



“If I could burn the space”: on homelessness and the collapse of subjectivity in S.Y. Agnon’s *A Guest for the Night**

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ABSTRACT

A Guest for the Night, one of Agnon’s greatest novels, has long been considered to have dealt with the demise of Jewish Eastern Europe, Zionism and the art of the novel. This article offers a different reading, showing Agnon’s novel as a radical work that may have greatly exceeded its author’s intentions. Focusing on the irony directed at the novel’s narrator, I claim that *A Guest for the Night* calls on its readers to reconsider common premises regarding the history and politics of Eretz Israel/Palestine.

KEYWORDS

S.Y. Agnon; Zionism; homelessness; Donald Winnicott; subjectivity; Jewish literature

Over two decades after leaving his hometown Buczacz in East Galicia, the Hebrew writer S.Y. Agnon returned to Buczacz for a short visit that would also be his last. He made his way from Leipzig in Germany to Poland on the 10th August 1930, and stayed there for 28 days, during which he spent less than a week in Buczacz (Laor 1995, 154–157). Seven years later Agnon began writing his novel *A Guest for the Night*, which he finally completed in September 1939. The novel tells of a man who returns to his hometown Szybusz¹ after his home in Jerusalem had been destroyed by Palestinian rioters. The protagonist, who is also the narrator, is a writer who shares Agnon’s name and much of his biography, including the fact that Agnon’s own apartment in the Jerusalem neighbourhood of Talpiyot was indeed demolished during the 1929 riots. However, the novel is not a biographical work. Its narrative, spanning the ten months between Yom Kippur and Tisha B’av many more than the actual six days Agnon had spent in Buczacz, is fragmented and repetitive, comprised of conversations between the protagonist and local people that he meets, dreams or illusions, stories and thoughts that he shares with his reader. These assorted elements form a fractured and eventually fatiguing narrative. But the greatest difficulty in following the narrator’s story and in making sense of it lies in a harsh irony directed at all that he does and says. This irony makes the reading of the novel extremely confusing, if not overly frustrating, and raises many disturbing questions: Why did Agnon opt for a narrator who fails to know himself, a narrator whose attitude to others lacks genuine compassion and understanding? Why did he give his own name and biography to this insensitive and unsympathetic figure? Why is the narrative made to be so wearying?

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Let us start by recalling what the narrator himself tells of his journey: on the eve of Yom Kippur he arrives in the Galician town of Szybusz where he was born and raised, and notices that everything has changed during the two decades that had passed since his departure. The Jewish community, once active and prosperous, is now ruined as a result of the First World War, repeated pogroms and persecutions. The people he meets are bereaved and damaged, physically and emotionally. They fail to meet his expectations of engulfing himself once more in study and prayer. All have lost interest in the old *Beit Midrash* (the old synagogue), which was once the centre of life in town, and its key is passed to the guest as a useless object. He then tries to renew the studies and pray in the old synagogue, but his efforts are all in vain: it seems that the rich heritage of Jewish cultural life in Eastern Europe has come to an end. In light of this conclusion, and after almost a year in Szybusz, the narrator fulfils his true vocation by rejoining his wife and children from whom he has been separated all that time, and returns to Jerusalem to reestablish his home there. Unknowingly, almost miraculously, he brings with him to Jerusalem the original key to the old synagogue, a symbol of the old home and the cultural and religious heritage of the Jews in Eastern Europe. He then places the key in a box, where it must wait until all synagogues and Houses of Study reach the Promised Land at the end of time, and he wears the key to the box around his neck, as the original key is too heavy to wear. Acknowledging the lost Jewish tradition and life, the novel seems to be saying, and always waiting for the Messiah to come while never assuming he had already arrived, is the only way one could face the grave difficulties in Palestine, especially those related to the national conflict over the land.

However, the narrative is repeatedly undermined throughout the novel. The narrator's longing for days gone by, for the glorious past of his hometown, are ridiculed in light of the wretched condition of the poor, bereaved, and amputated people that he meets in Szybusz. Despite all the misery and despair he encounters, he still believes he could somehow revive the old synagogue. Yet, while he presumes to take upon himself the responsibility for the place, he hands over the chores to others (Reb Hayim and the wagon driver, Hanokh). He incessantly praises the Land of Israel (though he does not hide the Zionists' difficulties), but says nothing about its actual landscape and people, and remains for almost a year in a place that he describes as listless and hopeless, the same man who maintains, "... anyone who leaves the Land of Israel, even for a while, is regarded as one who runs away" (253; 236).² He often speaks of the importance of having a home, be it his hometown, the religious "home," and, of course, a "national home," but he is separated from his wife and children for many long months. Only after he runs out of money does he return to Jerusalem. In short, the incessant irony directed at the narrator undercuts his supposedly unconditional adherence to Zionism, as well as undermining his presumed unabated commitment to Jewish Eastern Europe. Most of all, the narrator is ironically portrayed as a man lacking self-awareness and who unable to sympathize with his fellow human beings. Thus, I argue, the greatest question the novel raises concerns Agnon's choice of entrusting such a narrator with his own name and biography, the telling of what is apparently his own story, and possibly that of an entire generation of Eastern European Jews reaching Palestine between the two world wars.

