

# Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers

THE SONG OF SONGS  
IN ISRAELI CULTURE

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## Rechnitz's Botany of Love

### THE SONG OF SEAWEED

THE novella *Betrothed* (*Shevu'at emunim*), hailed as a masterpiece already on its publication in 1943, opens with a memorable depiction of Jaffa as a city “of beautiful seas”: *yafu yefat yamim*.<sup>1</sup> The resonant alliteration of *y f m* augments the sensuality of a feminized city of legendary beauty, whose shores are “kissed” by the waves of the great sea (3). Among those compelled by Jaffa’s sea is Jacob (Ya’acov) Rechnitz, a young marine botanist from Vienna. Although Rechnitz comes to Palestine as a traveler, with no intention of settling there, he ends up staying in Jaffa for a while, dedicating himself to the exploration of local seaweed. “Each day he would go out to take whatever the sea offered him. . . . Plying his net and his iron implements, drawing up specimens of seaweed not found along the beach, his heart beat like a hunter’s at the chase” (8). Every time he embarks on his scientific expeditions, he lovingly says to the seaweed he collects, “My orchard, my vineyard” (8), echoing the renowned landscapes and metaphors of the Song of Songs.<sup>2</sup> He seems to go so far as to regard the lowly, forlorn plants of the sea as if they were exquisite plants of the upper, earthly world; more, as if they were the ultimate objects of love, precious relics of an ancient, primary, amorous chase.

As the tale unfolds in Jaffa of the Second Aliyah, we discover that Rechnitz’s intellectual passions are set against, though bound up with, other competing amorous lines. There are six young maidens (*ne’arot*) in Jaffa with whom he strolls occasionally, finding each one of them attractive in a different way. But the woman who seems to lure him most is Shoshana Ehrlich, his childhood love. When Shoshana arrives in Jaffa with her father, the Consul, she awakens memories of a “betrothal oath” (the very oath that appears in the Hebrew title), opening the enigma of that early bond in the enchanting

Viennese garden of the Ehrlichs.<sup>3</sup> Whether or not the oath between Jacob and Shoshana could or should be rekindled now that they are adults is a question that remains tantalizingly unresolved. Whenever the two lovers draw close, they hasten to drift apart. The novella ends with a nocturnal race along the beach after which Shoshana supposedly reaffirms their bond as she places a crown of the young botanist's seaweed on her head. But this somnambulist encounter by the moonlit sea, with its curious intermingling of Rechnitz's botany of love and love for Shoshana, seems closer to a precarious, maddened dream of wish fulfillment than to an actual event.

There have been several attempts to decipher the scholarly context of Rechnitz's research. Arnold Band, in one of the most interesting accounts of the matter, points to certain affinities between the scientific portrait of Rechnitz and that of another Viennese scholar: Sigmund Freud.<sup>4</sup> Like Freud, he claims, Rechnitz is an assimilated, secular scholar who studied at the University of Vienna. Even their fields of interest are more akin than meets the eye. Freud's first publications were on eels (creatures as primitive and as watery as seaweed)—his primary research goal was to discover whether or not eels have sexual organs—and, in turn, Rechnitz's fascination with the unseen phenomena of the lower worlds of marine botany is analogous to the psychoanalyst's preoccupation with the darker, submerged strata of the mind.<sup>5</sup>

A reading that is, in a way, closer to my interest in Israeli biblicism is that of Israel Asael in a rather early piece on *Betrothed* titled "A Midrash of Seaweed." Asael regards Rechnitz as a modern biblical critic whose Bible research is as futile and detached as seaweed. A follower of Meshulam Tchner, Asael reads this tale as representative of Agnon's sharp critique of secular modern scholarship: it may strive to cure Judaism from stagnation but actually offers a disastrously pointless approach that overlooks the true vitality of traditional Jewish sources.<sup>6</sup> Asael's primary justification for linking Rechnitz's scholarly pursuits with biblical criticism is the passage from "Edo and Enam," where our two tales intersect, in which Gamzu, the book dealer and storyteller, associates the magical, inscribed leaves of Enam with the seaweed Rechnitz hauls up from the bottom of the sea. The sudden shift in the hue of the inscribed leaves from "the primary colors of the rainbow" (165) to the dull grays of Rechnitz's seaweed is, Asael claims, an ironic configuration of the ways in which the scientific tools of biblical criticism have stifled the "spirit of the sacred sources."<sup>7</sup>

However perceptive at points, Asael's midrash overlooks the intricacies of Agnon's irony. There is no interpretive trend that escapes Agnon's "little

demon of irony”—be it modern biblical scholarship or traditional commentaries. Such irony, however, by no means precludes a passionate probing of the ever-changing modes of biblical reception. A closer look at the leaves that play so crucial a role in Asael’s reading makes clear that their unexpected transformation is not quite a disastrous fading (caused by modern intervention) but rather an enchanting, inexplicable aesthetic-hermeneutic event, where colors and scripts are forever shifting:

On the way back, [Gemulah’s father] opened the jar and showed me a bundle of dry leaves unlike any I had ever seen; and on them were the strange characters of a script unlike any that I knew; and the color of the characters, that is, the color of the ink in which they were written, was not like any color we know. At first sight I should have said that the scribe had mixed gold, azure and purple with all the primary colors of the rainbow and written with them. But as I stood gazing, the colors altered before my eyes and changed into the tints of seaweeds drawn from the depths, such weeds as Dr. Rechnitz drew up from the sea near Jaffa. Then again, they were like the silver strands we observe on the moon. . . . As I stood marveling, Gemulah’s father replaced the leaves in the jar and spoke to me simply, with these words: “They are plants of the earth, and they have been given the power to influence the upper air.” (165–66)

The change in the letters’ color does not end with the transition from the rainbow hues to the shades of Rechnitz’s weeds: it is followed by a no less dramatic leap from the young botanist’s specimens to the silver strands of the moon. Pertaining to the bottom of the sea, Rechnitz’s leaves differ from the Enamite “plants of the earth,” but they too seem to have some kind of odd connection with the lunar spheres of the “upper air”; they too are somehow both botanical specimen and captivating scribal sheets (in Hebrew, as in English, the term for “leaves,” *’alim*, can mean both).

In Rechnitz’s marine leaves, I detect Agnon’s response to a branch of modern biblical scholarship whose relevance to the tale has gone unnoticed: biblical botany. Agnon reflects on the charms, pretensions, and pitfalls of the scientific endeavors of biblical botany, but he is also intrigued by its broader cultural implications in the exegetical scene of the Second Aliyah and beyond, a milieu in which biblical landscapes—above all, those of the Song of Songs—were perceived as indispensable relics of biblical times and a vital means for the renewal of the bond between the people and the Land.

In *Betrothed*, Agnon shapes a grand Song of Songs through and against this exegetical botanical scene. If Zionist botanists were searching for biblical flora in the Land of Israel, Rechnitz moves in the opposite, or even heretical, direction in his attempt to collect and identify unknown specimens of seaweed from the sea. And much as the Song had a pivotal role within the framework of Zionist biblical botany, so too it colors Rechnitz's marine expeditions, though the assimilated Viennese scholar does not quite discern the hidden biblical layers of his inquiries.

Agnon's ironic inversion of biblical botany allows him to explore some of the paradoxes and ambiguities of the biblical culture of secular Zionism. Although Zionist botanists were eager to shape a new literal Song that would be grounded in botanical realities, their quest for literalism and for an authentic, erotic landscape of biblical times, Agnon intimates, does not quite lead to terra firma. What is more, for all its literalism, their botany is replete with allegorical innuendoes. Agnon playfully juxtaposes the new Zionist allegories invented via biblical flora with traditional allegories of the Song's roses, mocking normative distinctions between the secular and the sacred.

