

Remembering S.Y. Agnon

A Nobel Prize for literature, a bit of family history – and the gift of great literature

By **Rena Shimoni**
For the Jewish Free Press

Almost a half a century ago, I asked my Israeli husband- to- be whether he intended to don a tie for our approaching wedding. In response he told me that the first and only time he wore a tie was when required to do so as a condition for attending a reception at the Israeli embassy in Sweden, in honor of the receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature by the renowned Israeli writer, S.Y. Agnon. The event was hosted by the Israeli Ambassador to Sweden at that time, the late Yaakov Shimoni, who became my father-in-law a few years later. I learned that for Israelis, Agnon's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1966 was a momentous occasion, and a deep source of national pride. Most fortunately, decades after our wedding (minus the tie), circumstances aligned which afforded me the opportunity to become acquainted with some of Agnon's writings, and appreciate why he is hailed as "the greatest Hebrew writer of the modern age".

The first of these aligned circumstances was that on our return to Israel after many years in Calgary, we settled in a neighborhood of Jerusalem called Arnona. Right around the corner of our apartment building sits the house where S.Y. Agnon lived for much of his life, and where much of his later writing occurred. Agnon House, or Beit Agnon, is now a museum and active cultural center. In the second of the aligned circumstances, I attended one of the very many activities that take place there – a lecture on Agnon, in English, by Rabbi Jeffrey Saks. Saks, who came on Aliyah to Israel in 1994, has over the course

of several years become one of the leading scholars and translators of the literature of S.Y. Agnon. Among his many hats, he is Beit Agnon's Director of Research and the senior editor of a recent-

can browse Agnon's library and breathe the air of literary genius, Saks engages classes in discussions of several of Agnon's works. His knowledge of literature in general and Agnon in

tion to the minds, souls and hearts of the stories' characters, their deliberations and tribulations, and their fate. Although it was my interest in great literature that brought me to the classes,

literally thousands of articles have been written by scholars and journalists who interpret, explain, and provide in depth analyses of Agnon, his life, and his literature. But reading and enjoying Agnon does not

ies of imperfect souls, as they plod through that time and space, directed by their own human drives and failings, by history, by fate, and/or by God. The places of Agnon's stories range from his city of birth in Galicia (in today's western Ukraine), to Jaffa, Jerusalem, and pre-World War II Germany. The time period in which the stories are situated range from the early 19th century, through the years before the First World War to the 1940's. According to Rabbi Saks, "Agnon's stories deal with the conflict between traditional Jewish life and language and the modern world, constituting a distillation of millennia of Jewish writing – from the Bible through the rabbinic codes to Hasidic storytelling – recast in the mold of modern literature." And yet, while this will inevitably create deep meanings and associations for many Jewish readers, Agnon would surely not have received the Nobel prize if his stories did not resonate with universal themes that are the very "stuff" of being a human in a very confusing world – about inner conflicts, about belonging and longing and alienation, about hope and regret, about complex love and the struggle to make sense and meaning of a most confusing world, one in which there is sometimes only a very elusive line between dreaming, day-dreaming, and life. The stories' narrators reveal the thoughts and actions of the characters with various combinations of irony and satire, wit, and tenderness, sometimes with seemingly objective distance and sometimes from a perspective of intense affinity, if not identification, with them. And the reader cannot help but respond to the characters with a similar range of emotions.

I think the novel that first
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Rabbi Jeffrey Saks shown at Beit Agnon in the Talpiyot neighbourhood of Jerusalem, where S.Y. Agnon lived and worked. Rabbi Saks is director of research at what is now a museum and cultural centre. He is also senior editor of the new 15-volume library of Agnon's works published by Toby Press.

ly completed 15-volume library of S.Y. Agnon, published by the Toby Press. In Beit Agnon's small and intimate setting, where one

particular, of Jewish history and sources, but I think mostly his love for the subject matter, evokes in the participants a deep connec-

each class provided a window into Jewish sources and a heritage that I shamefully know much too little about.

Hundreds of books and

require scholarly study. On a first encounter with his stories, readers are brought into a world, a place and a time, and into the hearts, minds and bod-



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"hooked" me to Agnon was "A Guest for the Night". It is hailed as one of Agnon's most significant works, and the one specific work singled out by the Nobel Committee. In it the narrator (who is not Agnon although the story contains many biographic elements) leaves Israel for a period of time to return to the town in which he grew up, in Eastern Europe. He describes its decline and disintegration through what Saks claims are some of the most moving character descriptions in Hebrew literature. The narrator discovers that the lives of many friends have been taken by war, pogrom or disease, and the former vibrant Jewish life is impoverished almost to the point of extinction. He sees the decline of traditional values and confronts the loss of faith and trust of a younger generation and the disillusionment of some who replaced faith with ideology. Saks sees in this story Agnon's vision of his people's past, tragic present, but as well the hope for the future. However, what stirred me most about this story was best captured in the parallel Saks drew (in the book's introduction) between Thomas Wolfe's "You Can't Go Home Again" and the Agnon story. That is, for me this novel's true power lay in the confrontation of a present (fictional in this case yet truthful) reality with the memories of a home that no longer exists, and the impossibility of ever going back – not just to the place, but to all the things that we remember about our past home. It is about a sadness so prevalent in human experience, when memory collides with the reality.