The irony directed at the novel's narrator has often been acknowledged by Agnon scholars, and yet its most radical implications were not fully recognized. Agnon's commentators, among them A.Z. Eshkoli (1940) and Yitzhak Barzilai (1979), noticed the ironic gaps

in the novel and still insisted that the implied author remained faithful to Zionism as the only hope for Eastern European Jews.³ Dan Laor agrees with this (Laor 1995, 154–174), and Baruch Kurtzweil, who stresses Agnon’s tragic failure to restore a lost religious world, still maintains that Agnon does not give up on messianic hope, albeit through an ever deferred divine intervention (Kurtzweil 1950). Indeed, because the novel engages with Zionism and the Jewish religious heritage so much almost all the interpretations of it so far have focused on internal Jewish questions: can Jews create a national home in Palestine despite the conflict with its Arab Palestinian dwellers?⁴ Can Zionism replace the traditional hope for messianic intervention? Does the narrator find a way to part from his hometown Szybusz, or integrate its religious and diaspora heritage into his vision of Zionist Jerusalem, or, at least, erect a written monument to his hometown (and to its demise)? Thus, Ann Golomb Hoffman suggests that the novel presents the telling of the story itself as an imaginative substitute for all that was lost (Golomb Hoffman 1991, 77–103) and in some of the most recent scholarly writings on *A Guest for the Night* Michal Arbell further argues that “[t]he written story is the only way by which the guest can draw Szybusz into Jerusalem” (Arbell 2008, 208). Arbell further maintains that by writing this and other stories Agnon is creating a much needed continuity between the lost world and the present, as the written work becomes a memorial to a once vigorous civilization and to its catastrophic loss. Arbell concludes that “only the story, the act of recreating in words, can give the city its name, and save it and its sons from oblivion” (208). In that, I believe, she may come close to proposing what she terms a “harmonious” reading of the novel.⁵

Dan Miron’s explanation of the novel is particularly intriguing (Miron 1995, 219–221; 307–343). Miron, who like many of the other critics focuses on the fate of the original key, explains that the discovery of the key in Jerusalem is ironic, as it was already of no use in Szybusz and would serve no purpose in Jerusalem. Miron explains Agnon’s irony in two ways: first, he argues that Agnon had substantial difficulty in writing novels, a genre that was foreign to Jewish tradition and represented modern values – a belief in man’s ability to steer his life and take hold of his destiny. These values collided with Agnon’s aspiration to make way for a personal, national and cosmic hope that relies on traditional Jewish values, and hindered the closure of his novels. In *A Guest for the Night* this difficulty expresses itself in the final ironic understanding that we humans cannot “end our ‘affairs’ in a way that gives our life sense and meaning [and] we have to leave this closure to forces above or below us” (321–322). Miron, however, gives another reason for the novel’s ironic closure, explaining that when Agnon was writing *A Guest for the Night* in the 1930s he needed to break away from the religious storyteller of his earlier work in favour of expressing “the contemporary drama of exile and redemption” (221). The reasons for that, according to Miron, were threefold: first, Agnon’s visit to Eastern Europe taught him about the decay of Jewish communities and he may have felt that he could no longer be like the one who “sings a sweet lullaby in the ears of the dying” (220). Second, Agnon’s decision to adopt a religious way of life after his return to Palestine in 1924 made it possible for him to be less conservative in his writing. Third, and above all else, Agnon realized that he had exhausted his creative resources and needed to find a new way that would allow him to express “new sensibilities [*regishuyot hadashot*] of that time and place” (221). Agnon had found the strength to do so, Miron continues, in his being critical of “himself, his own literary and public persona and of the literary ‘agenda’ that

had guided him” (221). Consequently, as of the 1930s, Agnon’s poetics focuses on the recognition that suffering or pain is an inseparable part of human life, and for that awareness to be expressed he needed to treat his narrators ironically as he does so in *A Guest for the Night*.

In other words, Miron explains that Agnon felt the need to express the reality of contemporary mankind, but did not believe that we humans could do anything to change it, a task best left to divine intervention. As much as Miron’s analysis is interesting and thought-provoking, it raises some difficulties. First, by accepting the claim that we humans are powerless to change our dire condition, and that our fate should better be left in the hands of God, Miron echoes the words of the narrator at the end of the novel, the same narrator who knows not even himself, as Miron stresses. I would like to further suggest that in attributing the irony to Agnon’s need to forge a new way for himself, Miron locates the answers to this very complex and bewildering work in the alleged psychological and artistic motives of its author, rather than in the work itself.⁶ In what follows I aim to show that the irony so courageously directed at Agnon’s imaginative shadow figure, here more than in any of his other works, eventually makes it impossible for us to accept the narrator’s messianic aspirations. This irony also excludes any kind of reconciliation (even through an ever-deferred divine intervention) with what the novel conceives as the tragic condition of Jews, whether still in Europe or in Mandate Palestine, as well as with the suffering of *all* subjugated people in the first decades of the twentieth century. It is my understanding that in ways that may have radically exceeded Agnon’s own intentions, *A Guest for the Night* calls on its readers to move beyond the most immediate internal Jewish issues of Zionism, messianism, religiosity, and even diaspora existence, to see in a new and different way the historical and geographical reality of Palestine in the 1930s. In a way that goes against virtually all Agnon criticism so far, I believe that to the extent that this novel goes beyond displaying a hopeless reality, it involves a recognition of the actual circumstances of the narrator’s journey, something that he so significantly fails to do. My reading of the novel further suggests that before the British psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott wrote his seminal essays on transitional phenomena and their importance in enabling imagination, creativity, subjectivity, empathy and meaningful human relations (Winnicott [1971] 2005), Agnon portrays a protagonist who resembles some of the cases Winnicott describes. Not unlike Winnicott’s patients, Agnon’s protagonist lacks the capacity for creative living, the capacity related both to telling reality from illusion and then to the imaginative placing of oneself in the position of the other. As I intend to show, Agnon chooses such a narrator not only because he so badly wanted to find new ways for his writing, or only to stress how all-encompassing human pain has become, although he certainly does that, not even to suggest that only a religious way of life can give sense and meaning to one’s experience, but because this narrator, made in the image of Agnon himself, and possibly representing an entire generation, makes it possible for the novel to reveal something not known enough, if at all, about a *particular, historical* reality.

