded the Six-Day War, had been going on for weeks, as described in my novel, *THE HOPE*. It was as gruelling a national ordeal as any Israel has ever endured, and at the height of it Ambassador Harman came roaring into that banquet hall in Washington to deliver a fiery speech of defiance. "*We don't want an inch of anybody else's territory*," he concluded, both fists shaking in the air, "*but if we're attacked we will fight, and we will win!*" The thousand Conservative rabbis rose to their feet applauding, and after that Agnon spoke.

I have to say it was a grievous letdown. A little man in a black velvet yarmulke came to the microphone, which half hid his face. The other half was all but hidden by sheets of paper he held up to his eyes. As he was reading his speech in high-pitched Hebrew, which the restless audience obviously was not following, an embassy aide approached us. "Look, the Ambassador was planning a dinner party for Agnon tomorrow night," he whispered, "but with the war situation, it's impossible. Would you and your wife entertain Agnon for dinner? You're kosher, you're fellow authors, and the Ambassador would be immensely obliged." Sarah said at once that we'd be honored, and that was how I met Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

He came to our home next evening with some embassy escorts, and he was a different man from the droner at the microphone; charming, relaxed, articulate in understandable Hebrew, wolfing down plate after plate of Sarah's Quiche Lorraine with great gusto, for he had been living so far in America, he told us, on salad and bread. Speaking about food, he remarked that in Stockholm at the Nobel Prize banquet, seated next to the King of Sweden, he had been served on plates of gold; and the King himself had assured him that the food was kosher, and that the gold plates had been kashered. "I thanked the King for his thoughtfulness," said Agnon, "and I didn't eat."

After the meal, I invited him to lead the grace. He asked for a cup of wine over which to speak the benedictions, then he passed the wine cup to my wife, a lovely antique custom. Allow me to present to you the lady who drank that cup of wine blessed by Agnon -- the mother of my sons, the love of my life for fifty three years, and incidentally, a formidable literary agent -- Sarah Wouk.

When I drove Agnon to the hotel he insisted that I come up with him. He couldn't sleep, he said, no matter how many kadurim (pills) he took. We talked for hours, or rather he talked and I listened, replying only now and then in my halting conversational Hebrew. Just before I left, he said something I have often quoted since. "Herman Wouk, remember this," he admonished me with a waving finger, "We are storytellers. Pictures, pictures! No thoughts!"

Here then, are three pictures of Shmuel Yosef Agnon, though I cannot guarantee that a thought or two will not slip in.

### FIRST PICTURE: AGNON IN JERUSALEM

The following year when we came to Israel, Agnon picked me up at the hotel and took me to his home in Talpilot, today a national shrine. "Call this a house?" he remarked as we went in. "It's not a house, it's a ruin." In truth it was a modest abode, crammed with books and sparsely furnished. He showed me his gloomy workroom, where the stand-up desk was cluttered with piles and piles of envelopes. "I never answer my mail," he said with mock contrition. "It's terrible." A rotating *sefirra* calendar stood on the desk. "And never remember to turn this," he remarked, whereupon he did so. We went into a little kitchen and sat down to talk over tea.

I should mention that I had promised to take Sarah to dinner that evening at the old Jerusalem Hilton, where the strictly kosher menu featured exotic delicacies like pate de fois gras and osso buco. I knew Sarah was eager for that pate de fois gras, so after an hour or more I said, "Agnon, I think I should be going."

With a pathetic look, he plaintively asked, "Lama? (Why?)"

"It's getting to be dinner time," I said.

"So?" He got up and took a can down from a shelf. "You like sardines?"

"Yes, Agnon, I like sardines, but --"

"You eat eggs?"

"I eat eggs --"

"Good. Open this can, I'll boil the eggs, and we'll have dinner."

*(Quick decision! Do I leave Sarah hungering for her pate de fois gras, while I eat with Shmuel Yosef Agnon?)*

I opened the sardines, he boiled the eggs and sliced some bread, and we went on talking about this and that as we ate. All at once he casually inquired, "Now, what can you tell me about this James Joyce? What does he write? What is his style?"

