

Maayanot (Primary Sources)

S. Y. Agnon, “The Great Synagogue” Translation and Commentary

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An Introductory Note: Subversive Echoes of Tradition

Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970) is thus far the only Hebrew writer to have received the Nobel Prize in Literature (1966). It may almost be true that his Complete Works are to be found in every Israeli home. I happened to live in his Jerusalem neighborhood of Talpiot shortly after his death, and attended the local synagogue (a simple, almost rough wooden structure). People there referred to Agnon with deep affection and respect as “our teacher of blessed memory.”

Indeed, Agnon was steeped in traditional Jewish literature and was a masterful anthologizer of source material.¹ But he had also gone through a complex evolution since his yeshiva days in Galicia, to become a truly modern writer. Martin Buber called him “the poet and chronicler of Jewish life; of that life which is dying and changing today, but also of the other life, still unknown, that is growing.”² “The Great Synagogue” is a rich and fascinating sign of that evolution.

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This original translation is forthcoming in a new anthology of Agnon’s short stories, *Forevermore: Stories of the Old World and the New*, edited by Jeffrey Saks, to be published by the Toby Press in 2016 as part of its *S. Y. Agnon Library*, featuring the writing of the Nobel laureate in new and revised English translations.

Amos Oz begins the opening chapter of his study of Agnon with a citation from Agnon's Nobel Acceptance Speech:

Because of that historical catastrophe when Titus the Roman Emperor destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of Exile. But all the time I imagined myself as having been born in Jerusalem.

Agnon, somewhat slyly, poses here as a simple, pious Jew, but his identity was always more complex. Oz offers his own analysis:

Those words, as all readers of Agnon know, are true. But, strangely enough, their opposite is also true. Had Agnon chosen to say, "Because of that historical catastrophe when East European Jewry fell apart, I became a Hebrew writer in Jerusalem. But I always saw myself as one who was born in one of the cities of Galicia and destined to be a rabbi there," those words would also be true and right on target.

Perhaps it is in this paradox, the tormented tension between one tenet and its opposite, that we must recognize the trauma that made Agnon what he is.³

Robert Alter describes "The Great Synagogue" in *Necessary Angels*, his impressive discussion of Franz Kafka, Walter Benjamin, and Gershom Scholem, pointing out "the complications in its seemingly naïve recuperation of the harmonies of pious tradition."⁴ Indeed, all the critics of Agnon emphasize the double-edged quality of his writing, in which "the world of piety is elaborated and lovingly evoked at the same time that it is ironically subverted from within."⁵ This strategy is precisely what marks Agnon as a modern writer, and it leads to constant comparison—and contrast—with Kafka.

The Israeli critic Baruch Kurzweil, among others, pointed out many parallels between Kafka and Agnon,⁶ and Gershon Shaked offers some useful observations in an essay on "Kafka, Jewish Heritage, and Hebrew Literature."⁷ Arnold Band's important study of Agnon mentions Kafka in the opening paragraph of the preface, though he argues, rather unconvincingly, that "the common comparison of Agnon to Kafka . . . is entirely misleading."⁸

Kafka is also a major subject of many of the letters exchanged between Gershom Scholem and Walter Benjamin.⁹ While they

disagreed on substantive points of interpretation, they were both passionate in their reading of and devotion to Kafka's work. It has even been suggested that Scholem's entire reading of Kabbalah passed through the lens of Kafka.¹⁰

Agnon is also discussed in their correspondence. In 1928, Scholem had offered the view that Agnon's world contains "the revision of Kafka's *Trial*."¹¹ Scholem himself was a translator of Agnon: "The Great Synagogue" was translated by Scholem into German and published in Buber's journal, *Der Jude*, in 1924.¹² It was subsequently collected with five other stories (two more translated by Scholem and three by Nahum Glatzer) and published by Schocken in Berlin in 1933 under the title *In der Gemeinschaft der Frommen*.

Scholem sent a copy of the book to Benjamin on December 24, 1933, with a note: "I am sending you a thin volume of Agnon's stories, two thirds of which I translated myself. Perhaps you'll get something out of it."¹³ Benjamin responded on January 18, 1934, with enthusiastic admiration:

You know the exceptional interest with which I read all of Agnon's writings that are accessible to me. I have just finished this volume, and I will often refer back to it. For now, I bring it into the conversation whenever possible. I have yet to find anything in his works more beautiful than "The Great Synagogue," which I regard as a tremendous masterpiece. And then the story about the guardian of books seems to me to be of great significance. Agnon displays mastery in every piece, and if I had become "a teacher in Israel"—but I could have just as easily become an ant lion—I would not have been able to refrain from a lecture on Agnon and Kafka.¹⁴