But what makes Agnon's rendering of the Song in *Betrothed* a virtuoso interpretive gem are the nuanced ways in which all the loves in the tale are interwoven. The Song reverberates through all realms—the scholarly, the personal, and the national—engulfing every imaginable dimension of life in a whirlpool of love. Rechnitz's obsession with seaweeds is deeply embedded within the intricate plot of his past and present amorous entanglements with Shoshana. These two loves, in turn, are set against the backdrop of the Second Aliyah and the new Zionist allegory of love for the Promised Land.

On the margins of this amorous network is yet another, less apparent, love: the love for art and for the Song itself. The nexus between botany and the visual arts was an integral part of the field from its very inception, as is apparent in the drawings that accompanied the scientific records of the anatomy of plants. Agnon takes the dependence of botany on art a step further by blurring the demarcation between Rechnitz's scientific passions and hidden artistic inclinations. As such, Rechnitz's marine botany also serves as a springboard for a meditation on the intensity of aesthetic attractions as a whole and those generated by the ancient love poem in particular.

How familiar was Agnon with the Zionist botanical world I sketched out in the previous chapter? There was hardly a scholar in Jerusalem whom Agnon did not know. In fact, scholars were among his closest friends and acquaintances. In the small, intimate Jerusalem of the forties and fifties, where

the bulk of intellectual life was conducted in four (almost) adjacent neighborhoods—Rehavia, Talbiya, Beit Ha-Kerem, and Talpiyot (Agnon’s neighborhood)—formal and mostly informal encounters with prominent scholarly figures such as Gershom Scholem, Shlomo Dov Goitein, Martin Buber, Dov Sadan, and Ephraim E. Urbach were very much part of Agnon’s daily routine. Ephraim Hareuveni was not one of Agnon’s close friends but was definitely an acquaintance, as two letters in the Agnon archive at the National Library make clear. Referring to a flower Agnon had asked about, Hareuveni writes: “I’m sending you the flower so that you can see its color and shape.” He goes on to explain that he decided to name the flower (whose scientific name is *Colchicum stevenii*) *bar yoreh* (“the son of the first rain”) because of the season in which it blooms.<sup>8</sup> (The dried flower of the *bar yoreh*—known today as *sitvanit*—may still be found in the envelope of this letter.) Language—the coining of new names and the revival of old ones—was at the core of Hareuveni’s project, making his work of special interest for poets and writers as different as Bialik and Agnon.

My aim is not to identify Rechnitz with a sole botanist. I will read him primarily in relation to the life and work of Hareuveni, but he also has something in common with Alexander Eig, the “pure” botanist of the Hebrew University, and even with Shmuel Charuvi, the botanical artist of Bezalel. Like other scholars in Agnon’s detailed representations of academic life, Rechnitz is an ironic blend of various historical figures—and much more than that. And although I focus on Rechnitz’s affiliation with biblical botany, I will offer a consideration of the impact of Freud’s portrait behind the scenes and the ways in which the interpretive practices of botanists in this novella tend to intersect with psychoanalytic exegesis. This psychoanalytic prism, in effect, deepens Agnon’s study of the darker, disturbing facets of love in the Song and is relevant to all the different amorous ties in the tale.

#### THE QUESTION OF PURE SCIENCE

Rechnitz, in many ways, is the very antithesis of Ephraim Hareuveni: he is a researcher and a teacher who endorses no Zionist or Jewish pedagogical vision whatsoever. In stark contrast to other scholars of the Second Aliyah, the narrator assures us, who were immersed in either studies of the Land of Israel or studies of the Bible (*miktsatam ‘asku be-heker ha-aretz u-miktsatam be-hikrey mikra*) and whose research was yoked to national, social, and religious agendas, Rechnitz “subordinated his work to no other consideration [lo

*‘asah ‘et ‘avodato snif le-shum davar aher*]. He took trouble and pains solely in the cause of pure knowledge” (98).<sup>9</sup> Devoted to his marine plants, he goes out to the sea to collect new specimens in all seasons, regardless of weather hazards, despite the fact that no one in his vicinity—not even his students in the local high school where he teaches—has any interest in his findings. His work is acknowledged only abroad—either by European scholars who admire his contribution to the extent of naming one of the seaweeds he had discovered after him *Colorafa Rechnitzia* or by American academics who bestow upon him the title of professor and offer him a distinguished post.

Should Rechnitz then be considered as closer to the “pure” botanists? That the debate regarding “pure science” at the Hebrew University is of relevance to this tale is made clear in the speech the school principal delivers in the farewell party in honor of Rechnitz. The principal speaks in fictional time from a point in history before the foundation of the Hebrew University, but one can trace the voice-over of later perspective. “Why is Rechnitz departing?”—asks the principal in a mock pedagogical gesture—“Because we have no university here. If there were one, he would not have to leave us.” Rebuking all those who do not believe in the possibility of founding a university in the Land of Israel, he moves on to the final pitch:

Let me say in conclusion that I hope we, too, will achieve a university before long. . . . What a great university that will be, when all the scholars of Israel, from all the universities of the world, gather in Jerusalem, on the Temple Mount, to teach wisdom and knowledge! . . . But it follows of necessity that I mean no mere seminary for [Jewish] studies. We have enough already of this [Judaism] stuffed into us morning, noon and night. When I say university, I mean a real one, where all the forms of knowledge to be found in other centers of learning will be taught. (116–17)

Agnon ridicules those who insist on turning every science into Jewish Studies or Zionist lore, creating a stifling overdose of Judaism.<sup>10</sup> But at the same time, he mocks scholars who think that they can develop a “pure science” and remain objectively removed from their cultural milieu. The principal’s protest against the imposition of a Jewish angle on all fields of knowledge does not stop him from envisioning the new, secular, Zionist university on the Temple Mount, of all places, or from defining its mission in prophetic, eschatological terms as a “light unto the nations.”

A peculiar blend of secular and religious overtones was in fact evident in

late December 1924 at the formal opening of the Institute of Jewish Studies at the Hebrew University. Judah Magnes declared that it was “a sanctuary in which to learn and teach, without fear or hatred, all that Judaism has made and created from the time of the Bible until our days” and then ventured to conflate the goals of modern and traditional research: “We exult in the ideal of pure science; and there is no place in the world with a *genius loci* as suitable for Torah as Jerusalem.”<sup>11</sup> “The sentiment of the day,” David Myers comments, “was perhaps best captured in the frequent expression of hope, drawn from a traditional liturgical refrain, that ‘from Zion will go forth Torah.’”<sup>12</sup>

Rechnitz accentuates the fragility of “pure science” at the Hebrew University and beyond. Though respected for his rigorous research, the young botanist is far from being an emblem of objectivity, as is already evident on the dramatic night (during his student years in Vienna) when he first realizes that his vocation lies in the vast expanses of the sea.

When he first entered the university he chose no special subject but applied himself to all the sciences, and particularly the natural sciences, for these had drawn his heart. He already thought of himself as an eternal student, one who would never leave the walls of the academy. But one night he was reading Homer. He heard a voice like the voice of the waves, though he had never yet set eyes on the sea. He shut his book and raised his ears to listen. And the voice exploded, leaping like the sound of many waters. He stood up and looked outside. The moon hung in the middle air, between the clouds and stars; the earth was still. He went back to his book and read. Again he heard the same voice. He put down the book and lay on his bed. The voices died away, but that sea whose call he had heard spread itself out before him, endlessly, while the moon hovered over the face of the waters, cool and sweet and terrible. Next day Rechnitz felt as lost as a man whom the waves have cast up on a desolate island, and so it was for all the days that followed. He began to study less and read books about sea voyages; and all that he read only added to his longing, he might as well have drunk seawater to relieve [the] thirst. The next step was to cast about for a profession connected with the sea. (10)

A Romantic scholar more than a follower of *Wissenschaft*, Rechnitz falls in love, as it were, with his object of investigation against the mysterious backdrop of the moon and the sea. And although he is drawn to the natural sciences rather than to the humanities, what seems to spur him to become a marine botanist is an encounter not with the sea but rather with literature:



hearing the irresistible sound of the sea while reading Homer.

