

**“AS HE HAD BETRAYED THE LAND, SO HE BETRAYED HIS
BETROTHED”: EROTIC LOVE, NATIONALISM, AND
AUTHORSHIP IN *A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT***

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Abstract: *This article offers a reading of *A Guest for the Night* by S. Y. Agnon that unravels a semantic net of analogies among characters; the author and his dilemmas are arguably reflected in his relations with side characters, in some cases by analogy and in others through opposition. This network of relations uncovers the meaning of freedom in the novel. Freedom is semantically related to dependence and betrayal in intimate romantic relations, in national allegiance to the land of Israel and in relation to authorship, three semantic domains that are structured as parallel. The reading reveals Agnon’s position toward intimate relationship, nationalism, and authorship as laden with conflict: on the one hand the need to betray parents, partners, and origins and on the other hand, the fear and guilt concomitant with the freedom to write and to sever the ties to one’s roots.*

S. Y. Agnon’s second novel, *A Guest for the Night* was often read as dealing with a homecoming to the old home and as Agnon’s farewell to East European Jewry.¹ Critics highlighted the narrative of conflict and wavering between old and new by following the process of disillusion and sobering that the guest allegedly goes through during the year he spends in Szibusz. According to this interpretation, the guest’s decision to return to Palestine after eleven months spent in Szibusz is an unequivocal expression of the Zionist endpoint of this process. However, Agnon’s narrative technique in *A Guest for the Night* is much more complex than manifest actions reveal. By following the manifest level only, we end up with a uni-dimensional understanding of the novel and a very loose plot line that does not tie up together the secondary plots and the role of secondary characters in the novel. In this article I examine Agnon’s narrative techniques and the way they construct deeper meaning on the implicit level. I suggest that the narrator’s relations with Yeruham Freeman and his fiancé, Rachel, two minor characters in the novel, illuminate the narrator’s inner conflict regarding his national allegiance and tie together several major themes: the meaning of freedom, its price, and its inevitable

1. S. Y. Aganon, אורח נטה ללון (*A guest for the night*; Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976). S. Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night* (trans. M. Louvish; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1968).

relation to betrayal. By following the meaning of freedom as it is laid out simultaneously on the romantic, national, and artistic level, we realize that Agnon's treatment of Zionism is much more complicated than it appeared to Agnon's critics.

A Guest for the Night is an account of a belated homecoming; a middle aged man, former resident of an East European *shtetl*, returns to Szibucz after years of absence, on the eve of the Day of Atonement. The man, referred to as "the guest," is the first person narrator of his homecoming story. During his visit in his hometown, he faces a shattered and traumatized Jewish community that has dwindled as a result of World War I. Facing the devastation of the old *Beth Midrash*, where he used to study as a boy and a young adult, the guest tries to rehabilitate it and renew regular prayer and service. The cold winter weather that attracts worshippers to the well-heated place raises in the guest's heart false hopes for renewal, but with the coming of spring, the illusion dissipates, and he is again left there to pray in solitude.

As it unfolds, the story reveals the guest's own biography: he was born and raised in Szibucz, left as a young man, and immigrated to Palestine as a Zionist. Later he immigrated to Western Europe, spent several years there, and finally returned to Palestine with his family and built his home in Jerusalem. His decision to go back to his hometown, as he presents it, is an attempt to take a time-out, rest and relax from the destruction of his new home in the 1929 Arab riots. The guest eventually decides to leave the town after almost one year he spent there and re-settle in Palestine for life. However, at the same time that he decides to leave the old, exilic home behind, he is ambivalent toward the Zionist movement and its secular agenda.

The fact that the guest is also an author is revealed only at a relatively late stage. The choice of a self-reflecting narrator who is a professional author offers Agnon the opportunity to interrogate the role of a secular Jewish writer both in relation to literary traditions and in relation to broader contemporary political-national developments: the Zionist revolution on the one hand and the demise of the traditional *shtetl* culture on the other. The demand to become a modern writer and neglect the traditional Jewish genres plagues him no less than the decision to leave the old world behind, following the Zionist ideal of return. These conflicts find expression not only in the plot line, but also in the semantic web that Agnon weaves through narrative techniques.

As Gershon Shaked noted, *A Guest for the Night*'s plot structure appears at first reading as very loose, with many sub-plots interwoven through unclear logic and chance meetings with characters whose relation to the main plot is not easily explained. In place of a coherent, uni-linear plot, Agnon constructs meaning, according to Shaked, through two main techniques: analogy and chance meetings between the protagonist and other characters that point to hidden connections between the two acquaintances (הטכניקה הזימונית)². By describing the guest's chance meetings, the author reflects and projects the contents of the guest-narrator psyche on his interlocutor. Thus, “the character that the protagonist meets is internalized, so to speak, to the point that the former's relation to the latter is similar to his relation to one's own mental content.”³ The novel's many seemingly unrelated sub-plots can also be explained through analogies between characters.⁴

Following Shaked's reading strategy, I suggest that the narrator's inner conflicts in *A Guest for the Night* are indirectly conveyed through his relationship with Yeruham Freeman and his fiancé Rachel. Yeruham is a former pioneer, who immigrated to Palestine and was later expelled from it due to his activity as a communist. Yeruham then returned to Szibucz and made his living in the town by doing manual maintenance work. Apart from some side comments, very little was written about this loaded relationship, crucial to understanding the dilemmas that the narrator faces in the novel. In fact, the guest's relations with Yeruham are enmeshed in a web of analogies with other minor characters that eventually enrich and complicate the discussion of the narrator's inner conflicts.