Again, Kafka, who comes up once more in Anne Golomb Hoffman's study of Agnon, *Between Exile and Return*. In the introductory chapter, Hoffman makes a general statement about Agnon's work that applies perfectly to "The Great Synagogue:"

The text evokes the horizon of a golden age that it can only point to, so that the reader is made to feel loss, while glimpsing a wholeness that cannot be achieved. Like Kafka, Agnon writes for a restoration he knows to be unattainable in writing. His writing activates both a sense of the inherence of meaning in language and the testimony to loss of a prior plenitude.¹⁵

Band suggests that it is difficult to pin down Agnon's style, but relates it primarily to the "Hebrew written by learned Jews mostly in Eastern Europe during the past four centuries."¹⁶ The intentionally archaic style of this story is that of a parable. When it was written, in 1919, Agnon was among the pioneers in the use of Hebrew as a literary medium, creating a unique blend of modern and Rabbinic language.

Obviously, "The Great Synagogue" is a story suffused with tradition. Indeed, there are certain phrases that intentionally point to a textual backdrop. The opening phrase, here translated as "school children" [*tinokot shel beit rabban*], is surely intended by Agnon to echo this passage from the Talmud:¹⁷

Resh Lakish also said in the name of R. Judah the Prince: School children may not be made to neglect [their studies] even for the building of the Temple. Resh Lakish also said to R. Judah the Prince: I have this tradition from my fathers—others state, from your fathers: Every town in which there are no school children shall be destroyed. Rabina said: It shall be laid desolate. (*Shabbat* 119b)¹⁸

Read against the Talmudic text, the opening paragraph announces the subversive quality of the entire story.

The Great Synagogue

"How abundant is the good that Thou hast in store for those who fear Thee" (Ps. 31:20).

SCHOOL CHILDREN WERE PLAYING ON THE HILL: Games such as Forty Thieves and Three Brothers, the Battle of David and Goliath, and the Priest Anointed for Battle. When they had tired of these pastimes they said, "Yesterday was Tishah B'Av, the day that the enemies destroyed the Temple. Let's begin to rebuild it." They examined their *tzitzit* to make sure they were fit, and agreed among themselves that there would be no hatred among them—for they knew that the Temple had only been destroyed on account of the groundless hatred that had existed among Jews. Thus they commenced the task of construction. One brought a pocket full of clay, and another a mouth full of water. This one a stone and that one a broken brick. And until such time as they might find the magical *shamir*¹⁹ they decided to cut the stones with their teeth.

They spread themselves out over the hill and dug, one with a stone and another with his fingers. And they sang the Passover song: "Exalted is the One who will build His sanctuary soon, quickly, quickly, in our day, soon—*Bimherah, bimherah, b'yameinu b'karov.*" One of the boys was the rabbi's son. He said to his friends, "My father has a Talmud volume that contains a picture of the Temple and its vessels. I'll go and bring it, so we can have a plan for building the Temple. I'll even bring the box in which my father keeps his Sabbath hat. It is made of brass, and would serve well as the Brass Altar." His friend, the son of the gravedigger, said, "And I shall bring stones that were cut for tombstones. Once the Temple is rebuilt the Redeemer will come. No one will die any more, and there will be no need of tombstones."

As they were digging they found a piece of wood. They continued digging and found something that looked like a roof tile. They tried with all their might to dislodge it, calling out, "Please, O Lord, help us!" Their teacher heard them and came out. They said to him, "Rabbi, we have found a tile." Hardly had they finished speaking when a second tile was found. The rabbi saw the discovery and leapt upon it. Raking the dirt he found several tiles, together forming the shape of a roof. "It is divine providence!" he said. "The rainy season is rapidly approaching, and the Holy One has provided me with the means to repair the roof of my house."

Meanwhile dusk was falling. The teacher sent his students home, and until it was time for the afternoon prayer, he and his family continued to rake the hillside. They found tile after tile. They continued digging and found still more. If this was not a sorcerer's trick, it was the roof of a house. In a few more days they had cleared away all the refuse. And once they had cleared the refuse, they found a large roof. The whole town gathered to see. They surrounded the roof and said, "Such a large roof, such a large roof! There must be a palace underneath, and this is the palace roof." The elders recalled the story of a lord whose wife had run after other men. The lord had invited all of her lovers to a feast. When they had eaten and drunk, he ordered his servants to seal all the windows and doors, and they all died of suffocation. Upon hearing this story the workers shrunk back in terror. But the taskmasters²⁰ stood over them, making them clear away all the dirt. Several stained-glass windows were uncovered, and they knew this to be

a house of prayer. So they drove the Jews away, saying, "This is holy ground."