Some question! Though Agnon could not read English, he surely knew a lot about Joyce. Even thirty years ago there must have been reams of Joyce criticism in Hebrew; moreover he had lived for years among the Berlin literati, where Joyce criticism must have been commonplace. But for reasons

of his own, he wanted to hear what an American popular novelist would have to say about the literary idol of the international avant garde. The mask of the simple old Jew had slipped off, and a world genius of literature was quizzing me about his giant contemporary. Agnon's expression was alert, amused, and a trifle sly as he listened to me trying to tell him in Hebrew my view of James Joyce.

As it happened, I had reread *Ulysses* not long before, and off and on I have had many a go at *Finnegans Wake*, which to a Talmudic mind is a hypnotic teaser. So I did my best to answer him, and Agnon nodded and nodded, his face screwing up in the effort to follow me; not my opinion of Joyce, which is hardly complicated, but my Ivrit, which quite broke down from overload. Then he let me go. I picked up Sarah, who was reasonably gracious about the delay, and we went on to the Hilton, where she ate her fill of pate de foies gras. I can't for the life of me remember what I ate there, but I will never forget telling Shmuel Yosef Agnon about James Joyce over sardines and eggs, in his kitchen in Talpiot.

## EXCURSUS: JOYCE AND AGNON

Since I have touched on the topic, let me briefly pursue interesting parallels between these authors.

As artists both aimed at the stars. Despite poverty, neglect, and oncoming blindness, Joyce created monumental works intended -- in his own words in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* -- "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race"; a statement of purpose at least as lofty as the blind Milton's in *Paradise Lost*, "to justify the ways of God to men." Much like Milton, Joyce has become a revered literary titan of immense influence, his name perhaps greater than his readership. Educated readers are required to attempt *Ulysses*, but as for *Finnegans Wake*, the first ten pages will stop most readers dead, and that is clearly the author's intent. "*Only the brainy few need enter here*," says the opaque opening paragraph of his grandiose dream-language phantasmagoria.

Agnon makes no such demand on the reader, for his storytelling in classic Hebrew flows clear and plain. Yet there is a catch. He weaves quotes from Tanakh and Talmud so tightly into his style that an Agnon work becomes a palimpsest -- sometimes almost a mosaic -- of our holy writings. However, if secular readers miss the allusions it doesn't matter too much. The story comes through anyway, and in this unobtrusiveness lies a special grace of

Agnon's art. Joyce made a tremendous point of obtruding; he capers on every printed page of his masterpieces, like a laughing virus on a computer screen.

Both authors record the collapse of their cultures, and lovingly preserve the debris in their books. But Joyce wrote his works about Ireland in Trieste and Paris, and once he left his homeland he did not return. Agnon migrated from Poland to Palestine at nineteen, left to spend years in Germany, then came back to Jerusalem to live out his life and complete his oeuvre. In his long realistic novels, as well as in his novellas and short stories -- mystic or humorous, or subtly erotic -- the cadences of his childhood Yiddish sound under the Hebrew. In this way, like no other Jewish writer I know, his art bridges the old and the new.

Agnon captured the three main elements of the modern Jewish predicament; the rickety east European Jewry doomed to the wrecking ball, the new Jewry in the Holy Land struggling to define itself, and the sacred heritage at the root of the epochal change. Joyce's art too is saturated in his people's life and destiny, but he reaches out beyond his Irish roots to capture all of decadent Europe's culture. He never went home again, never wrote in revived Gaelic, and the Nobel juries never caught on to Joyce. That they discovered Agnon is an enduring wonder.

## SECOND EXCURSUS: PSIK RAYSHAH

Now for a touch of Talmudic lore, the basis for my next picture -- Agnon as Talmudist -- and I beg the patience and indulgence of my secular friends here tonight. We all know of the general prohibition against working on Shabat. The Talmud takes up a limiting case: suppose a man, not intending to do work, let alone to profane the Sabbath, happens to perform a prohibited act: is he nevertheless culpable, and in Temple times would he have had to bring a sin offering? A hairsplitting question you may say, but the hair is split yet again, and that is where Shmuel Yosef Agnon comes in. Not to keep you in unbearable suspense, I will give you the Talmud's answer first.