Rechnitz reads Homer on that night, but he could just as well have been reading another text of antiquity: the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Behind the sound of the Homeric sea, one can hear the distinct echoes of numerous biblical scenes—the initiation scenes of Samuel and Ezekiel mingled with the aquatic moment in Genesis 1, with the spirit “hovering upon the water,” images of God’s voice exploding like *mayim rabim*, “many waters” in Psalms (29:3, 93:4) and Ezekiel (1:24, 43:2), and the “many waters” of the Song that cannot extinguish the fire of love (8:7). This is, indeed, a mock initiation scene that underscores Rechnitz’s blindness to the impact of his own cultural waters on his professional choices.

Later, in Jaffa’s sea, when Rechnitz admiringly notes the great beauty of the local seaweed, he seems to be equally unaware of the biblical ghost that hovers upon his stream of associations. The stamp of the Song is evident not only in his daily address to the seaweed—“My orchard, my vineyard”—but also in a whole array of exquisite images, of diverse colors and textures, that floods Rechnitz’s mind just before he utters these words of love. This botanical underworld is anything but dull and gray. Rechnitz perceives the mysteries beneath the waters as “growing like gardens, like thickets, like shadowed woods among the waters, their color like the yellow of sulphur, like royal purple, like living flesh, like white pearls, like olives, like coral, like a peacock’s feathers, clinging to the reefs, to the rocks, and the cliffs.”<sup>14</sup> Unbeknownst to him, he fashions a condensed version of the ancient love poem, which despite its marine character comes close to some of its unique, aesthetic features. The Song’s excessive, dreamy stream of similes and metaphors from different semantic fields (the gardens, the moon, a crimson thread, walls and towers, gazelles)—no figure of speech seems to suffice in depicting love—is rendered here through a breathless, unending list of similes (note the rhythmic repetitions of “like”), pertaining to all realms (gardens, woods, pearls, corals, peacock feathers). And much as in the Song every simile is charged with erotic overtones, here too there is a sensuous, anthropomorphic quality to the gardens of the deep: the seductive eye and the “living flesh” (*ka-basar ha-hay*).

Agnon derides scientific pretensions of objectivity, but he is nonetheless intrigued by scholarly passions, especially when they verge on art and coincide with his own exegetical obsessions. The interrelations between science and art, between the quest for an unbound science and the quest for an unbound art, become all the more conspicuous in the description of Rechnitz’s album:

But in his time, no one had a collection to match that of Rechnitz. There they were, dried, attached to their sheets, placed in the album. At first glance you would think you were looking into an artist's sketch book, each line was drawn with such exquisite care and beauty; for the way of seaweeds is to adhere to paper, become absorbed in it, and not protrude from the surface. But once you drop a little water on them, they grow soft and you see before you living plants, the work of the Creator who cares as much for each humble object as He does for what is high and mighty. There were times when Rechnitz dropped a tear in his rapture, which fell on the plant and brought it to life again. (118)

Likened to “an artist's sketch book,” Rechnitz's album calls to mind the drawings of Charuvi and the herbarium sheets of the Hareuvenis, perhaps even something of their mysterious embalming techniques. Yet it departs from such botanical endeavors in moving beyond the constricting agendas and geographies of its practitioners—be they the scholars of the Hebrew University or the artists of Bezalel. Inasmuch as scholars, artists, or writers (for the sheets of paper with their marks resemble writing as well) assume the position of the Creator, they should be open to consider even lowly plants as objects of wonder and love. The miracle of a plant that comes back to life on receiving a few drops of water (or tears in this case) is not necessarily limited to terrestrial zones. In Rechnitz's inverted botanical world, seaweeds hold the magical qualities of the Rose of Jericho, though the name of the Rose does not resurge in his thoughts as he attaches the specimens he had collected to the sheets of his album.

MEMORIES OF A LOST GARDEN:  
THE BETROTHAL OATH REVISITED

In the human realm, Rechnitz's Song primarily revolves around Shoshana. If in the ancient love poem, “rose” is a metaphor for the Shulamite as well as part of the plantscape where the lovers meet, in Agnon's tale, the beloved is named after the flower she supposedly resembles (“Shoshana” means “rose”). Shoshana's name, we discover time and again, is not merely a dead metaphor for Rechnitz. In his visit as a boy to the Consul's office in Vienna, he sees a portrait of Frau Ehrlich and a portrait of Shoshana on the wall. In the latter, Shoshana is seen in a dress that “reached only to her knees and her legs

seemed to tremble lightly,” as if she were running. There are two additional pictures of the mother and daughter on the desk, and “before them was set a moist rose in a glass of clear water.” When these portraits merge in his daydreams, he seems to be viewing a silent film in which Frau Ehrlich vanishes into the mists and Shoshana runs “on and on with a wet rose in her mouth” (13–14). The “wet rose” in the glass supposedly soars into the picture, or rather into Shoshana’s mouth, transforming the running girl whose name means “rose” into a sensuous bearer of an actual wet rose.

In Rechnitz’s memories, his childhood Rose is placed in the bright, Song of Songs garden of the Ehrlichs in Vienna.<sup>15</sup> When he hears of the forthcoming trip of the Consul and Shoshana to Jaffa, he recalls their blissful encounters in this garden as children: picking flowers, preparing garlands for each other, skating on the frozen pond. “In his thoughts all the seasons merged, and all the goodness and grace in them became one” (24).

Upon Shoshana’s arrival in Jaffa, memories of a more pivotal scene in this enchanted garden are set into motion: the declaration of the love oath. They resurge with particular intensity one day as the two walk by the sea. The sea was calm that day, and its hue was deep blue; “the waves broke over one another, raising their crests as if held back from mingling with the waters beneath” (55–56). And much as the waters do not mingle, so Rechnitz and Shoshana drift apart. “Jacob would have given all the expanse of the earth in return for something that might draw Shoshana’s attention. But nothing in the world could awaken this sleeping princess [*bat malka menamnemet*] who walked by his side, insensible to his presence.”<sup>16</sup> His desperate longing for her attention leads him to recall better times when they fed the goldfish in the pond at the Ehrlichs’ garden. Yet as he “watched the sea and the lonely fisherman standing up to his waist in water, he could not bring himself to speak of things past” (56). Just then, Shoshana halts suddenly and says:

“Do you remember how you and I used to play in our garden?”

He answered in a whisper, “I remember.”

“Good,” said Shoshana. “Let’s go on.”

Then again she stopped. “Do you remember what games we played?”

Jacob began to recount them to her as he walked. She nodded her head at every detail, saying, “That’s right . . . That’s right . . . I thought you had forgotten.”

He laid his hand over his heart, as if to say, “How could anyone forget such things?” . . .

. . . “Do you remember that vow we made together?”

“I remember,” said Jacob.

She looked at him steadily for a moment. “Do you remember the words of the vow?”

“I remember them,” said Jacob.

“Word for word?”

“Yes, word for word.”

“If you remember the vow, repeat it.”

Jacob repeated the substance of what they had sworn.

“But you told me . . . that you remember it word for word.” . . .

He hesitated, sighed, and at last said: “We swear by fire and by water, by the hair of our heads, by the blood of our hearts, that we shall marry one another and be husband and wife, and no power on earth can cancel our vow, for ever and ever.” (56–57)

The garden of the Ehrlichs’ is remembered as a playful paradise. It is a garden where love blossoms and oaths of eternal love may be delivered with the seriousness that accompanies children’s games.