For those unfamiliar with Agnon, I perhaps would recommend beginning with

Toby Press's 2014 English Edition "Two Scholars who were in our Town and Other Novellas by S.Y. Agnon".



S.Y. Agnon in an undated photo near the time of his Nobel Prize for Literature, which he shared with the German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs. He was born as Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes in Buczacz (Polish Galicia) in 1888, the son of a Hasidic rabbi. In 1908, he moved to Jaffa in Ottoman Palestine. The first story he published there was "Agunot" ("Forsaken Wives"), which appeared that same year in the journal Ha'omer. He used the pen name "Agnon," derived from the title of the story, which he adopted as his official surname in 1924.

It is also edited and annotated by Rabbi Saks, whose introduction to the novellas I have mercilessly condensed and plagiarized here (with permission). I recommend beginning with this book because each of the 4 stories is very different, and "exemplars of the richness of the literary world created by Agnon". They vary in place, from Agnon's ances-

tral Galician hometown, to in the Land of Israel, and one story takes place, at least partly, on the sea. The

thus?" cannot be avoided in this tale, which although drawn from classical Jewish sources is absolutely modern. The second story, "In the Heart of the Seas", is a tale of the Journey to the Land of Israel by a group setting out from Galicia. The story is a stunning example of what Saks refers to as the dual frequencies on which the story broadcasts, between a realistic fictional travel tale of this group of Jews and the story of one of the characters "who floats along in the heart of the sea atop a magical kerchief". It is a most fascinating weave of fictional realism and the surreal. In "In the Prime of Her Life", the third story – readers are introduced to Agnon's collection of love stories. It is written in the voice of a young girl, and the reader familiar with the Bible may detect parallels in content, theme, and style with the Book of Ruth. But it is mostly a tale of love lost and found, with exquisite emotional depth and complexity. Two of Israel's most acclaimed current writers, A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz have hailed this story for its ability to bring to life the sub-conscious of its characters, and the latter hailed it as "the bedrock of modern Hebrew Literature". And the final story in this volume, "Tehilla", is perhaps Agnon's best known and most beloved tale. It explores the themes of righteousness, repentance, redemption, reward and punishment in an "Agnonian love story" which takes place in Jerusalem. It is about love that is obstructed by the jealousy and hatred between different Jewish factions, about the suffering which results from it, and about one remarkable woman's capacity to transcend this suffering, and

manage the conflict between a faith-driven deterministic world view and her personal determination to be her own agent in the struggle to make peace with the past. Some scholars view the story, written immediately after the 1948 War of independence in which the Old City of Jerusalem was hidden away from the Jewish State across the border, as a lamentation for Old Jerusalem as a place and as an idea, embodied in the life of one remarkable woman". Whether or not the reader agrees with this interpretation, it is a beautiful story about a remarkable woman, whose strength, determination and goodness resonates most powerfully.

The recently completed Toby Press 15 book series of Agnon's writings has been hailed as a remarkable accomplishment in terms of its quality and its scope. It has been reviewed in journals such as the New Yorker and The New York Review of Books, and I include some links for those who wish to read more about this series. In addition to the literary quality of the translations, the prefaces and end notes in each book are worthy of highlighting. Written either by the translators, all of whom are well known authors and scholars themselves, and by Rabbi

Saks, the prefaces provide short but important background information, as well as an invitation and a lens through which the stories might be understood. The endnotes provide the reader with information and references relating to the rich array of Jewish sources that are embedded in the stories – be they from the Bible, from legends or folk tales, midrash, and so forth. Apparently even Israelis who can read Agnon in the original, have sought this series of translated S.Y. Agnon stories because of this feature (oddly absent from the original Hebrew volumes!). But it is in particular English speakers/readers who will be grateful to Rabbi Saks, and his colleagues at Toby Press for providing us with the opportunity to experience S.Y. Agnon's gift of great literature.

(Rena Shimoni is a retired Calgary educator who divides her time between Calgary and Jerusalem.)

So - next time you visit Jerusalem - you might want to visit Agnon House – <https://agnonhouse.org.il> and check the Toby Press Website www.toby-press.com/agnon to get more information on the series.

Reviews: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/israels-founding-novelist>
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<https://www.makorishon.co.il/judaism/51977/>
Canadian Jewish News: <https://www.cjnews.com/uncategorized/exploring-midrashic-style-s-y-agnon>



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