“Every article in the land is like a limb of [my] body”

One of the most striking features of *A Guest for the Night* as a “journey novel” is that the narrator never tells about his travels on sea from Palestine to Galicia and back. The time

and space of being in between lands is made unavailable, and the kind of reflection and taking stock associated with the “journey novel” is nowhere to be found. Agnon’s choice to leave out the journey and its spaces may correspond to his decision to transform the week he had spent in Buczacz in 1930 to almost a year in the novel.⁷ It seems that the prolonged stay on land and the convoluted, lengthy narrative, reflect the narrator’s inability to achieve the inner change conventionally associated with the “journey novel.” It is only towards the second half of the novel that the narrator gives his reasons for travelling to Szybusz.⁸ Throughout the previous thirty-four chapters he had said nothing about his reasons for going on this journey and departing from his wife and children.

Almost 200 pages into the novel we first learn what had happened:

Why am I here and my wife and children elsewhere? After our enemies had destroyed my house and left me with nothing, a great weariness entered me and my hands were too feeble to rebuild my house, which had suffered a second destruction. The first destruction was abroad, and the second in the Land of Israel; but when my house was destroyed abroad, I accepted the justice and the verdict and said: It is my punishment for choosing to live outside the Land. So I made a vow that if God was with me and restored me to the Land of Israel I should build myself a house and never leave it. Praised be the Name of the Lord, who allowed me the privilege of going up to the Land and to live in Jerusalem. I brought over my wife and children; we rented a house and bought furniture ... Eye to eye we saw that the Almighty was looking down with favor on His Land and that a people was being created. And we already thought, in error, that the end of exile had come and we were feasting on the years of the Messiah.

While we were living in tranquility, judgment struck us. The enemy raised his sword against our holy city and the cities of our God, and the houses of Israel were plundered. Jews were killed and burned and grievously tormented, and all the fruits of our toil were pillaged. ‘Yet His anger has still not been appeased, and His hand—heaven forbid—is still outstretched.

My wife and children and I emerged alive, and the sword from the desert did not strike at our persons. But my belongings were looted and my books torn up, and the house in which I thought I should live was laid desolate. “The Lord gave and the Lord took; blessed be the Name of the Lord.”

Praised be the Name of the Lord that we emerged alive, but our household goods and my books were pillaged and torn. I, for whom every article in the Land is like a limb of the body, and every book is a part of the soul, suddenly became as one stricken in body and soul. [Agnon (1939) 1959, 193–194 (Hebrew); Agnon 1968, 207–208 (English)]

While alluding to the 1929 riots in Palestine, when an Arab mob destroyed Agnon’s apartment in Jerusalem, the narrator uses a language that at least partly denies the actual historical circumstances of the riots. First, he opts for the general noun *oyev* or *oyvim* (enemy/ies), not Arabs, to describe the rioters; second, he uses the phrase *hurban sheni* (a second destruction) when referring to what happened to his house in *Talpiyot*, a term strongly associated with the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE. Third, after telling of his vow never to leave Eretz Yisrael, and admitting to having thought that the Messiah had already arrived, he uses language that is full of pathos, reminiscent of descriptions of pogroms against Jewish communities in Eastern Europe (*ha’oyev henif harbo* [the enemy raised his sword]; *veyisra’el nehergu venisrefu venityasru bisurim kashim*) [Jews were killed and burned and grievously tormented]), to describe the riots. He also directly

resorts to biblical language (*herev hamidbar* [the sword from the desert] from Lamentations 5:9) to reinforce the overall sensation of divinely inspired violence and loss. The narrator further uses the phrase *pag'a banu midat hadin* (God's judgment struck us), insisting that the violence was an expression of divine wrath rather than the result of an actual conflict between two national and ethnic communities. We thus belatedly realize that the narrator's journey started as a direct response to the riots, but what kind of a response? The narrator explains that before the riots he believed that messianic times had already started. He says – “And we already thought, in error, that the end of exile had come and we were feasting (*okhlim*) on the years of the Messiah,” possibly ironically translating the Yiddish idiom *esn teg* (literally “eating days”), which refers to the custom according to which yeshiva students would have daily meals at the houses of the wealthy. The narrator is thus comparing himself and others like him (as he explicitly uses the plural pronoun), to exilic Jews who are allegedly passively awaiting someone else to feed them, actually ridiculing himself for believing that God was already providing for him. But God had other plans, and the Enemy charged. It may seem then that the narrator's disenchantment with the divine promise reduced all his mental and physical resources so much needed for the national project and made him go into exile. However, the narrator himself stresses the *physical* destruction of his house and belongings, not the loss of life or his own anxiety in face of such brutality, as the main reason for his emotional and physical devastation.⁹ Notwithstanding that this was the second time a house of his was destroyed and that a strong emotional attachment to books is not a rare trait, especially among writers, it is still surprising that the loss of the actual house and objects hurts him most. As much as his belief that the Messiah had already arrived might have imbued the concrete walls and objects with mythical importance, the narrator's attachment to all that is concrete goes much further than that.