But such blissful gardens of the past are bound to be lost. Shoshana forces Jacob to reiterate the oath verbatim (no paraphrase is accepted) and later asks whether their oath still holds. And although he follows her subsequent whim as well and declares, “I am prepared, I am prepared, I am prepared” (*mukhan ‘ani, mukhan ‘ani, mukhan ‘ani*), while committing himself to marrying her, it isn’t that clear whether the reenactment of the speech act has actual power in a present fraught with moments of estrangement and illness.<sup>17</sup>

Shoshana is not quite a Shulamite who is awakened by love, but rather an ailing “sleeping princess,” who perks up occasionally but then falls asleep again (the link between the Song and the folktale of Sleeping Beauty is made apparent in the German title: *Dornroeschen*, meaning “the rose among the thorns”).<sup>18</sup> Rechnitz, in turn, is neither a Prince Charming who can rescue his beloved from the world of slumber nor a *dod* who can lure her with songs of love. He mostly walks silently by her side, groping for words he cannot find or else repeating words of times past (he is surely more imaginative when talking with the seaweed). Their relationship as adults, in fact, seems a distorted Song of Songs in which the more somber aspects of the ancient love poem are set in relief.

## LOVESICKNESS: THE FREUDIAN UNDERCURRENTS

“I am love-sick”—*holat ‘ahava ‘ani*—sounds like a cliché (it is one of the most resonant lexicalized expressions of the Song), but it is in fact part of a remarkably intricate metaphoric network in the Song. The expression emerges in Chapter 2 after a sequence of plant metaphors:

I am a [lily] of Sharon, a [*shoshana*] of the valleys.  
As a [*shoshana*] among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.  
As an apple-tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.  
Under its shadow I delighted to sit, and its fruit was sweet to my taste.  
He hath brought me to the banqueting-house, and his banner over me is love.  
“Stay ye me with dainties, refresh me with apples; for I am love-sick.”  
(Song 2:1–5)<sup>19</sup>

In a breathtaking juggling of metaphors, the Shulamite likens herself to a rose and a lily, and then, adhering to the same semantic field of vegetation, she casts her loved one in the role of an apple tree. Plunging into this imaginary landscape, she makes it semi-concrete by sitting under the apple tree and relishing its shade and sweet fruit (the metaphor extends to the extent of becoming a conceit). Here and elsewhere in the Song, as Robert Alter points out, there is a distinct blurring of figurative landscapes and real ones.<sup>20</sup> Metaphoric language is an intrinsic element of the courtship and is continuously made seductive by double entendres. Is she actually sitting under an apple tree, or should her eating of the ravishing fruit be construed as a provocative metaphoric sequence through which she imagines the pleasures of love?

In verse 5, the Shulamite momentarily leaves the natural scenery and shifts to a very different semantic field: illness. Addressing her listeners, she now declares that she is “love-sick.” Expressing love requires not only an unending stream of metaphors but also antithetical metaphors that can approach the puzzling paradoxes of the amorous experience: the sudden oscillations between pleasure and pain, power and utter powerlessness. What complicates it all is the thin line between bodily experiences and emotional ones. Is the Shulamite physically ill, or is it an inner event that is likened to a bodily disease—or both? She requests a bedding of apples to alleviate her sickness. But given that she had just described her loved one as an apple tree, is she seeking a soothing apple-bed or yearning for him? Love, rather than its absence, turns out to be, at times, the very source of sickness—not quite a cure. Overbearing

in its radical wakefulness, it leads the Shulamite to desperately utter: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles, and by the hinds of the field, that ye awaken not, nor stir up love, until it please” (2:7).

The Shulamite’s declaration of sickness reappears in the nocturnal, dreamlike sequence of Chapter 5. On hearing her lover speak behind the door (or upon recalling that earlier experience), the beloved depicts her *nefesh* as departing: *nafshi yatsa’ ve-dabro* (5:6). This verse has been translated in a variety of ways, primarily because of the multiple meanings of *nefesh* in biblical Hebrew: “breath of life,” “life,” “innermost feelings,” and “soul.” The KJV, among earlier translations informed by allegorical readings, sought to underline the soul: “my soul failed when he spake.” In the Blochs’ recent translation, the spiritual routes are avoided and desire is foregrounded: “How I wanted him when he spoke.”<sup>21</sup> What gets lost in both translations is how close these acute longings are to death. The Shulamite does not merely “want” her lover: she dies, as it were, on hearing the voice of her unreachable *dod* (the shades of another somber metaphor of the Song—or rather simile—are already apparent here: “for love is strong as death”—8:6). But as her *nefesh*, her breath of life, goes out, it curiously has the freedom and pleasure that her body lacks: of being outdoors where her loved one roams (this is not a Platonic soul). When the beloved actually ventures to go outdoors, the guardians of the walls bruise her, adding external violence to her sense of inner turmoil. It is at this point that she yet again adjures the daughters of Jerusalem and sighs that she is “love-sick” (5:8). If in Chapter 2, lovesickness dismantles the boundaries between the body and the *nefesh*, here the split between the two is set up only to be obliterated again by a love that comes close to death in its intensity.

Shoshana’s illness, like that of the Shulamite, remains a mystery. Love isn’t quite the origin of Shoshana’s malady (and definitely not the remedy), but her attacks break out in the context of her renewed amorous ties with Rechnitz. Here too illness is of the body and of the mind, though it is morbidly troubling in both realms. The only desire that prevails in Shoshana’s world is the desire to sleep. Her sleeping disease is “a sickness which had not been heard of before in Palestine. Her head was dizzy and she had lost full control of her legs, which tottered as she moved about. When she spoke, her voice was indistinct and sounded like someone talking in his sleep; indeed, her only desire was for sleep” (105). The local doctor, Zablodovsky, prescribes various medicines, but his greatest achievement is to make sure Shoshana is put to bed with careful supervision.

There are distinct melancholy underpinnings to her lethargic conduct. During dinner at the Jaffa hotel one evening, Shoshana's *nefesh* seems to have withdrawn inward or to have fled her body altogether (*nafsha ke-'ilu nitcansa le-tokha o ke-'ilu barha mi-gufa*).<sup>22</sup> Agnon invokes the words of the Song, but in this highly distorted split between the body and the soul, the term *nefesh* also acquires the connotations of the modern expression *holat nefesh*—"mentally ill." Just then the Consul ponders over the coffee that is served: "Every age has its own customs: our forefathers used to take drinks that put them to sleep, but now we try to keep ourselves awake. After all, is there anything in the world worth staying awake for?—Those scents from the garden are most exhilarating: a mixture of jasmine and orange blossom, isn't it?" (51). His comment sounds like a parody of the wakefulness that stirs the enamored Shulamite's heart even in her sleep. Coffee, rather than love, is the stimulus that arouses people in modern times, and the question of whether or not there is something for which to be awake does not receive a decisive answer. The Consul seems to find some pleasure in the intoxicating scents that blow from the citrus orchards into the dining room, the kind of scents that awaken the sea of Jaffa and "enliven the soul" (*she-mehayim 'et ha-nefesh*),<sup>23</sup> the kind of warm, spring scents of jasmine and orange blossom that have the potential of forming part of a new, Oriental Song of Songs garden, but his daughter is only "put to sleep" by them (51).