Answer: it depends.

Depends on what? Depends on whether the outcome of the act is absolutely inevitable. A man throws open a door, say, and crushes a chicken to death. Killing an animal on Shabat is of course prohibited. In this instance it was not in the least inevitable, since the unfortunate chicken might not have been there, or the man might have opened the door less violently; but -- th

question is pressed -- what if he *beheads* a chicken with no intent to kill it? "Oh, come ON!" the humanist strikes in, "Are you serious? Cut off a chicken's head *with no intent to kill it!*" Exactly, friends. That concept, familiar to all Talmud students among my listeners here, is "*psik rayshah v'lo yamut*" -- spoken with a skeptical rising inflection: "beheading without killing?" (Legal implication: "Preposterous!"). And *psik rayshah* defines a small but precise area of Sabbath Law.

I had just turned forty when I published *Marjorie Morningstar*, and I decided it was now or never to get at Talmud learning in earnest, so I dropped everything for a good while to attend the yeshiva of Reb Moshe Feinstein, on Manhattan's lower east side. The great sage tolerantly put me in his lowest Talmud seminar with the eighteen-year-olds, where *psik rayshah* came up in the treatise *Shabat*; and Reb Moshe improvised a theoretical instance. A pauper wants to distract a fretful child, but there is not a toy in his hovel, so he takes off a chicken's head for the youngster to play with. He does not *intend* to kill the fowl, but he would indeed be liable to a sin-offering, because -- *psik rayshah v'lo yamut?*

## AGNON AND THE PSIK RAYSHAH

Now back to Agnon.

On our next visit to Israel, when Sarah and I were shopping in the Old City, she suddenly seized my arm. "Look!" she exclaimed, pointing at a little Arab boy playing with the bloody head of a chicken. "*Psik rayshah!*" I had described Rabbi Feinstein's instance to my wife, and she had thought it ingenious but extravagantly farfetched. Now here before our eyes was Reb Moshe's *psik rayshah!* That night I visited Agnon, and I mentioned that Sarah had spotted an actual *psik rayshah* in the Old City, a child playing with a chicken head.

Well, Agnon's reaction was astonishing. He lit up, he was overjoyed, he laughed, he made me repeat the whole story, then he called in his wife and made me tell it to her all over again. This meant I had to go through the entire subject of *psik rayshah* for her, and she was not exactly spellbound, but Agnon kept chortling, and encouraging me. Somehow the anecdote had struck a deep chord in his spirit. What was that chord?

An illuminating episode in his novel *Tmol Shilshom (Only Yesterday)* bears on this point. A Yiddishist literary critic visiting Palestine in the early days of the *yishuv*, and lecturing in Jaffa to the local intellectuals, derides them for trying to speak and write in Hebrew. "We have such a rich Yiddish

culture, such a great literature, so why are you trying to revive a dead language?" he inquires with scorn. Now, Agnon like his great predecessors, Mendele the Bookseller and Y.L. Peretz, wrote in Yiddish as well as Hebrew, but they moved back and forth between the two languages, and did their most memorable work in Yiddish. Once Agnon turned to Hebrew, he stayed with it. He sensed in his prophetic soul, I suggest, that Yiddish was going down, that the lifeblood of a culture is in its language, and that in this century Hebrew was going to become a *sine qua non* of continued Jewish existence -- a *psik rayshah*.

Agnon could have lived anywhere. As I have mentioned, he made aliya in his youth to Palestine, left to spend years in Germany, then returned to the Land for good; and if there is a single theme that runs through all his writings it is love of *Eretz*, of the Holy Land. Even in his grimly realistic *Only Yesterday*, picturing the hardships and failures of the early *yishuv*, this love shines through. Again, Agnon evidently sensed in his prophetic soul that in this century, the Jewish people would have to return to the Land, that *Eretz* had become a *psik rayshah* of our folk's survival. He lived out that vision, and came back to the holy soil to write his main work and to die.