I would like to argue that shunning the sea as an in-between space and that of the cityscape and concrete human life either in Jerusalem or in Szybusz emanates from the narrator's proclivity for the concrete – not the actual and historical – but that which is tangible and can be owned. Let us recall what the narrator tells about his feelings for the old synagogue where he spends much of the winter. One day, when it turns chilly and there isn't “even a chip” to burn in the wood bin, the narrator recalls days long gone:

I remembered how, in days gone by, when we wished to heat the stove and the wood was not sufficient, we used to take the reading desk of a householder who had avoided donating wood to the Beit Midrash, break it up, and put it in the stove. The few desks that were left in the Beit Midrash did not sense my thought. In any case, I said to them: Have no fear, I shall not touch you. On the contrary, I am glad you still exist, for I have studied the Torah on you, and inside you I used to hide the little books that made me leave off the study of the Torah. If I could burn the space inside and preserve you, I should burn the space; but since that is impossible, I shall keep my hands off you.¹⁰ [Agnon (1939) 1959, 109 (English); Agnon 1968, 107 (Hebrew)]

The narrator expresses a willingness to burn down the space as if by doing so he could save the desks on which he had studied Torah and where he had hidden secular books that drove him away from the study of the Torah, possibly Zionist writings. Times have changed. The fire hasn't been lit there for years and only a few of the desks were left. The narrator will soon hand over the chores of cleaning the synagogue and maintaining a wood supply to others, but right now he concentrates on inverting the accepted

hierarchy between the sanctified space and the objects in it. The desks that he so much wishes to save are tangible and concrete, but not necessarily unique and certainly not sanctified. Unlike Marcel Proust's madeleine they do not represent other past desks. They are the very same desks and at the end of times they will transport themselves through tunnels to the Promised Land, unlike the space surrounding them.¹¹ Agnon's narrator proves to be incapable of relating to any space that is in between, that remains undefined and that changes as time passes. As much as the old desks remind him of his youth, they do not open a well of memories for him, and he insists on their sheer materiality, on there being things in themselves. The narrator treasures their messianic, legendary future alongside their sheer materiality by indicating an affinity between the myth and the erasure of symbolic content/space.

Where could the narrator's preference for the tangible and concrete over the symbolic have begun? A possible answer is given when the narrator tells of his early fascination with the concept of "home." In his early childhood, he would watch the blacksmith at work and craved a box with a lock and a key on it:

... [W]hen I was a child I used to stand at the entrance of his [the blacksmith's—R.O.] shop, looking at the keys and locks, for in those days I longed for a chest with a key and a lock. When, later, I gave up the idea of the chest I did not give up the idea of the key, and I would lie in bed at night thinking of it—a large, heavy key, the kind a man takes out of his pocket to open his house. I picture this key in various shapes, but all the shapes were less important than its function and final purpose: the act of opening. Imagine it: In the center of the city stands a house, and that house has a door, like all the other houses, and on the door hangs a lock. Along comes a child from school, puts his hand in his pocket, takes out a key, pushes the key into the lock, and twists it this way and that—and immediately the whole house is open before him. What is there in that house? A table and a bed and a lamp. That is, there is nothing in the house that there is not in other houses. But the moment of the opening of the door with the key that is in the child's hand—no other moment can compare with it ... There are hidden stores of treasure that can be opened with a sentence, as when one says, 'Open Sesame'; I did not wish for things that were hidden from the eye, but only things that the eye could see, and I wished to have the key to them in my possession.¹² [Agnon (1939) 1959, 98 (English); Agnon (1935) 1968, 97 (Hebrew)]

The narrator wishes for something that could be exclusively his, home as a concrete object only one particular key can open but that is no different from other such homes. He insists that he wants nothing but what everyone else already has, and, one could say, understandably so. But why does he emphasize that his wish stands in opposition to a metaphorical, imaginative understanding of what a key could be? What he is after is not magical words that can open magical caves, it is not something that needs to be imagined for it to happen; for him a key is a key, even without a box to open.

Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin's explanation of Zionist ideology as a nationalization of the religious myth may be considered in this context (Raz-Krakotzkin 2002). He maintains that Zionist thought intervened in the traditional redemption narrative in a way that turned *Bet hamikdash* (the Temple) into a material *bayit* (house, home). He further explains that even though messianic ideas exist in various Jewish traditions, an actual messianic "sting," his term, lies not within the religious myths themselves but in defining Zionism as messianism and non-messianism at the same time, as redemption without a temple (Raz-Krakotzkin 2005). Although Zionism presented itself as defying messianic beliefs, considered to encourage nothing but passive hopes for divine intervention, Raz-

Krakotzkin continues, Zionist thinkers considered Zionism to be only a partial fulfilment of the Jews' prayers for redemption. The resulting "mixed separation," according to Raz-Krakotzkin, between the religious myth and a national ideology, which both maintains the religious myth while denying it, threatens to turn the spiritual yearning for the resurrection of the Temple into a *concrete* desire. This is the "sting," the risk, the danger Zionism entails, according to Raz-Krakotzkin. He further argues that this ideological mechanism also entails the denial of the actual sociopolitical reality. However, I believe that the novel does much more than reveal a messianic sting within Zionist ideology, a sting that, according to Raz-Krakotzkin, is bound to realise its full dangerous potential one day, regardless of any other ideologies and historical events. Indeed, in this regard Raz-Krakotzkin's is, at least to a certain extent, a teleological explanation that considers current socio-political reality as inevitable. Agnon's novel, on the other hand, first asks us to grasp the way the concept of *imagination* plays itself out in it: why does the narrator resent imaginative keys ("open sesame") and insist on having *only* an actual object? This is not a preference he adopted after becoming a Zionist; there is something in this novel that transcends Zionism although it never ignores it altogether.