In her mixed somatic and mental symptoms, Shoshana bears some resemblance to Freud's hysterical patients. Like many of them, she comes from an affluent Viennese family, holding the necessary means to afford psychoanalytic treatment. Given that such treatment is not available in Jaffa, the Consul thinks of consulting Nothnagel, a Viennese doctor who happens to be a historical figure: none other than one of Freud's teachers.<sup>24</sup> The voice-over of a later period may be traced here as well. In Jaffa of the Second Aliyah there were no psychoanalysts, but in Jerusalem of the forties there was a thriving Psychoanalytic Institute, founded by one of Freud's students: Max Eitingon.<sup>25</sup>

To the extent that Agnon writes a case study of Shoshana, he evokes Freud's theories with characteristic irony. As with biblical botany and other modern exegetical trends, he is both fascinated and amusedly critical. Psychoanalysis offers new methods for exploring the *nefesh* that appeal to Agnon in their emphasis on dreams and the darker, uncontrollable aspects of the mind, yet he cannot but ridicule Freud's overriding assumption that psychoanalysis holds the decisive key to the psyche. His skepticism merges with that of Shoshana at different points, most notably when she recounts one of

her dreams. She dreams not of her lover knocking or calling her “upon the handles of the lock” but rather of the seductions of emotional numbness and death. “I dreamed that I was dead,” she notes. “I wasn’t happy, I wasn’t sad, but my body felt such rest as no one knows in the land of the living. And this was the best of it, that I wanted nothing, I asked for nothing, it just felt as if I were disappearing into blue distances that would never end.” But then she sarcastically adds: “Next morning I opened a book and read in it that nobody dreams of himself as dead” (94–95). The untitled book, one may assume, is *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud’s analysis of dreams as wish fulfillments in this monumental work does not quite account for Shoshana’s dream, where her own death is the greatest wish of all.<sup>26</sup>

#### ARZAF’S EMBALMED WORLD: INCESTUOUS FANTASIES

The young botanist could also be put on the psychoanalytic couch—and indeed he has. Gershon Shaked defines him as a neurotic who is beset by oedipal fixations.<sup>27</sup> Against common readings that define Rechnitz’s inability to fully commit himself to Shoshana as his paramount failure—involved as he is in ongoing flirtation with the six maidens of Jaffa—Shaked calls attention to the pathological qualities of this return to a childhood love. Above all, he highlights the incestuous dimension of Rechnitz’s attraction to Shoshana (they were raised as siblings of sorts) and the ways in which Shoshana and her mother, Frau Ehrlich, often blend in his mind.

Incest is not absent from the world of the Song. The lover calls his beloved “sister,” and the term *dod* means both “lover” and “uncle.” What is more, the Shulamite, at one point, revives the lexicalized metaphor of brother as lover on exclaiming: “O that thou wert as my brother / that sucked the breasts of my mother!” (*mi yitenkha ke-’ah li yonek shedei ‘imi*; 8:1). She imagines her lover as a brother in seeking a way to stroll in the streets with him without being scorned. Yet her fantasy of a more acceptable encounter discloses a wish for an even more illicit love: one that entails incest and a highly erotic sucking of the mother’s breasts. Not unlike illness and death, incest, in the ancient love poem, conveys a certain maddening intensity of a love that remains, in a sense, impossible.

Rechnitz’s incestuous cravings are more than a luring sideline: they pose a surplus of stimuli he cannot quite endure. Sitting with Shoshana in the hotel garden, yet another garden with a potential of turning into a new Song of Songs garden, Rechnitz’s thoughts drift from Shoshana’s hands to a memory



of how he used to “long to touch” her mother’s hands with his lips (90). Out of this childhood recollection emerges another unexpected memory of a visit to the abode of Arzaf in Ein Rogel. Shmuel Werses regards Arzaf, the taxidermist (one of the marginal characters in both *Betrothed* and *Only Yesterday*), as an ironic replica of Israel Aharoni: the half-crazed biblical zoologist of both Bezalel and the Hebrew University, the zoological counterpart of Hareuveni.<sup>28</sup> Aharoni, in fact, was the first to call attention to this connection. He went so far as to claim that the name Arzaf is an acronym for “Aharoni the head [*rosh*] of zoology in Palestine.” Agnon whimsically responded that he would have never thought of using the term “Palestine” rather than the “Land of Israel.”<sup>29</sup>

Rechnitz recalls watching the hands of Arzaf stretching an animal skin on a board. The sequence between these three sets of hands (which surprises Rechnitz) lays bare a deep attraction coupled with an equally deep disgust. The young botanist tries to block his incestuous fantasies by thinking of a supposedly remote topic—Arzaf—but Eros returns through the back door. Unwittingly, he identifies with Arzaf, whose eccentric love for animals is defined as that which “[gives] them life even after their death” (64). He would have liked to embalm his childhood love and her mother, as it were, much as Arzaf embalms his animals, or much as he himself, in the analogous botanical practice, dries, glues, and draws seaweed in his album. It is a way of touching that is supposedly less threatening in the control it seems to promise over the embalmed.

Given her own morbid wishes, Shoshana plays along with Rechnitz’s latent fantasy. On hearing of Arzaf (Rechnitz eventually mentions his thoughts about the zoologist, though he censors their erotic dimension), she exclaims: “Cattle and wild beasts may enjoy a privilege granted to no man except the mummies in Egypt. . . . Our days on earth are like a shadow, and the time of our affliction is the length of our days. How fortunate are those mummies, laid in the ground and freed from all trouble and toil. If I could only be like one of them!” (91). She craves nothing less than to be one of Arzaf’s taxidermic specimens or an Egyptian mummy. But her wish to be embalmed does not provide Rechnitz with much tranquility. The ill Shulamite never stops dragging the young botanist, ever more forcefully, into vortexes of love, incest, and death.

#### A SUDDEN INSIGHT: PLUNGING INTO THE POND

The connection between Rechnitz’s love for marine botany and his love for Shoshana is intimated at various points throughout the tale—from the wet

rose in Shoshana's mouth to his ruminations on Arzaf—but is addressed openly in Rechnitz's response to the Consul's questions about his choice of profession. Initially, the young botanist doesn't really explain his choice: instead, he depicts his gradual decision to turn from the botany of "upper plants" to the botany of "lower" ones. But then the Consul goes on to ask whether the plants that he investigates "also have their characteristic diseases" (103). "There isn't a single thing in creation that is not liable to disease," Rechnitz replies (104). And as he ruminates on botanical maladies, his thoughts wander off to the ill Shoshana: it suddenly dawns on him that the reason for his particular professional preferences may lie in a forgotten episode on the day of the betrothal oath at the Ehrlichs' garden.

Suddenly Jacob's eyes grew round with wonder. A new perspective opened up beyond the one he saw before him, like the vision of a painter. . . . The pond in the Consul's garden, whose water plants used to fascinate and amaze him, came back into his memory. Perhaps, after all, his heart had been drawn to these plants since those very days? Twenty years and more had passed since he had first gone down with Shoshana to the pond and drawn up the wet vegetation; the strange thing about it was that in all those years the thought had never come back into his mind. At that moment he saw before his eyes the same circular pond set in the garden among the shrubs and the flowers, with Shoshana picking flowers and braiding garlands; now Shoshana jumped into the pond and disappeared; and now she rose again, covered with wet seaweed like a mermaid, the water streaming from her hair. As he thought of her hair, he thought, too, of how on that same day Shoshana had taken a curl from her curls and, with it, a lock of his forelock, and mingled them and burned them together and they had eaten the ashes and sworn to be faithful to each other. (104)

This is one of the most climactic moments in the tale. It has the sudden, revelatory force of an exhilarating Proustian scene of recollection; it has the freshness of a retrieved lost memory whose emergence opens up unknown realms of the past. Rechnitz is likened to an artist, in this case, not because of the sketches in his album but because his sudden insight resembles that of "a painter struggling to apprehend what his eyes have never seen" (104). If visual terms prevail in the depiction of this moment, it is because he now plunges back into a magical, childhood sight: one in which Shoshana emerges out of the pond, like a mermaid or a siren (*bat galim*) with wet seaweed streaming down her hair.