The first time Yeruham Freeman appears in the novel (i.e., not just mentioned by other characters) he is described as masculine, strong, and handsome.⁵ The author explicitly compares him to the Zionists working in the land of Israel in spite of the fact that he had chosen to return to Szibusz (p. 54). Yeruham is lean, sun burnt, and the narrator notes his

2. G. Shaked, “בעיות מבניות ביצירתו של עגנון” (Structural issues in Agnon's work), in לעגנון שי: דברים על הסופר וספריו (In honor of S. Y. Agnon: Essays on the author and his works; Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency, 1966), pp. 308–320.

3. G. Shaked, “Structural Issues,” p. 321.

4. G. Shaked, “Structural Issues,” p. 311.

5. In the Hebrew text, this character is called Yeruham Hofshy, which means “Yeruham the free man,” therefore the translation is apt. However, one should note two things: the name Yeruham is derived from the Hebrew root רחם which means to take pity. The author takes many opportunities to refer to this root and thus indirectly refers to this character in a way that is lost in translation. I will point to it whenever necessary. Also, the last name, deriving from the root חפש, is often mentioned in other contexts. Here again I will point to it whenever necessary.

forelock, a characteristic native Israeli feature.⁶ Yeruham's physical characteristics set him apart from other people in Szibucz who make their living mainly from peddling or a small business in the traditional Eastern European way. The guest makes it a point to note that he likes Yeruham, apparently for being the emblematic Zionist pioneer. Also, when later the young man ignores him, the guest is clearly disturbed and offended (p. 54). At the same time, the guest is at pains to explain this liking to himself. He therefore keeps asking himself a nagging question: "Why do I like Yeruham?" (p. 217). The guest discovers that Yeruham is engaged to the attractive Rachel Zommer, the young daughter of the family who owns the guest house he stays in, and who the guest himself secretly covets. When he finds out that Yeruham and Rachel are planning to get married quickly because of her pregnancy, he remarks:

Why do I like Yeruham? Is it because he lived in the Land of Israel? But then he has left the Land and speaks evil of it. Or is it because he speaks Hebrew? But then Erela and her pupils also speak Hebrew. But when you hear their language, you feel as if you had been served with mealy potatoes, in which only the worms are alive, for their language is intermingled with words that all the tasteless people have made up out of their own heads. Not so with Yeruham. When he speaks, you feel as if a man were plowing and the fragrance of the pure earth were rising all around you. (p. 217)⁷

The first avowed reason for liking Yeruham is his organic ties to the land that are metaphorically conveyed through his use of the Hebrew language. Language is metaphoric to the nation, which is, in turn, rendered as a body. The horrible picture of the mealy potato eaten by worms applies to both. In linking language to national revival, the narrator implicitly refers to contemporary pioneer ideals. The Zionist pioneers insisted on Hebrew as the only language that can serve the national project. Moreover, they perceived the language metaphorically as a territory and saw "an organic connection between Hebrew and the Land."⁸ The connection to the land, in turn, could only be materialized through plowing and

6. O. Almog, "From Blorit to Ponytail," *Israel Studies* 8 (summer 2003): 86.

7. I had to modify the translation at this point. The English text reads "clean" whereas in the Hebrew Agnon uses the much stronger and laden word טהר, that is, pure, that has both religious and sexual connotations.

8. B. Neumann, *Land and Desire in Early Zionism* (Lebanon: Brandeis University Press, 2011), p. 162.

sawing, through physical, rather than abstract means.⁹ The pioneers perceived the land as a body, and likened the tilling of its soil to resurrecting a dead body.¹⁰ The organic connection between language, work, and land is characteristic of the Zionist ethos, and it excludes mere intellectualism. Indeed, the valorization of physical work leads us to a more implicit reason for the narrator’s attitude toward Yeruham: the narrator loathes the Zionist dealers and politicians that abound in the town and prefers Yeruham’s practical Zionism (pp. 340–341).

But the fact that the narrator has to convince himself several times that he likes Yeruham implies that different, unconscious motivations might be at work too. Baruch Kurzweil, in a seminal discussion of *A Guest for the Night*, offers an interesting account of the relationship between the narrator and Yeruham. Kurzweil argues that the narrator tries in vain to revive the lost world of childhood and of Jewish tradition. In this context, Yeruham Freeman is the narrator’s opposite:

Throughout the novel there is no character whose mere existence in Szibucz contradicts the guest’s actions more than Yeruham Freeman. The relationship between Yeruham and the guest sheds a new light on the true meaning of the guest’s attempt to return to yesterday’s world.... From a certain perspective there is no other character in the novel whom the guest envies more than Yeruham. This Yeruham is completely free of all the wavering, problems, complexes and contradictions that chart the way of the key’s owner [i.e., the narrator]. Yeruham ruined the bridges to the past.... In Yeruham the guest simultaneously loves and hates the desires that are hidden in his own heart—to free himself from the burden of the past and of tradition.¹¹

Kurzweil suggests that we should be suspicious of the narrator’s confessions of love for Yeruham and should change “love” to “envy” and a simple relationship to a more ambivalent one. Kurzweil’s focus on the issue of freedom is crucial but should be modified. Also, love and hate are closely enmeshed in the two characters’ relationship, precisely because the guest sees *himself* in Yeruham. I suggest that the two characters are *analogous* rather than opposite.