"Do you know what imagination is, Hanokh?"

Some pages later, when a duplicate key allows the narrator to return to the synagogue and he needs wood to keep the place warm, Hanokh, the wagon driver, enters the story. Hanokh supports his family by travelling with his horse and carriage, petty trading in the villages of the gentiles around the town. From this point and until his death on one such excursion to make a living, the narrator would pay Hanokh to bring wood to heat the synagogue. One day he strikes up a conversation with the poor wagon driver, which leads him to a long meditation (or rather something between a monologue, a lecture and a homily) on the nature of the faculty of imagination. It is clear that the narrator has very little appreciation for Hanokh's intellect: not only does he say so clearly, he also insists on calling Hanokh's horse after him (Henech, the Yiddish pronunciation of Hanokh) and not by the name Hanokh has given it. Most specifically he blames Hanokh's lack of imagination for his inability to understand his own lofty ideas. He then goes on to explain what imagination is:

'Do you know what imagination is, Hanokh?' I ask him. 'I don't know,' he says. 'If so,' I say to Hanokh, 'sit down and I will explain it to you. Imagination is something through which everyone in this world lives: you and I and your horse and your cart. How can that be? Well, you go out to the village because you imagine that your income is assured there. The same applies to your horse and the same to your cart, for without the power of imagination the world would not go on living. Happy is the man who uses his imagination to feed his household, and woe to the man who uses it for vanities, like those who present dramas and farces. Once I went into a theater where they were showing a kind of drama. I said to my neighbors: "I know the end of this drama from its very beginning." And what I said was fully confirmed, because all I had to do was mirror one thing with another. And this I did through the power of the simple imagination ... for most plays are made with the simple imagination, because the authors have not been privileged to possess the higher imagination.'¹³ [Agnon (1939) 1959, 111 (English); Agnon 1968, 109 (Hebrew)]

"Simple imagination" and "higher imagination" are difficult to define. Does higher imagination entail some kind of religiously inspired ideas, such as the belief in messianic

times? Is the kind of imagination Hanokh uses in his daily work the same as the one used in the theatre? Is the narrator criticizing his present-day theatre, or expressing resentment of what he conceives to be non-productive imagination? Is the writer of the novel using simple or higher imagination? One thing is sure, the narrator is obviously ridiculing Hanokh in claiming that his horse and cart have the same imagination as he does. It is also hard to understand why the narrator believes Hanokh needs all those explanations, and what he means by the mock-*midrashic* exegesis of Hanokh's name, his horse's and his wagon's. Then the narrator suddenly comments:

You are a modest man, Hanokh; you are fit to be a shepherd. The shepherd walks beside his sheep or sits facing them and recites psalm like King David ... and the whole land of Israel is open before him ... If you like, you sit by streams of water and say: "He maketh me to lie down in green pastures ... Perhaps you are afraid of robber bands, but you need not be afraid. It happened once that a child went up to the heights of the mountain of Ephraim to graze his lamb. A certain Arab came, stole the child's lamb, and slaughtered it. The child began to cry. A certain shepherd came and judged the Arab according to the verdict in the Torah ... The Arab went and brought the child's father four lambs instead of one ... When this became known in the village, all the Jews went up to the top of the hill to the shepherd and said to him: "Master, son of Moses our Teacher, every day we are robbed, every day we are slaughtered, every day we are killed; come and guard the sheep that are led to the killing." He said to them ... Wait a little until the indignation of the Almighty passes away and he gives us permission to return to the Land of Israel, and rely upon His blessed mercies that He will protect you as a shepherd his flock." [Agnon (1939) 1959, 113 (English); Agnon 1968, 110–111 (Hebrew)]

After completing his long story, which I have considerably shortened here, the narrator tells us that he has never seen Hanokh rejoice so much. To make him even happier, the narrator tells him more about the Land of Israel. Let us read some more of his homily:

For the Land of Israel is not like the lands of the other nations, where the snow comes down without a stop and the sun hides itself and does not come out, and a man is covered and hidden by the snow and his wife and children cry and are not answered. And where is the sun? Has it no mercy on the children of Israel? In those days the sun is busy ripening the oranges in the Land of Israel ... [Agnon (1939) 1959, 113–114 (English); Agnon 1968, 111 (Hebrew)]

The irony is sharp and bitter. This is what will soon happen to Hanokh himself. He will be lost in the snow and his wife and children will be left with no-one to support them. Is this simply the way things are: the sun is elsewhere, God is elsewhere, when you need them most? If so, waiting for the Messiah could not make less sense both for those Jews in Palestine who ask for the shepherd's help, as well as for Hanokh and his community in Szybusz. Are those immigrating to the Land doing it without God's consent? Notice how varied the narrator's imagination is throughout these four pages: the narrator uses his imagination to analyze a theoretical concept (imagination); to criticize the way it is being used in the theatre, to tell a messianic legend aided by such tropes as the lamb and the shepherd; to mock Hanokh's alleged feeble mind; to imagine that Hanokh may consider him to be a prophet, and, perhaps above all, to prophesy Hanokh's death. However, there is one meaningful way in which his imagination fails him: he cannot imagine himself in Hanokh's position. It is not that he lacks awareness of how poor and helpless Hanokh is, but by burdening Hanokh with this endless, fatiguing verbosity, irony and messianic

imagination, he does nothing to help Hanokh or express empathy for this man whose imminent death he so clearly foresees.¹⁴ It is hard to avoid the feeling that the narrator is using the wagon driver to make himself seem wiser and more sophisticated, the one who is truly in possession of “higher imagination.” Eventually his long lecture on the imagination throws into relief his own lack of imagination, as well as the affinity between this lack and his incapacity for genuine empathy.