Once again Rechnitz recalls the blissful Song of Songs garden of his childhood, but this time around the aquatic qualities of that garden are more apparent, calling to mind the blending of vegetation and water in the *dod's* playful punning: "A garden shut up [*gan na'ul*] is my sister, my bride; a spring shut up [*gal na'ul*], a fountain sealed" (4:12). The locked garden and the locked spring (literally "wave"), drawn from the surrounding sites, serve as metaphors for the vitality and virginity of the Shulamite. But the dripping of myrrh from the beloved's body onto the "handles of the lock" shortly afterward, in the dream sequence of Chapter 5, intimates that the fountain may not be as sealed as it may first seem. For once, Rechnitz seems to be attuned to the tension in the Song between chastity and unabashed sensuality. Shoshana in the pond of the Ehrlichs' garden is no longer merely an innocent, chaste girl (modeled on Herderian notions of the Shulamite) but a wildly sensuous and seductive mermaid/siren who teasingly disappears in the water and then rises up again.

Band reads the pond scene as a kind of dream and sees Rechnitz as its Freudian interpreter. In accordance with the psychoanalytic exegetical practices of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the young botanist moves from the overt to the covert—following a stream of associations from the seaweed of the deep to the seaweed on Shoshana's hair—and much as Freud was preoccupied with decoding childhood memories that appear only in fragmentary forms in dreams, so too Rechnitz is immersed in a search after the hidden spheres of his childhood games.<sup>30</sup> To top it all, Freud too defined his vocation as involving a heretical move from the upper worlds to the lower ones, as the evocation of the *Aeneid* in the epigraph to *The Interpretation of Dreams* makes clear: "If I can sway / No heavenly hearts I'll rouse the world below" (7:425–26).<sup>31</sup>

Gradiva's gait may also be traced in this scene. In fact, this is her most pronounced appearance in Agnon's tales. Both *Betrothed* and Freud's study of *Gradiva*, as Erella Brown points out, probe the impact of lingering memories of childhood loves on later professional choices.<sup>32</sup> If Norbert Hanold becomes an archaeologist in reenactment of his childhood infatuation with Zoe, Rechnitz becomes a marine botanist, charmed by those dripping weeds on Shoshana's hair. In both cases, there is an unconscious attempt to both preserve and escape primary erotic experiences. "Archaeology took hold of [Norbert Hanold]," remarks Freud,

and left him with an interest only in woman of marble and bronze. His childhood friendship, instead of being strengthened into passion, was dissolved, and his memories of it passed into profound forgetfulness. . . . What is

repressed cannot, it is true, as a rule make its way into memory without more ado; but it retains a capacity for effective action, and, under the influence of some external event, it may one day bring about psychical consequences which can be regarded as products of a modification of the forgotten memory and as derivatives of it and which remain unintelligible unless we take this view of them.<sup>33</sup>

In Agnon's tale of a Pompeii-like Jaffa, it is the scholar himself who retrieves repressed memories while gaining insight into the link between his childhood love and professional passions. He is positioned, for a brief moment at least, in the role of the analyst. But how successful is Rechnitz's probing into the mysteries of the mind's underworld? In a famous section in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.<sup>34</sup>

For all his certainty concerning his capacity to solve oneiric puzzles, Freud does not hesitate to acknowledge the hermeneutic limits of psychoanalytic inquiry. In an admirable move, he goes so far as to define the obscure, impenetrable passage of the dream as its very navel. The metaphor of the navel leads to the maternal body and the moment of birth, to the inscrutable site of human origin. But Freud does not remain in the human realm for long. Harking back to his interest in the natural sciences, he adds a semi-botanical image to his explication as he depicts in detail the intricacies of the mushroom growing out of its mycelium, branching out in all directions, having no "definite endings." Both the navel and the mushroom mark the dark, unknowable "spot" where our quest for interpretive insight fails. Any notion of human mastery is mitigated by a humbling reminder of the embeddedness of the mind in the body and of humanity in the evolutionary chain.

Agnon goes with Freud beyond Freud into more skeptical zones. There is much that remains concealed and uninterpretable in this “locked spring” of Rechnitz’s childhood. Seaweeds no less than mushrooms, and perhaps even more so—as they are among the most ancient species and lower in the evolutionary scale—reach down to the unknown and as such allow Agnon to underscore the partiality of Rechnitz’s new perspective. This scene of remembrance may seem to offer a deeper explanation for Rechnitz’s choice of profession than the legendary Homeric scene of initiation, but here too the young botanist still thinks in terms of classical and European myths (the sirens and mermaids), unaware of his latent attraction to his own cultural heritage and to the underlying Song of his life; here too he is at a loss when it comes to understanding the one love of his life that neither botany nor psychoanalysis can make truly graspable.<sup>35</sup>

#### ALLEGORICAL ROSES: NATIONAL LOVES

*Betrothed* has generated numerous allegorical readings. Avraham Kariy, among its early reviewers, regards the novella as an uplifting allegory of national renewal, embodied in the reaffirmed oath of Yaacov Rechnitz as Israel and Shoshana as the Shekhinah of the Shabbat (the six maidens turn out to be the six secular days of the week).<sup>36</sup> By contrast, Dov Sadan, in one of the first monumental books to dismantle the common notion of Agnon as a pious writer, aptly calls for a more nuanced understanding of allegory in the novella—one that does not overlook the literal dimension. The *mashal* and the *nimshal*, he argues, each has its own “wondrous autonomy.”<sup>37</sup> The beauty of the piece lies precisely in that the literal love story is not simply yoked to the allegorical one but rather stands in its own right. Sadan goes on to complicate the allegorical dimension of the tale. He calls attention to the tale’s oscillation between non-Jewish texts—from classical literature to the folktale “Sleeping Beauty” and the novels of Knut Hamsun—and Jewish subtexts, among them, the allegorical network created by the combination of the names of the two protagonists: *shoshanat Ya’acov* (the “Rose of Jacob,” a traditional designation for the Jewish people).

If Sadan questions Kariy’s overemphasis on the Jewish sources of *Betrothed* and calls attention to their presence as hidden subtext, Hannan Hever, in a more recent essay, has challenged the tendency to view the novella as an uncomplicated allegory about Zionist renewal. In contradistinction to the Zionist tendency to relegate the sea to the margins and regard it as a subor-

dinate geography whose primary role is to lead to the sanctified land, Agnon, Hever suggests, inverts these hierarchies. He places the sea at the center of all events and exposes the instability of terrestrial attachments.<sup>38</sup>

The discussion regarding the allegorical dimension of the novella has had its twists and turns—from Kariv to Hever—but it has not touched on the exegetical issues I’ve been addressing in my consideration of Agnon’s response to the Zionist adaptation of biblical botany and of the Song.<sup>39</sup> Walter Benjamin’s redefinition of the distinctions between allegory and symbol is vital to the understanding of Agnon’s take on the allegorical underpinning of biblical botany. “Whereas in the symbol,” writes Benjamin, “destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape.”<sup>40</sup>

For Agnon, who shares Benjamin’s critique of the illusionary, organic wholeness of the symbol and its redemptive light, biblical plants are as arbitrary a sign as seaweed.<sup>41</sup> There is, after all, no guarantee that the scientific identification of biblical plants is an actual retrieval of an authentic, botanical past (if it were decisively so, there would not be so many disputes regarding the correct identification and translation). Seaweeds that do not pertain to the world of biblical flora may be associated with the Song no less than terrestrial plants. When botanists such as the Hareuvenis regard biblical plants as “natural” symbols and a concrete bridge to the biblical past and to national renewal, they are, Agnon reminds us, in the realm of sheer, inorganic allegory.