The guest as narrator consistently questions and problematizes the freedom of Yeruham Freeman, both on the physical and the symbolic

9. B. Neumann, *Land and Desire*, p. 50.

10. B. Neumann, *Land and Desire*, pp. 81, 89.

11. B. Kurzweil, על סיפורי ש"י עגנון (Essays on S. Y. Agnon’s stories; Jerusalem: Schocken, 1970), pp. 61–62.

levels. On the physical level, the narrator initially perceives Yeruham as a free working man who has no relationships with other people and no obligations, romantic or otherwise (p. 84). However, he soon discovers that Yeruham is not free, but actually shares his life with Rachel Zommer. In fact, it was only his own blindness that made him miss the signs of this binding relationship; not only is Yeruham not free to do as he wishes, but he is also going to be a father.

On the symbolic level, Agnon problematizes the idea of freedom by intricately intertwining it with death and disease. Gershon Shaked observed that before talking to Yeruham the narrator associates him with death by noting that he is repairing the road from the graveyard to the town.¹² The character Yeruham Freeman is not directly associated with death in any other case but his last name, *Hofshy*, appears in the novel twice as part of a telling quote from Ps 88:5: “Free among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave,” (בַּמָּתִים הַחַפְּשֵׁי כְּמוֹ הַחַלְלִים שֶׁכְּבִי קֶבֶר). The two contexts in which this verse appears reveal the semantic web in which the term “freedom” is enmeshed and articulate its meaning in the novel.

The verse appears in chapter twenty-four, in the narrator’s first, spontaneous sermon, when he offers the men in the *Beit Midrash* commentary on *Torah* portion *VaYetse* (Gen 28:10–32:3). The narrator expounds on the story of Jacob’s ladder by offering a short history of the Jewish nation as divided into three eras symbolized by the three patriarchs and three parallel kinds of spaces associated with them—all eventually examined through the idea of freedom. Through this brief historical analysis, the sermon questions the value of freedom and considers the price that should be paid for it.

In the first era, that of Abraham, freedom is valorized. Abraham, the first patriarch, said “the lord shall appear on a hill” (p. 132) and is therefore identified with hill dwelling, that is, with a temporary and non-binding way of life. Freedom was valorized in this time, because houses and fields were considered constraining and unreliable: “there is no support for a man in a house, as it is said, ‘And he went into the house, and supported his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him’” (Amos 5:19). Therefore, in Abraham’s time “there [was] no quality better than freedom” (pp. 132–133).

12. G. Shaked, *אמנות הסיפור של אגנון* (The art of Agnon’s fiction; Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1973), p. 238. See p. 84 in *A Guest for the Night*.

In the second era, the disadvantages and limitations of freedom are fully exposed. This era is symbolized by Isaac, and the paradigmatic space is the field, as Isaac is the one who “went out to meditate in the field” (p. 132):

In the second era...the benefits of freedom are outweighed by its disadvantages, for it leads to extinction and destruction, as it is said, “*Free among the dead, like the slain* [that lie in the grave].” And similarly, we are told that when Uzziah became a leper, he “dwelt in the house of the free one.” Rabbi Jonah the son of Jannah explains that it was called “free” because the lepers isolated themselves there from all men. (p. 133, emphasis added).

Freedom is associated in the second era with death, disease, and isolation. The “house of the free” is a secluded place for lepers, ironizing the idea of freedom and implying that it can be attained only at the price of complete banishment from society.¹³

In the third era, freedom is relinquished in favor of house dwelling, symbolized by the patriarch Jacob. As related in the weekly *Torah* portion, Jacob awakens from his dream to realize that “this is none other than the house of God,” marking the future territory of his progeny’s homeland. The third era is also marked by the biblical call, later adopted by the first groups of Zionist pioneers, “O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord” (p. 134).¹⁴

This succinct history leads to the novel’s fictional present, charting the Jewish nation’s path from a life of nomads to the present pursuit of settlement in a home, and implicitly, homeland. The path begins with a deep distrust of home dwelling. Later, however, freedom is perceived as perilous and costly. In other words, the contemporary historical dilemma described here, on both the individual-artistic and the national levels, is the value of freedom and the need to compromise it for safety, family life, and eventually fulfilling the commands of God. For both the individual and the nation, total freedom can be achieved only through death, and life entails bonds and dependence.

13. *Beit HaHofshit* is a real house standing in Jerusalem to this very day. Until about fifty years ago, it served as a clinic and a retirement place for lepers. After the cause of the disease was discovered and a cure was found, the house emptied of its inhabitants and is now converted into a museum dedicated to the history of the place. The fact that Agnon was attracted to the idea of seclusion associated with leprosy is well evident in his last novel, *Shira* (S. Y. Agnon, *Shira* [New York: Schocken, 1989]).