What I would like to suggest now is that there are telling similarities between Agnon’s dealing with the imagination and Donald W. Winnicott’s theory of playing and reality. A brief discussion of Winnicott’s theory may allow me to show how the narrator’s greatest difficulties in telling reality from fantasy, feeling empathy and making sense of his own experience are all related to each other. I would then explain how this understanding elucidates key questions raised by this novel, not least those relating to the Zionist endeavour.

The space in which we are alive

In Winnicott’s account, early development centres around the mother’s initial provision of the illusion that internal and external reality are one and the same (Ogden 1992, 167–232). The mother (or someone else in that position) is able to provide the infant with what she needs as if she had “created” the object. The illusion is not of the infant’s omnipotent power to create what is needed; rather, the illusion is that need does not exist, as the mother is meeting the infant’s need before need becomes desire. At a certain point the infant will start to “destroy” or give up on the internal object mother or subjective object, that is, on the object conceived by her to be within the realm of her omnipotence. If the mother “survives” this destruction, that is, if she remains emotionally present while the infant tries to carry out the act of trust involved in loosening her grip on the omnipotent internal object mother, then she will be able to become aware of the object (mother) as a subject. This awareness of the difference between me and not-me is not dichotomous but dialectical. The infant first becomes capable of being alone in the presence of the mother, when a transitional object, often a soft doll, is “a symbol for this separateness in unity, unity in separateness,” being “at the same time the infant (the omnipotently created extension of herself) and not the infant (an object she has discovered that is outside of her omnipotent control)” (Ogden 1992, 212). For our discussion of Agnon it would be especially meaningful to notice that the transitional object “must seem to the infant to give warmth, or to move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has vitality or reality of its own.” (Winnicott [1971] 2005, 7). Its fate, Winnicott explains, is not to be forgotten or mourned, but to lose meaning. Ogden further explains, that when this happens a “potential space” is being created, a space between symbol and symbolized mediated by and interpreting self. (Ogden, 213) Within potential space imagination and play can develop, consequently subjectivity, and also the use of the object, that is one’s ability to truly “make use” of another human being, to be fed not only by oneself, to form meaningful relationships. In the absence of potential space there is only what Winnicott defines as “fantasy,” not a dialectic of fantasy and reality, and in fantasy “a dog is a dog” (Ogden 1992, 214). Understanding is denied, replaced by action, for “understanding the meaning of one’s experience is possible only when one thing can stand for another without being another.” The establishment of subjectivity is then inseparable

from the establishment of the distinction between the symbol and the symbolized, and is a result of the same developmental process, that includes transitional objects and the process through which they lose meaning.

Let us return to the idea of empathy, as it is so important for understanding Agnon's novel. Paraphrasing what is explained above, the infant as interpreting subject makes it possible for him or her to become aware of the mother's subjectivity, allowing for the development of the capacity for concern for another person as "a separate human being capable of feeling *like*, not the same, as one's own" (Ogden 1992, 224). With this awareness of the subjectivity of the other comes not only empathy but the capacity for guilt, mourning, "and for the desire to make reparations as opposed to magical restoration of the damaged object" (Ogden 1992, 224). I believe my reading in the novel so far shows that for the narrator the dialectical relationship between fantasy and reality has collapsed. Not only is he incapable of feeling true empathy for Hanokh, the man for whose death he portrays himself as being indirectly responsible (because he failed to keep him on a retainer and thus prevent him from travelling in the snow to sell his merchandise), he is overwhelmingly preoccupied with fantasies and dreams, daydreams and visions.¹⁵ Eventually, he returns with his own peculiar transitional object, the original key to the old synagogue, which shows no vitality or reality of its own, as a transitional object would do, and also seems not to have lost meaning for him, as transitional objects are meant to lose. Therefore, it could not have made way for a potential space allowing empathy and mourning. A key can be an actual key and at the same time a symbol of one's childhood, or for the soon to be lost (according to the novel) Jewish community of Szybusz, but when it symbolizes a denial of the loss, of its own uselessness as an actual object, and mainly when it symbolizes a mourning process that does not take place, as I believe is the case in this novel, then the key becomes *a thing in itself*, making all else unavailable (Winnicott [1971] 2005, 26; 32). The narrator prefers "a magical restoration of the damaged object" instead of making reparations, and he returns from his journey with no real sense of loss, and consequently fails to make sense of his experience.