We know from his writings that the place he loved most in *Eretz* was Jaffa. Yet when he returned he chose to settle in Jerusalem; a risk-filled Jerusalem in those days, where his house was in fact gutted in 1939 by rioting Arabs. He lost most of his books and many of his manuscripts, but he rebuilt and stayed on. Agnon sensed in his prophetic soul, I believe, that in a reborn Jewish state, the Holy City would be a *psik rayshah*, that without it the nation would not live. David Ben Gurion too sensed that. Some strategists fault him for his four failed bloody attempts in the War of Independence to take the Latrun fortress, which dominated the mountain pass to besieged Jerusalem. Though the Haganah could not take Latrun, its secretly constructed by-pass -- the famous "Burma Road" -- broke through and saved the city for Jewry. "Without Jerusalem, *Eretz Yisroel* will have no existence," declared Ben Gurion. Agnon confirmed that belief in his writings and in his life.

And it was quite a free life, I understand, for a goodly stretch of his years. The other day a cynical Israeli remarked to me, "Oh, you're lecturing about Agnon, are you? Well, do you know Agnon was a *shovav*?" The word was unfamiliar, and I guess I looked puzzled. My informant winked. "Ladies' man, you know." Later I checked in my pocket dictionary, just to be thorough, and for "*shovav*" it gave *prankster, rogue*. Those traits are certainly discernible in the quirky humor of some Agnon stories, and as for his personal life -- well, most of us have been young once. When I met him he was, and for

many years had been, a *shomer mitzvot*, an observant Jew, though perhaps the *shovav* was still there in the twinkle of his aged but sharp eyes.

When then, and why, did he put on the black velvet yarmulke, which you see today on the fifty-shekel note? I suggest he returned to observance because he sensed in his prophetic soul that in the very long run there would be no survival for our people, *amkha*, without our three-thousand-year tradition; that our ancient faith was the ultimate *psik rayshah* of our national destiny. Believing that, he donned the velvet yarmulke, and wore it to the end of his days.

#### LAST PICTURE: PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS AN OLD MAN

Agnon's greatest work of art was himself. He lived the Jewish revolution, traversed it from end to end, and embodied it in what he became; a davenning Jerusalem Jew and a fiercely perfectionist literary artist, writing not for the brainy few but for *amkha*, the readers of the ancient rejuvenated tongue.

Yet for the brainy few, there are depths beyond depths in Agnon. He worked on his prose as hard as Joyce, trying to make each word count to create a translucent medium for his pictures. He rewrote his published work without cease. The art that conceals art controls every page. Among European authors he most admired Flaubert, the obsessive seeker of *le mot juste*. Literary sophisticates could tell Agnon nothing he did not know; and he knew as few of them ever do, that beyond sophistication lies simplicity, the artistic peak which in the Bible soars above all mundane art.

A well-known photograph of Agnon in Stockholm will be my last picture of him tonight. He has just finished delivering his charming address in Hebrew, replete with his usual touches of Torah, and the audience is giving him a standing ovation. Directly in front of Agnon the King of Sweden is on his feet, smiling in admiration and clapping vigorously; and Agnon, in the white tie and tails of a Nobel Laureate, and the black velvet yarmulke of the fifty-shekel note, is bowing to the monarch. In that picture, Agnon becomes for me a living image of our threatened heritage.

At this gala occasion, perhaps I should not introduce a somber note, but in fact the heritage is threatened, as we all know too well; threatened in the diaspora by ignorance and assimilation, threatened in the Holy Land by obdurate enemies without, and by dissension, cynicism, and causeless hatred within. Yet because Shmuel Yosef Agnon lived and wrote his grand deathless

body of work, I can conclude on a note of hope and say in the style of his Tanakh borrowings, *B'oro nireh or*," "In his light we see light."