14. *בֵּית יַעֲקֹב לָכוּ וְנִלְכָּה* (Isa 2:5) was the biblical verse that served as the slogan for the first Zionist group that immigrated to Palestine, as well as the acronym for their name, BILU.

The phrase “free among the dead” has an additional meaning that can only be rendered in Hebrew: “בַּמָּתִים הֶפְשִׁי” might also mean “Hofshy, i.e., Freeman, is among the dead.” The narrator repeatedly wishes Yeruham was dead and tries to curb his sexual desire for Rachel (see p. 369). Here the association of Yeruham Freeman with death might reflect the narrator’s own semi-conscious wish to physically get rid of his competitor. The narrator envies Yeruham not only because he impregnated Rachel, but also because, as a true pioneer, he fertilized the land by tilling the “pure ground.” When the narrator describes Yeruham doing this, he implies that he himself was never a “true” pioneer; coming to the land of Israel, he was not a farmer but a writer.

The second time Ps 88:5 is mentioned is in the guest’s detailed dream in which the guest relates the traumatic incident of one of the town’s people, Daniel Bach. During the war, when Bach tried to put on *tefillin*, he found the same object on a dead soldier’s detached arm. In the dream the guest is surprised to hear that, according to Raphael, Daniel’s disabled son, his father puts on *tefillin* with a dead person’s arm. Explaining his surprise at hearing this fact, the narrator says (more literally translating the verse here), “the dead are free.” Or, in other words, “when a man becomes dead, he is exempt from religious precepts” (p. 383), implying that it is wrong to use a dead man’s arm to obey the commandment. In this case, the original simile in the verse is concretized, and the dead are free precisely because they *are* slain soldiers in the grave. The narrator’s description of freedom from obeying religious precepts turns Kurzweil’s view of Yeruham’s coveted freedom on its head; Yeruham’s freedom from the past and from Jewish tradition is not to be envied; it results from the spiritual and physical destruction of the old world.

Freedom acquires further, deeper meaning in the novel through its relations with other terms. Here, too, Yeruham Freeman and his relationships with the guest serve to convey this meaning. As it turns out, Freeman is not only the “free man” of this novel but also the paradigmatic traitor. His betrayal is mentioned repeatedly (see pp. 149, 216, 217, 279, 304, 368, 456) and described as personal-familial, romantic, and national. Yeruham’s life story began when his father, a charlatan Lithuanian scholar, came to preach in the town and made a great impression on the town’s people. His host, a rich Jewish man, hastened to marry his young daughter to him. However, throughout the traditional seven days of the newlyweds’ celebration, women came from neighboring towns and identified the fraud as their own husband. The Lithuanian ran away, leaving his

bride pregnant, and she then died in childbirth. Her father died penniless soon after and left nothing to the newborn, the deserted son of a fraud.

The baby was named Yeruham, after his late grandfather, meaning “the one who will be pitied” in Hebrew. Indeed, when no money was found to supply him with a wet nurse,

Mrs. Bach had pity on him, so she took him and nursed him with her own milk, for Yeruham was born in the same month as her Aniela, that is, Erela. So Mrs. Bach took from the milk of Erela...and gave to Yeruham. Even in his childhood he showed strength and vigor, and drank double. That is why he is tall and handsome. (p. 142)

Mrs. Bach raised him as her own son. Later she sent him along with her nephew to the land of Israel, after Yeruham Freeman and Erela got betrothed, “and it was agreed between them, namely between Yeruham the Lithuanian’s son and Aniela, that is Erela, that he would bring her there” (p. 149).

Yeruham’s first betrayal happened when, in the land of Israel, he became a pioneer but soon turned into a communist and “cast out his love [of the land] from his heart and became hardened against it” (p. 224). After being arrested and deported for his illegal political activities, he returned to his hometown and slandered the land of Israel. This was only his first betrayal, for he did not keep his promise to his betrothed and did not return the great favor of the Bach family. Instead, “he came back from [the land of Israel] and began to court another girl: As he had betrayed the Land, so he betrayed his betrothed” (p. 149). Yeruham’s life story reveals that his tall and handsome body is the result of having lived at others’ expense. Worse, his independence is the result of his physical betrayal of the breast that suckled him and in the adopted sister who gave up some of her mother’s milk (and implicitly, her physical vigor and beauty—Erela is described as an unattractive, pale woman).