The sad tonality of home

Agnon's was not the only journey novel written and published in the 1930s by a Jewish writer who had left Eastern Europe. In 1938 the Yiddish poet Yankev Glatshiteyn published his first journey novel, *Ven Yash iz geforn* (*When Yash Set Forth*; Glatshiteyn 1938; Glatstein 2010) followed by its sequel *Ven Yash iz gekumen* (*When Yash Arrived*; Glatshiteyn 1940; Glatstein 2010), telling of Yash's journey from New York to Lublin to visit his dying mother. Glatshiteyn, like Agnon, had left Eastern Europe twenty years before returning on his first and last visit to his hometown. Yash's novels say nothing of Lublin itself: the first novel ends when Yash is about to reach Lublin and the other takes place in a Jewish-owned convalescent home near the Polish city of Kazhimir, where Yash spends a few weeks after his mother's burial. In addition to there not being an actual return, the two novels take place in "extra-territorial" settings, the first one mostly on sea and briefly on a train, the second in an institution for people suffering from sclerosis and quiet mental patients. Yash, then, is always in between, never really "at home." His journey is not meant to bring anything in the past back to life, or salvage in any way the Jewish life he had known in his youth. Not restoring what cannot and need not be restored in the *place* of his childhood,

Yash is finally able to stitch together the two parts of his life, that of Jewish Eastern Europe and that of New York, and stops being what he calls “a synthetic man.” His journey, reconnecting with Jewish Eastern Europe as he imagines it to be, allows him to face death courageously and to move forward in his life’s journey while still having a child’s optimism and spirit. What enables it all is the metaphorical “key” with which Yash returns, which he calls *di troyerike tonalitet fun der heym*, the sad or sorrowful tonality of home, that is, the sad, albeit beautiful and inspiring, tonality of Jewish existence.

The difference between this *troyer*, sorrow or sadness, and Agnon’s depiction of injustice and suffering is insurmountable. Yash’s solution suggests a way for the individual to make sense of his experience, it is a very intimate form of redemption although it may apply to many. But Glatshiteyn’s optimism cannot apply to the reality of Agnon’s novel, it cannot relieve the loss of the man whose three daughters were killed on the very same day, nor could it comfort Hanokh’s widow and orphans or those immersed in what by the 1930s may already seem to be repeated cycles of violence in Palestine. Yash’s novels are much more nostalgic than Agnon’s, as Yash sees hope in the cultural heritage of Jewish Eastern Europe. In Agnon’s novel there is no hope. Had he created a rounder figure, his protagonist would have had to return with something that would, if only a little, lessen the severity of what the novel exposes. When the journey ends, exactly where it started, we are left with a sense of restlessness and with a heavy key that opens nothing. Thus, the major concern around which the novel revolves is not how an Eastern European Jew could overcome the devastating loss of the way of life he had once known (but had long left behind), and/or incorporate the memory of it within Zionism. Questions such as where the real home is, whether the Messiah will ever arrive, or how the old home could be part of the one still in-the-making pale in the face of the loss of human life and hope that the novel unveils. If at all, Agnon’s narrator, in his strong attachment to concrete objects that are not transitional and enabling, in his failure to imagine himself *like* anybody else, a failure that attests to a collapse of subjectivity itself, undermines the very importance and validity of internal Jewish questions. It may be that Agnon believed Zionism to be a necessary, though partial, redemption, but the novel does not stop at such an understanding.

From house to house and from dwelling to dwelling

As explained above, Winnicott maintains that when the mother is not present emotionally for the infant, she or he may not be able to develop the capacity to differentiate me-extensions from not-me and reality from fantasy (or maintain the potential space between them). However, Winnicott also mentions other factors that would prevent the normal development of an infant or a child, such as acute sensitivity on his or her part, or unfavourable external conditions. Towards the end of the novel the narrator offers a revealing fact about his childhood that attests to certain such unfavourable external conditions:

I am the son of respectable folk and I love the houses where I dwelt in my childhood. First, because a man’s house is his shelter from the sun and the cold, the rain and the snow, the dust and the noise of the streets; and second, because a man’s house is his own domain, which he acquires in this world as a portion divided off from the world, in which no one else has any

portion, nor does it make any difference whether he lives in a house of his own or has rented it from someone else. Father ... did not build a house for himself, and therefore we would move from house to house and dwelling to dwelling ... (403; 377)

Only now can we begin to understand the narrator's fascination with boxes, keys and homes. Despite calling himself "the son of respectable folk," which in the Hebrew actually reads "a son of home-owners" (*ben ba'ale batim*), his father did not own a home, and the family had to move from one apartment to another.¹⁶ He argues that it does not matter whether one owns one's home but moving from place to place during one's childhood may yield a sense of homelessness. He might not have been able to develop the kind of trust a child needs to relinquish the illusion of an omnipotent internal mother with all that this entails for one's subjectivity. In a way we have come to expect from him, the narrator fails to acknowledge his own deprivation.¹⁷ Furthermore, it is not only the narrator's homelessness that is at stake. The novel shows how *everybody* has become homeless, with the very idea of Home as a secure place being undermined. What the narrator knows as a personal condition – his father's difficulty in providing a secure home for his family – has become everybody's fate between the two world wars. Are we then to understand that human subjectivity is in danger, including the ability to tell reality from fantasy, to make judgments communicate non-violently and feel empathy for others? Whereas Glatshsteyn's Yash advocates "homelessness" as a kind of noble and enabling (Jewish) trait that can be elevated into a general principle of personal growth and creativity, Agnon in this novel could not be further removed from such conceptualization of homelessness. I would also like to suggest that Agnon's decision to give his protagonist his own name and biography makes him somewhat resemble a lyric persona calling on his readers to see him as themselves and his voice as their own. The result is challenging and complex. For while we start grasping the kind of homelessness and collapse of subjectivity the novel reveals as not only the narrator's, but possibly also our own, we also find it difficult to identify with him. It is here that the only hope in this novel may lie: in its irony towards the narrator. Once we have grasped the scope of this irony we are almost forced to understand how all-encompassing homelessness is, but in order to realize this we must engage in some sort of play. We imagine the narrator to be like us, without being able to believe this wholeheartedly since we cannot agree with his behaviour. Through this dialectical movement of identification and distance we begin to grasp differently the sociohistorical reality that has made the narrator embark on his journey. We may recall the narrator's belated explanation for his long journey, and question not only his depiction of the 1929 riots, but also his understanding of Zionism and the overall circumstances in Palestine at the time. Moving between tentative identification and disapproval we realize this man cannot be trusted, and that we need to make our own judgments. Once we have been fully engaged in this dialectics of identification and rejection, we start considering things differently. We may then begin to sense that the struggle over Palestine is not as he says it is, a conflict between the People of Israel and their enemy. We begin to grasp that homelessness, perhaps specifically Jewish homelessness, is related to a difficulty in telling myth from reality, me from not-me, that it hinders the development of subjectivity and the capacity for empathy. We may then provisionally experience some sort of a dead end. For how can there be hope for a non-violent future without the capacity to tell reality from delusion, and to imagine oneself in the position of the other? Through the