In the old *Beit Midrash*, between the afternoon and evening prayers, long sighs could be heard. Who knows? It could be a synagogue. After all, we have found in the responsa, the legal records of Buczacz, which borders on Jaslowitz, a tradition that Jaslowitz was a great city, a "mother city of Israel." And if it was a great city, might this not be its great synagogue? Other than many tombstones, there is no sign that here was once a great community of Jews. And the old *Beit Midrash*—how small it is. The ceiling is falling down and the earthen floor is rising. Whenever the heart is full there is no room for all who are bending in prayer. The Holy Ark is worm-eaten, the dust hanging from it is used to spread on the wound of circumcision. The wings of the two doves on the ark curtain, symbolizing the Jewish people, are plucked and fallen. There is not a penny to pay the building's upkeep. The Days of Awe are coming. The townsfolk—may they not suffer the evil eye—are fruitful. Last year there was not room for them all in the *Beit Midrash*. How will there be room for them this year?

On the hill they continued digging, and a beautiful building burst forth and rose up. And when the late summer sun of Elul shone upon the stained glass windows, all creatures were filled with the glow. Ancient days, ancient palaces.

It was not many more days before they had swept away the hill round about. Once they had cleared away the entire hill, a great building was revealed. But they found that the entrance was closed. They brought the carpenter and the locksmith. The men tried, but were unable to open the door. They tried to break it open, but no tool of human invention succeeded. And as they stood near the entrance they heard a voice issuing forth from the building. They said, "This must be the spirit of one who was not given burial, wailing from within." And they fled for their lives, lest an evil spirit take possession of them and they die.

So they called on the Jews to do their work. And they came and heard the voice which issued forth from the building, and behold: the voice is the voice of Jacob.²¹ They inclined their ears, and the voice said, "How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel."²² And when they put their hands on the gate, the gate opened before them.

They entered, and found the great synagogue. Was it not the greatest synagogue ever seen in Jaslowitz? The building was large and spacious, the Holy Ark full of Torah scrolls. And above it a pair of doves spread their wings, and the wings of the doves were covered with silver, and a large prayer book was written in elegant script on deerskin. Everything was in its place. Only the eternal light was about to go out.

Notes

1. In English, see *The Days of Awe (Yamim Noraim)*, trans. Maurice T. Galpert (New York: Schocken, 1965) and *Present at Sinai (Atem Re'item)*, trans. Michael Swirsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994). In 1924 Agnon was living in Germany, near Frankfurt am Main, and collaborating with Martin Buber on a collection of Chasidic tales. A fire in his apartment destroyed his library and manuscripts, including the "Corpus Hasidicum." See Buber's letter to Franz Rosenzweig, June 13, 1924, in Nahum N. Glatzer and Paul Mendes-Flohr, eds., *The Letters of Martin Buber: A Life of Dialogue* (New York: Schocken, 1991), 313–14.
2. Letter to Leo Herrmann, March 25, 1916, in *The Letters of Martin Buber*, 186.
3. Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 2–3.
4. Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels: Tradition and Modernity in Kafka, Benjamin and Scholem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, in Association with Hebrew Union College Press, Cincinnati, 1991), 15 (Efroymson Memorial Lectures, HUC-JIR/Cincinnati, March 1990).
5. *Ibid.*, 17.
6. See Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurei Shai Agnon* (Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962). Kurzweil is generally credited with opening up new audiences for Agnon's work with essays in the 1940s emphasizing the modern aspects of his writing.
7. Gershon Shaked, *The Shadows Within* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), 3–21.
8. Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 199. The comparison seems unavoidable, even if it can be shown that there was no direct influence. See also Gershon Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 42–43.
9. Gershom Scholem, ed., *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, 1932–1940*, trans. Gary Smith and Andre Lefevre (New York: Schocken, 1989). On Kafka, see esp. pp. 105–42.

10. Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 168.
11. "Das Hebräische Buch: eine Rundfrage," in *Judische Rundschau* 33 (1928): 202. Scholem goes on to say, "Repeatedly we marvel at how precisely the most beautiful of Agnon's stories seem to have been written completely for us and at the same time for our children. But this is the very stuff of legend...It is a good sign for our people that its greatest poets have again come close to the child's world."
12. *Der Jude*, vol. 8, 235–38.
13. Scholem, *Correspondence*, 91.
14. *Ibid.*, 94.
15. Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 5.
16. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 91–92.
17. I thank Rabbi Ben-Zion Gold for pointing out this connection.
18. I. Epstein, ed., *Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino, 1938).
19. The worm which, according to legend, was used by King Solomon to cut the stones for the Temple altar because the Torah prohibits the use of an iron tool for that purpose (Exod. 20:22).
20. Cf. Exod. 3:7, 5:6.
21. Cf. Gen. 27:22.
22. Num. 24:5, words traditionally recited upon entering a synagogue.