But the most condemning and powerful comment on Yeruham’s betrayal is made implicitly, in a different context. The guest meets several times with the town’s rabbi, and each time they have fierce disagreements about the Zionist project unfolding in the land of Israel. In his last visit, when the narrator comes to take leave of the rabbi before leaving the town for good, the same argument resumes, and the rabbi asserts that he does not disparage the holy soil but only its inhabitants, as they prematurely hasten the coming of the messiah (p. 456). The narrator responds at length, eulogizing all the Jewish people living in Israel, with one exception:

To which of its inhabitants do you refer, sir?... “Is it to those who dedicate their lives to its soil, who revive its desolation, plow and sow, and plant life for its inhabitants? Or perhaps you refer to its guardians, who are ready to sacrifice themselves for every little piece of it, or to those who study the *Torah* in poverty and do not feel their sufferings.... But no doubt your honor was referring to those whom the Land suckles with its milk and they impregnate it with their venom, *as when a woman suckles her son, and a serpent comes and sucks with him and impregnates her with its venom.*” (p. 456, emphasis added)

Yeruham is implicitly likened to a serpent, and his betrayal is likened to the impregnation of the mother’s body with venom. His betrayal of the land of Israel is linked to the ingratitude toward the mother who suckled him and toward the young woman who waited for him to marry her and bring her to the land of Israel; the land and the woman’s body are tantamount and symbolically related. In making this analogy, Agnon again refers to well-known figures in pioneer writing, and in nationalist writing as a whole. In it the land is presented as a beloved woman and a mother.¹⁵ More specifically, the land of Israel is presented as a suckling woman, and the pioneers are presented as babies, nourishing on its milk. Going back to the sin that Yeruham’s father committed, leaving the land by emigrating is sometimes likened in Zionist pioneers’ writings to deserting a pregnant wife, or a suckling mother, letting her milk turn bitter.

The theme of betrayal is related to the serpent motif, to the homeland and to Yeruham Freeman in a variety of ways. We should note that the Hebrew word for venom (אָרֶס) and the Hebrew word for land (אֶרֶץ) sound very similar. This similarity is brought up when the narrator first meets Yeruham Freeman, who accuses the narrator of not living up to the words of his own poem and for leaving Israel to live in Europe (chap. 17):

“You were living in Berlin,” said Yeruham, “enjoying all the pleasures of the big cities, and in our hearts you had instilled the poison (אָרֶס) of the Land (אֶרֶץ) of Israel.” I turned on Yeruham and cried, “Poison (אָרֶס) you call the love of the Land (אֶרֶץ)?” (p. 88)

The narrator, then, is the first to be accused of betrayal in the novel, not Yeruham. The narrator is the one who allegedly instilled poison in other people’s hearts; worse, he betrayed the people he so eloquently convinced to immigrate to Eretz Israel and betrayed the land itself by preferring to live in the modern European metropolis, as the biographic

15. B. Neumann, *Land and Desire*, p. 53.

author did as well.¹⁶ That the narrator consciously sees himself at least as a deserter, if not as a traitor, becomes clear during a conversation with Mrs. Bach. Here he says, “I ran away from there? And perhaps I really did run away, for anyone who leaves the Land of Israel, even for a while, is regarded as one who runs away” (p. 253).¹⁷ However, the implicit and unconscious self-accusation is, as we noted, much more severe.

The narrator likes Yeruham not for his merits but for his flaws and shortcomings. He has sympathy for Yeruham because he himself committed similar offences toward the land. In the artistic context he also was not faithful to past traditions; he betrayed his father, by disappointing his hopes that he would become a rabbi, and he deserted the traditional way of life in the *shtetl*. Above all, he became a modern author rather than a traditional scribe, breaking the chain of pietistic writing that he was supposed to continue.

In Yeruham the narrator sees his *alter ego*. While the two men are sexual rivals in desiring the same woman, they also mirror each other.¹⁸ We see this in chapter 18, which follows the narrator’s first conversation with Yeruham. That conversation was difficult and full of accusations by Yeruham. Reminding the narrator of his old vows, Yeruham declaimed the narrator’s poem, written when he was a young Zionist, “Devotion Faithful unto Death” and explicitly accused him of betraying his youthful ideologies. Several critics have noted that, after the meeting, the narrator dreams that he buys himself a cemetery plot in Jerusalem, as guilty response to Yeruham’s demand that he die.¹⁹ However, these critics neglected to note that before describing the dream of Jerusalem the narrator remembers something quite different: his old home in *Neveh Zedek*, a

16. According to his biography, Agnon immigrated to Palestine in 1908, stayed there for four years, and then immigrated to Germany in 1912. He stayed there for twelve years, leaving most of his Zionist friends behind. In 1924 he immigrated to Palestine again, this time for life (D. Laor, *חיי עגנון: ביוגרפיה* [S. Y. Agnon: A biography; Tel-Aviv: Schocken, 1998], pp. 49–168; H. Be’er, *גם אהבתם גם שנאתם* [Their love and their hate; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992], pp. 23, 162).

17. As Boaz Neumann notes, clear value judgments about leaving the land of Israel started to consolidate among Zionist pioneers after World War I, as “the relatively indifferent attitude to the ‘leavers’ and ‘departers’ vanished. Now such individuals were called ‘absconders’, ‘deserters’, ‘refugees’, ‘irresolute weaklings’, ‘slackers’, ‘gypsies’, ‘eternal wonderers’ and other epithets” (B. Neumann, *Land and Desire*, pp. 81–82).

18. As Shachar M. Pinsker shows in his study of modernist Hebrew fiction in Europe, the triangulation of romantic desire by presenting two men competing for the same woman is highly characteristic of modernist Hebrew fiction in Europe. Moreover, Pinsker notes that this triangulation often masks a homosocial desire between the two men (S. M. Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011], p. 185).