dialectics of identification and irony, exemplified by the figure of the narrator, the novel allows its readers to grasp more of the historical, geographical and political context of its time and place, i.e. Palestine between the two world wars. Will its readers now begin to imagine the Other (also the other ethnic community in Palestine, the native Arab Palestinians) to be like themselves? Could this newly arrived understanding (that in itself yields a felt subjectivity) facilitate a change in reality itself? And if so, what kind of change? Agnon gives no answer to these questions, but I believe these are the most urgent, most genuine concerns this great novel exposes.

Notes

1. Following Polish spelling, the town's name is Szybusz in the English translation, and should be pronounced "Shibush," Hebrew for something that changed form and went wrong (from the root *sh-b-sh*). Agnon first uses the name Shibush in his *Sipur pashut* (A Simple Story), first published in 1935 (Agnon 1935, 1985). I thank Michal Arbell for drawing my attention to this fact.
2. In all citations from the novel page numbers of the Hebrew follow those of the English translation.
3. See also Sadan (1973, 22–23; 54) and Halkin (1942, 139–146.)
4. Arbell (2008, 173–208) maintains that as of the 1930s Agnon's work focuses on the question of continuity between traditional Jewish identity as it existed in Eastern Europe and a new national identity, unreligious and Zionist, formed in Palestine. On Agnon's oeuvre at large as a memorial for what is lost see also Arbell (2006).
5. Arbell explains (in a private e-mail exchange) that her own "harmonious" interpretation of the novel differs from that of others since other scholars, such as Dan Laor, believe that the novel expresses a continuation of the traditional world within Zionism. She, on the other hand, argues that the novel focuses on the tragedy of the break, and it is the guest's mission to generate a continuous mourning endeavour.
6. According to Miron (2000, 549–608), Agnon believed in Zionism as the only hope for a creative continuation of Jewish life, while at the same time he felt that Zionism could be no more but a partial and tragic redemption. It is my understanding that the irony in this novel calls on us to ask about the nature of Zionism as "tragic redemption:" what makes it tragic? Is there any hope at all, even if only partial? Is there indeed nothing that we humans can do but passively accept Zionism as tragic? Agnon may have believed Zionism was a partial redemption, but his novel exceeds such understanding, as I show in this essay.
7. Laor (1995, 157–174) explains that by extending the week he had spent in Buczacz Agnon turns a journey novel into a historical novel (*roman-*tkufa**), and indeed *A Guest for The Night* tells a story relating to an entire generation at a specific historical moment.
8. Barzilai (1979) explains that in this novel, unlike Agnon's other *sipure shiva* (stories of Return), the narrator's reasons for travelling back to Szybusz remain unclear throughout the novel.
9. During the riots 133 Jews were killed and 341 wounded; 116 Palestinians were killed and 232 were wounded. Most Jews were killed in their homes, most Arabs were killed by the British security forces while they were attacking Jewish neighbourhoods and Jewish settlements (Cohen [2013] 1929, 20–21).
10. The English translation confusingly adds "inside" to "space," an addition not to be found in the Hebrew *chalal* (space). The word "inside" may create the false impression that the narrator wishes to burn the space inside the desks and not that inside the old synagogue.
11. The narrator refers here to *gilgul mehilot* (transportation through tunnels), an idea originating in *Midrash bereshit Rabbah* (a collection of homiletical interpretations of the book of Genesis).
12. Translation amended by the author.

13. The English translation uses another spelling for Hanokh (Hanoch).
14. Although it could be said that nothing much was in his hands, and far greater forces and injustices were involved in causing Hanokh's death, the narrator does not care for this man at all. When Hanokh disappears and later when his body is discovered, the narrator confesses to caring not for Hanokh's life, but only for the wood he fails to bring to heat the old synagogue. See the end of chapter 29.
15. Whether he is to blame for Hanokh's death or not (a question that occupies his mind, although he insists he is not to blame), the narrator is troubled by failing to give anything to Hanokh's widow. It is Reb Hayim who forces him to do right and give her some money: he asks the narrator to pay him for his work at the old synagogue and then gives the money to the widow and her orphans. See chapter 41.
16. See chapter 21.
17. Also, but not exclusively, through his insistence on bringing new life to the old synagogue—the house of the privileged educated class in Jewish society, as opposed to the poor people's house of prayer—but without caring for it himself.

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