To highlight the absurdity of the Zionist quest for the concrete biblical plantscapes of the Land of Israel, Agnon playfully evokes a series of traditional allegories of the Rose (the Rose of Jacob is but one specimen). The *shoshana* is first constructed as a metaphor for national renewal in Hosea 14:6—“I will be as the dew unto Israel; he shall blossom as the [*shoshana*].” Following Hosea, the commentators of *Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* interpret the “rose among the thorns” as an allegorical representation of the chosenness and glory of the nation, blessed as it is by divine dew (2:14). The *Zohar*, in turn, endorses the midrash on Song 2:2 and uses it as a springboard for a mystical reading: “Rabbi Hizkiya opened: ‘*Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens. . . . Who is a rose? Assembly of Israel. For there is a rose, and then there is a rose! Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white, so Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion. Just as a rose has thirteen petals, so Assembly of Israel has thirteen qualities of compassion surrounding Her on every side*’” (1:1a).<sup>42</sup> If in the midrash the Assembly

of Israel (Knesset Yisrael) refers to the earthly community of the people of Israel, in the Zohar it primarily designates the Shekhinah, the divine feminine counterpart of the people, here in her configuration as Rose.<sup>43</sup>

To this traditional line of roses Agnon adds a touch of the Zionist Rose of Jericho, capable of being revived by the slightest rain, even after many years of exile. With its promise of national renewal in modern times, the Rose of Jericho turns out to be yet another intricate chapter in the history of allegorical readings of the Song's *shoshana*.

The wet roses of *Betrothed* are saturated by all these different allegorical roses. Their overall allegorical hue is, however, distinctly darker. To the extent that Shoshana is an ill Rose who cannot quite be awakened, Agnon seems to challenge the very possibility of glittering allegories of national renewal—both old and new.

With his incredibly broad, panoramic view of the numerous, often contradictory, commentaries of the Song, Agnon sets the rosy, dreamy allegories of the Song against one of the more ominous ones: that of the Three Oaths. The Three Oaths (*shalosh ha-shevu'ot*) are based on an allegorical reading of the verse “awaken not, nor stir up love, until it please” as a warning against any attempt to rebuild Zion before Messianic times. This allegory has its beginnings in the Talmud but is still endorsed in current times by some Ultra-Orthodox and Hasidic communities, where it is used to oppose Zionism as a pseudo-messianic movement.<sup>44</sup> Whether the national love oath of biblical times—the covenantal scenes of Mount Sinai and beyond, which are construed by Hosea as an act of betrothal (“And I will betroth thee unto Me in faithfulness”; 2:22)—should be reenacted or replaced by a counter-oath of the *shevu'ot* is a question that underlies the ambivalence with which Rechnitz and Shoshana open up their childhood bond.

The warm, Oriental Song of Songs gardens of Jaffa in springtime, with all their intoxicating fragrance and promise of a new Paradise, are not quite a national cure in *Betrothed*. Shoshana and Rechnitz seem to stroll in an entirely different planet. More often than not, they wander in their minds and memories in the Eden-like Song of Songs gardens of Vienna rather than in the resurrected Song of Songs landscapes of the Zionist spring.

To evoke the Freudian connection yet again, this time via Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*, I would add that Agnon's suspension of belief in allegorical roses is accompanied by a suspension of belief in the value of awaking repressed collective memories. In *Moses and Monotheism*, the return of the repressed has its unmistakable dangers but is ultimately construed as a vital

“progress in spirituality” that eventually leads to the reemergence of the Mosaic text and the monotheistic nation.<sup>45</sup> Agnon renders the lure of rekindling past memories but is keener on probing the pathological fixations at stake—in both the individual and the collective spheres. Whether or not biblical plants are “memory plants”—in Hareuvenis’ terms—or bearers of traces of biblical events (a botanical version of Freud’s phylogenetic perception of human memory), it remains unclear why such memories should propel a whole community to search for a sense of belonging in biblical lands.

Writing in 1943, against the backdrop of the Second World War, Agnon’s preoccupation with the founding dreams of Zionism had special urgency. In one of the most moving moments in the novella, Rechnitz looks at Shoshana with dismay, wondering how such an ill, melancholy woman could expect him to marry her. But just as he approaches the point of leaving Shoshana behind, he cannot but admit to himself that without her, he feels “as if the whole world is taken from him” (*she-be-lo ‘ima kol ha-’olam menutal mimenu*).<sup>46</sup> In Agnon’s multifaceted allegorical framework, national passions may be construed as an equally impossible love—one that can be neither followed nor relinquished. Rechnitz cannot quite commit himself to Palestine, but he is, nonetheless, compelled by the seaweeds of Jaffa rather than by those of Ithaca.

#### “THE TALE OF THE SCRIBE”

In his unending exegetical experiments, Agnon juggles yet another traditional allegory of the Song in this novella: the Torah as Rose and the concomitant configuration of the study of the Torah as “picking roses” (*lilkot shoshanim*) (6:2). This allegorical line, whose most renowned advocate was Rashi, appears explicitly in Agnon’s “The Tale of the Scribe” (“Agadat ha-sofer”) at the moment in which Rafael, the scribe, decides to write and embellish a Torah scroll in memory of his late wife, Miriam.

Rafael was a great gardener. He planted beautiful Torah scrolls in the world. And whoever was invited to appear before the King . . . took a Torah scroll with him. And now that Miriam’s time had come to appear before the King—the Holy One, blessed be He—Raphael immediately went down to his garden—that is, to his pure and holy table—and picked roses—that is, the letters of the Torah scroll he wrote.<sup>47</sup>



Rafael's thoughts seem pious in character. He wants to create a Torah as beautiful as a rose so that his wife would be able to bring it along with her as she approaches the Ultimate Gardener upon her death. "While the story appears to take at face value Rafael's devotion," Hoffman writes, "there are subtle indications that his excess is not simply to be understood as piety."<sup>48</sup> Rafael's relentless, erotic immersion in his work comes at the expense of his relationship with his wife. He can unite with Miriam only after her death, in a highly sensual, ecstatic dance with the Torah scroll he had made on her behalf.

Asael, who calls attention to this passage from "The Tale of the Scribe" in his reading of *Betrothed*, misses this irony. According to Asael, Rechnitz is doomed because he chooses to adhere, like a biblical critic, to the secular studies of the sources instead of clinging to Shoshana, the Rose of the true Torah. Focusing solely on Agnon's irony vis-à-vis biblical criticism and modern scholarly trends, he neglects to take into account the blunt questioning of the exegetical practices of the orthodox world as well.<sup>49</sup>

But Agnon's irony is even more complex given that he is deeply interested in the similarities between modern scholars and the *talmidey hakhamim* from whom they wish to depart. Regardless of the palpable differences between their respective worlds, both Rafael and Rechnitz are so trapped in their passion for their work that they lose touch with the women whom they love. Their love for the Song itself and for picking roses—be they scribal or scientific—seems at times to reach troubling proportions.

In depicting happy days for Rechnitz, when he ends up withdrawing both from Shoshana and from the *ne'arot* of Jaffa—devoting himself, in "an undistracted love" solely to the study of seaweed—the narrator whimsically defines "wisdom" (*ha-hokhma*) as a conveniently "pleasant wife" (*ra'aya noha*).<sup>50</sup> Agnon deliberately uses the term "wisdom" (with its biblical, midrashic, and mystical echoes) rather than "research"—in order to underline questions of continuity between traditional exegesis and modern scholarship. But how long can such happiness last when the "good gods" (121) are envious of Rechnitz's tranquility and the women of Jaffa of his scholarly solitude?

#### THE SOMNAMBULIST RACE

The somnambulist race with which the novella ends is the grand finale of Agnon's dramatization of the dream sequences of the Song. On the night of the race, when Rechnitz is alone in his room, Tamara, one of the six *ne'arot* of Jaffa, ventures to knock on his door, with "her lips trembl[ing] like petals

touched with morning dew” (122), assuming the role of the dew-drenched *dod* (Song 5:2) with lips as roses—*siftotav shoshanim*—“dripping with flowing myrrh” (5:13). Rechnitz longs to take her into his arms, but desire remains unfulfilled, for Rachel and Leah suddenly appear and shortly after the other maidens. Once they all have gathered together, they go outdoors and stroll by the moonlit sea.