19. See, for example, Y. Feldman, “בין מפתח למנעול” (Between a key and a lock), *HaSifrut* 32 (1982): 148–154.

neighborhood near Jaffa, where he lived on his first immigration to Palestine, and his old love, Ruhama. In his memories, Ruhama, a little girl who plays the violin, is in love with him and tries to gain his attention:

Whenever she comes to me in a dream, she comes with her violin. Sometimes she covers her face with her violin and calls me by name and the violin echoes her; sometimes she plays my name with the violin and echoes it with her voice. So long as she behaved like this I said nothing to her, but when she began to play “Devotion Faithful unto Death,” I rebuked her. First, because I am tired of rhymes like “love” and “God above.” And second, because I have no mind for musical matters. (p. 92)

This dream refers to Agnon’s early story, *לילות* (1913), part of a group of four stories written roughly in the same period.²⁰ The story concerns an agonized young man, Hemdat, the name Agnon gave his autobiographic protagonist in the early period of his writing, who yearns for the love of an imaginary woman, while cruelly playing a game of luring and rejection with a real girl named Ruhama. Ruhama is desperately in love with him and willing to sacrifice anything for his love.

The fact that the narrator dreams of Ruhama after his conversation with Yeruham points at the analogy between the two. The names Yuruham and Ruhama (its feminine counterpart), derive from the same root. Moreover, Ruhama serves here as a lively incarnation of the narrator’s scruples as she reminds him of both his betrayals: his romantic betrayal of her, and his betrayal of the land of Israel. It is no coincidence that in his dream he thinks of *Neveh Zedek* and not of Jerusalem, as he himself notes (p. 71), since the little neighborhood is the place where he settled during his first stay in Palestine, before leaving for Germany.²¹ This immigration is the act that is referred to by Yeruham as his betrayal.²² Ruhama is also the feminine counterpart of Yeruham, in singing the narrator’s old and nagging Zion poem, as Yeruham did in their recent conversation, and the narrator silences her in the same way he silenced Yeruham during the day (compare pp. 89–92).²³ In the dream the narrator symbolically compares

20. The other stories are *אחות* (Sister; 1910), *תישרי* (Tishre; 1911), and *בארה של מרים* (Miriam’s well; 1909).

21. D. Laor, *S. Y. Agnon*, p. 49.

22. It is worth noting that the Enlightenment poets used to describe the land of Israel as a woman called by different names, and one of them, used by Yehuda Leib Gordon, was Ruhama, referring to Hosea 2:3 (M. Gluzman, *הגוף הציני* [The Zionist body; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007], p. 15).

23. This comparison reveals a small difference, lost in translation: Yeruham tells the narrator that he must be tired of rhymes like “Jerusalem” and “heaven” (*Yerushala'im–Shama'im*). Later he tells

himself to Yeruham, since both betrayed their romantic partner as well as their land. The friendship with Yeruham, then, is a way for the guest-narrator to deal with his guilty conscience.

Freedom is thematically related to other themes in the novel. Together these themes form the context for understanding the dilemma that Agnon unfolds. A complementary, if less obvious theme of Yeruham's life story is dependence. The handsome young Yeruham, an apparently strong, independent, and free man, is actually a waif who prospered through parasitism on a foreign woman's body and the exploitation of her resources. Dependence and parasitism are central themes in the novel as conveyed by further analogies between characters. Ignatz, the beggar, looks like Yeruham's opposite in every respect. In fact, he shares Yeruham's dubious origins as an adopted, illegitimate son.²⁴ Ignatz has a hole in place of a nose, as it was blown off in the war (pp. 25, 66), and he walks around begging for money, cynically using his deformed face to extort it. But his life story has surprising similarities to Yeruham's. One of the stories the townspeople tell about his birth, is that Ignatz was an orphan adopted at birth after a careless father deserted him (pp. 121–122). This is also the case with Yeruham.

Moreover, the novel suggests that as a whole life in the *shtetl* is parasitic and dependent, as people take from one another, and exploit other's resources, if only for lack of better options. After the war, this tendency turns into the rule of life, as the survivors of the war live from the devastation and misery that the war inflicted on most people. Ignatz, for example, wears “insignia of honor...some that he won by his deeds and some that he took from his comrades who fell in the war” (p. 121). Ignatz also steals the guest's newly made coat, after the latter defended him against the guesthouse owner's son, Dolik Zommer's bullying. When the guest demands to have his coat back, Ignatz rebukes him for his cruelty (p. 122). Ignatz, the reader learns, has always put his hands on anything he could, extracting his livelihood almost physically from other people. In an extreme case, he caused Schutzling's wife's death by stealing her shoes on a snowy night (p. 339).

Sucking other people's livelihood or sustenance is the rule of life in the town. This is most clearly illustrated in chapter 59, entitled “My Meals

Ruhama that he is tired of rhymes like “heaven” and “life” (*Shama'im-Ha'im*)—reflecting a latent death wish in this dream too.

24. His parents' marriage was void, of course, because his father was already married to another woman.

Grow Meager,” which intricately explores the theme of parasitism, exploitation, and dependence through two parallel stories. Also, here for the first time, the narrator explicitly accounts for his own place in this economy. The chapter begins with the narrator’s bitter complaint that, since Mrs. Zommer, the guesthouse owner and host, has been taking care of her pregnant daughter, Rachel, his meals have grown meager (p. 361). The narrator’s apparently reasonable complaint later turns into a growing grievance which pictures the fetus in Rachel’s womb as robbing him of everything he had and everything he needed during his visit to town (p. 369). The same chapter explains how Anton Jacobowitz, a former pork butcher, became the richest person in town. During the war, Jacobowitz befriended Russian officers and helped them loot the town, while at the same time he secretly supported the Polish and Austrian officials, in case they won the war. Later, when the Jews returned, Jacobowitz gave them some small monetary gifts, bought their half-ruined houses for minute sums of money, and took over the whole real estate market.²⁵ As a rich landlord he supports his sons and sons-in-law, as well as other former notables, inviting them to feast on rich, heavy meals.

The two stories focus on the flow of resources from one group to another. The implicit analogy puts the fetus in the same position as the Gentile speculator who prospered from everyone else’s misery, especially that of the Jews. The chapter develops the theme of infantile dependence in the context of deserted and adopted babies. It also shows that dependence and extortion are two sides of the same coin, especially in the post-war *shtetl*: the parvenu became rich by speculating during the war and emptying the Jews’ assets into his own pockets. He turned them into paupers who rely on his gifts. Similarly, the fetus “robs” the narrator of all he loves, including his food, turning him into a kind of homeless man who finds food in all kinds of places. Extortion and dependence are combined in the character of Ignatz, who depends on the townspeople for bread, and therefore has developed many cynical means of extortion. And the epitome of dependence, bordering on extortion, is baby Yeruham, suckling on his adoptive mother’s breast and taking the lion’s share.

The themes of betrayal and dependence/extortion intertwine elsewhere in *A Guest for the Night*. Besides Yeruham and Ignatz, the work presents another bastard/traitor. The narrator mentions rumors that Ignatz has been

25. The part describing the takeover was omitted in the English translation for unknown reasons.

informing on Jewish people to the town's anti-Semitic priest, who turns out to be an illegitimate son born to a Gentile landlady and her Jewish tenant (pp. 254, 343). The narrator takes great efforts to link the priest and Ignatz to the point that the two characters are interchangeable both as adopted waifs and as people who betray their origins and their people (see p. 254). The two are also analogous to Yeruham in this respect. Moreover, all three are analogous to the guest in betraying their origins; Agnon explicitly associates Ignatz, the priest, and Yeruham linking the motif of illegal birth to the motifs of dependence and betrayal.

Another minor character, Leibtche Bodenhaus, serves to complement the meaning of dependence in the novel by linking it to the artistic realm. Leibtche is an elderly man. He lives with his relative Gnendel, who supports him and occupies himself by writing a rhymed version of the Torah in German. Although Leibtche is a minor character, the narrator invests significant energy in differentiating himself from Leibtche, precisely because he represents the same artistic inferiority that the narrator tries to expunge. Leibtche is not only a meek person, but he is also a dependent man. He was once dependent on his wife's family for living and now he relies on his prosperous aunt, Genendel. This dependence compromises his masculinity, leaving him in a status of eternal minor in his aunt's house. Moreover, his artistic dependence intertwines with sexual impotence. Leibtche's sexual dependence and subservience is manifested in his passive submission to his wife, who hides his shoes when he tires of her abuse and wants to flee (see pp. 336, 384, 389).

Leibtche serves the narrator as a way to connect sexual and artistic dependence in his long and detailed dream toward the end of the novel (chap. 62). The passage that deals with Leibtche uses the succah as a central metaphor and links the different kinds of dependence with place, nationality, and religious practice.²⁶ This part of the dream starts before the Festival of Tabernacles, or Succot, a week-long holiday that follows the Day of Atonement. In this holiday Jewish people are commanded to build a succah, and live in it. This commandment commemorates the simple, temporary way of life of the Israelites during their forty year long wandering in the desert after fleeing from Egypt. In the dream Leibtche expresses his wish to build a succah on top of the narrator's and the narrator agrees reluctantly (p. 384). Still, he is very concerned about a potential

26. A succah is a booth, a tabernacle, a simple shelter lived in during the holiday of Succot.

confusion between his succah and Leibtche's: "Better if he made the succah somewhere else or if he did not make one at all, for this Leibtche, though he turns the Torah into rhymes, does not strictly observe the religious precepts" (p. 384).

Leibtche's request to build a succah on top of the narrator's is linked to his inferior artistic project; he translates the Torah into German and rhymes it. This project is inferior because it is dependent on a source text for its existence. This dependence, however, is not a legitimate but an extortive, "bastard" one. Moreover, elsewhere the narrator presents Leibtche's rhyming as ludicrous, and, more implicitly, as blasphemous (pp. 337–338). Building his succah on top of the narrator's, Leibtche commits similar sins.

Leibtche also threatens the narrator for deeper reasons. As a person, he is dependent and unmanly; living with his "aunt," he does not have his own home. The narrator, for his part, is a guest who is now dependent on his hosts, and this status threatens him and manifests itself through the image of the succah. His temporary status as a tenant jeopardizes both his authorship—and indeed he does not write anything during his visit—and his masculinity. Leibtche serves as a reminder for both these faults. Also, it is worth noting in this context that Leibtche does not have children, which links his masculine deficiency—his infertility—with artistic ones—not being able to produce an original work of art.

The narrator engages here with a dependent person, but in the dream, the two change positions, and the narrator must rely on Leibtche, while Leibtche erects the succah. Not only is the narrator here reliant on another, he also lacks assertiveness, evident in his reluctant assent to Leibtche's offer. The narrator's dependence on Leibtche ends with disappointment (if not utter betrayal on Leibtche's part) when the narrator discovers that the succah has been covered with a perforated sheet instead of branches as the Jewish law prescribes. When he remonstrates to Leibtche—the latter remains indifferent, saying "for me—it's good enough" (p. 385). The guest's realization that his collaborative project of building a succah with Leibtche led to religious disobedience implies that true and appropriate Jewish piety cannot be sustained in the temporary home of the *shtetl*. At the same time the flawed succah symbolizes Leibtche's writing, which is flawed, irreligious, and dependent. The guest's assertion that the covering should be made of something that grows in the soil and later picked up, rather than from something that is fastened and therefore unclean clearly refers to the halakic precepts for building a succah. But these precepts also

refer us back to the guest's own dependence: in this case, anything fastened to something else is unclean: a non-kosher succah covering, the dependent life that one leads in the Diaspora, or a work of art.

The succah also stands for the womb, and the narrator's competition with Leibtche also has sexual overtones.²⁷ Indeed, the succah scene in the dream symbolizes and summarizes the way authorship and paternity are presented in the novel: both are unstable constructs that arouse the anxiety of the father-author regarding his exclusiveness. The overall economy of life in the novel is structured through competition and dependence on scarce resources. Dependence stems from illegal birth, which ends with an image of the most primary dependence of the infant on a (surrogate) mother's body. Conversely, each child also has two competing fathers, or sometimes two competing stories about the father's identity. The most paradigmatic example is the symbolic competition between the guest and Yeruham Freeman over Rachel's womb. As critics have noted, the child eventually born to Rachel and Yeruham is symbolically also the narrator's son, and thus he is named after him. The narrator, who wished the death of both Yeruham Freeman and Rachel's fetus, as evidenced in his fierce envy of both, symbolically serves as the child's second father. This male rivalry is not only over the woman's body, it is also over the land.

The succah ties together home and homeland, the womb, and the work of art. As a symbol for the home, it arouses anxiety over its temporariness and over its ownership. The question of who owns the home and whether one is a homeowner has implications for all aspects of life in this novel, especially for authorship. The implicit question that emerges from this dream is whether a guest for the night can be an author: is writing the fruit of wandering or of home ownership and rootedness? And where should the proper home stand: in the land of Israel or in the Diaspora? As a symbol for the woman's body, the succah and the negotiations over its construction between the two men recapitulate the state of dual paternity in the novel. As a symbol for the work of art, it reflects all the anxieties related to the individualist, romantic model of modern authorship as a solitary exclusive project as opposed to the traditional model, in which uniqueness and originality are subdued and secondary.

The author expresses his anxiety about the solitary nature of non-traditional authorship through his complex and ambivalent relation toward

27. In Hebrew, the word for womb, רִחֵם, stems from the same root as the word for taking pity, רָחַם, that the name Yeruham is derived from.

the idea of origin: on the one hand he fears a lack of clear and identifiable origin, or a lack of relation to tradition, and sees it as aberration. He also expresses a similar attitude toward Zionist nationalism, and in this case he is very explicit: answering Yeruham Freeman's accusations of betrayal he tells the latter that the failure of the pioneers to take root in the land was due to their complete alienation from tradition: "you and your comrades sought in the Land not what your forefathers sought, and not what the books tell of it, and not the Land as it is, but a Land such as you demand, and that is why the Land did not tolerate you" (p. 90). On the other hand he fears a "bastard," extortive relation to origin: a relation that does not stem from a deep link to tradition and ends in sacrilege and abomination, as reflected in Leibtche's art as well as in his non-kosher succah. The guest as narrator who broke away from traditional writing fears that he will produce literary bastards, whose lack of lineage will lead to transgression. Yet, he is also ambivalent about the freedom of the artist as it is depicted in the romantic tradition. He fears any kind of dependence, whether sexual, filial, artistic, or national. On the other hand, he is ridden with guilt over his betrayal of the land, of his past, and of his original mission as a traditional writer.

The two options arising from the underlying semantic structure of the novel are either dependence or betrayal. In order to become an author, Agnon implies, one must betray his/her past and roots, since the other option is continued dependence, which eventually means impotence and lack of creativity. Betrayal is a moral evil but an inevitable artistic necessity, and the ones who prosper in the novel are those who depend on others, take advantage of them and betray them. The analogy to the national project is clear: as opposed to life in the *shtetl* that is based on mutual dependence and extortion, life in the new land will be based on productive work. At the same time, in *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon is highly opposed to the way that Zionism shakes off any relation to Jewish tradition and doubts the viability of a national project that seems to create its self justification without relating to it. Here too, extreme freedom might come at a high price.