The sea lay down on an unending bed, with moon-whitened waves as its nightgown. The shores had lengthened and the moon shone over the sands and the sea. And a benevolent spirit hovered over Rechnitz and the six maidens. . . . Sea and sky, heaven and earth, and all the space between became one body which is not a body but rather a luminous calm enveloped by azure, or an azure transparent as air. Up above, and under the surface of the sea, the moon raced as a somnambulist. . . . Even the sands were moonstruck and seemed to be walking on and on. Like the sands, like the entire surrounding air, the maidens, and with them Rechnitz, stood as if dream-struck. If they looked above, there was the moon running her race, and if they looked out toward the sea, there she was again hovering upon the face of the waters.<sup>51</sup>

All are swept into the Shulamite’s nocturnal imaginings—not only Rechnitz and his female companions but also the personified sea, who lies in bed with a dreamy, unending, moonlit gown. Agnon uses the feminine term for “moon,” *levana*, and plays with its adjectival meaning: “white” (in the feminine form). The *levana* whitens the waves and engulfs them with her lunar magic, but then goes on to spellbind the entire cosmos. If the sands become “moonstruck” (*mukey yareah*), Rechnitz and the maidens become “dream-struck” (*mukey halom*), surrounded as they are by the race of the moon in heaven above and her reflection “upon the face of the waters.”<sup>52</sup>

This lunar race is contagious, for it leads the *ne’arot*, one by one, to dance:

Rachel took Leah’s hand, Leah the hand of Asnat and Asnat that of Raya, and Raya took Mira’s, and Mira Tamara’s and Tamara took Rachel’s; they encircled Rechnitz and danced around him—danced until Rachel broke from their ring and knelt down facing the sea with her eyes uplifted to the moon. Asnat stood still, stretched out her hands in the air and played inaudible notes on an unseen keyboard. “Listen, Tamara,” said Mira, “if I had a horse, I would go galloping from one end of the world to the other!” (129)

The dancers form an enchanting ring around Rechnitz. And although the young botanist seems to be the center of attention, the young women are as absorbed in one another in a playful, imaginary game that doesn't remain within the confines of the circle or the confines of normative conduct. First, Rachel breaks from the ring and kneels before the *levana*, as if she were paying homage to the goddess of this magical dance by the sea. Then, Asnat comes along and accompanies her by playing an inaudible melody on an unseen piano. Finally, Mira, caught by the same wild whim, ventures to imagine herself galloping like an unstoppable knight "from one end of the world to the other."

The gender reversal that begins with Tamara's knocking on Rechnitz's door and continues with Mira's fantasy about the gallant galloping reaches its peak when the *ne'arot* propose an earthly race in which they will compete over Rechnitz's hand. The winner and future bride will then be crowned with a garland made out of Rechnitz's seaweed.

"Do you see this garland?" said Leah. "We've all agreed that the fastest runner will win and wear this wreath, made of Dr. Rechnitz's weeds. Do you agree, Dr. Rechnitz?"

Rechnitz nodded, saying, "Yes." But his face grew pale and his heart began to quake.

Leah insisted, "The Greeks had the men run, not the girls."

Asnat answered, "But since all those young men are dead and we are alive, let's do their running ourselves." (133)

The race, with its Greek stamp, continues the idolatrous moon worshipping in the dance that preceded it. But despite the pagan qualities of the race, it is inextricably intertwined with the rhythms of the Song and the intoxicated movement that characterizes the Shulamite, from her call upon her lover to rush in the opening verses of the biblical poem—"Draw me, we will run after thee" (1:4)—to her somnambulist wanderings at night in Chapter 5. Rosenzweig's depiction of the Song's speech of love in *The Star of Redemption* is most pertinent in this connection:

The speech of love is all present: dream and reality, sleep of the limbs and awaking of the heart, intertwine indistinguishably. Everything is equally present, equally fleeting and equally alive—"like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains." A downpour of imperatives descends on this evergreen

pasture of the present and vitalizes it. The imperatives sound different but always mean the same thing: “Draw me after you, open to me, arise, come away, hurry”—it is always one and the same imperative of love.<sup>53</sup>

A similar mixture of dream and wakefulness, a similar kind of speed, of urgency, of fleeting images, a similar sense of an all-encompassing vivacity are characteristic of the final sequences of *Betrothed*.<sup>54</sup>

When the semi-awake, semi-dreaming Rechnitz approaches the running maidens at the last stretch of the race, he suddenly sees dashing past them the figure of the somnambulist Shoshana in her white nightgown.

Neither Leah nor Rachel nor Asnat nor Raya nor Mira nor Tamara had seen her running, yet each of them had been aware in the course of the race that someone was ahead of her, without knowing this someone as Shoshana Ehrlich, Jacob’s friend, who for many days and weeks had been asleep, never rising from her bed. With fear in their souls they forgot the garland and their agreement with Jacob. And Jacob, too, forgot all this as he stood before Shoshana.

Suddenly there was a voice calling him by name, a voice that came, as it were, from beneath Shoshana’s eyelashes. Jacob shut his eyes and replied in a whisper, “Shoshana, are you here?”

Shoshana’s eyelashes signaled assent. She put out her hands, took the crown from Jacob’s arm and placed it on her head. (138–39)

As a “rose among the thorns,” Shoshana outdoes the other *ne’arot* in the race. She places the “crown/diadem,” *’atara*, of seaweed upon her head to mark her victory. The use of the term *’atara*, which appears in the Song in the context of Solomon’s wedding ( “Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and gaze upon king Solomon, even upon the crown [*’atara*] wherewith his mother hath crowned him in the day of his espousals”—3:11), endows the scene with nuptial overtones. It seems for a moment a happy ending that combines elements of the Song with the scene of awakening in the Sleeping Beauty legend. Above all, this encounter by the vast sea that “grew even vaster” (138) as they draw nearer to each other is a remarkably intensified reenactment of several childhood scenes that now blend together: Shoshana’s running with a wet rose in her mouth, the love oath in the Viennese garden, and that other more hidden scene in the pond, when Shoshana arose from the water with seaweed streaming down her hair.

But what if the reunion between Shoshana and Rechnitz takes place only in the dream zone between his “shut eyes” and her semi-closed “eyelashes,” from whence her voice emerges? Is it Rechnitz’s dream of wish fulfillment, where his two loves—the love for Shoshana and the love for marine botany—are wedded via the crown of seaweed? Or is it a more somber ceremony on the threshold of a love that yields to death (not unlike the *Liebestod* of Rafael and Miriam in “The Tale of the Scribe”)? Alter suggests that “Agnon is careful to draw a veil of ambiguity over the conclusion” and points to the deadly qualities of this nocturnal scene: Are Shoshana’s “night clothes her shroud? Has she arisen from a sickbed or a grave to fulfill her pact with Jacob?”<sup>55</sup>

The open-endedness of the literal love story of Rechnitz and Shoshana is accompanied by a final insistence on ambiguity on the allegorical level as well. The revival of the national Rose doesn’t seem less complicated at the conclusion. Dashing miraculously ahead of the maidens and then setting the ‘*atara* upon her head, Shoshana seems almost celestial. She basks in the light of three of the Shekhinah’s designations/symbols (all drawn from the Song): the Rose (*shoshana*), the Diadem (‘*atara*), and the Moon (*levana*).<sup>56</sup> And yet Agnon’s Shekhinah has a dubious dimension: the Rose is ill, the Diadem is made of seaweeds, and the *levana* “races like a somnambulist” and is associated with pagan rituals. National loves are set in this final race in a maddening, semi-heretical moonstruck world of enchanting dreams, equally removed from a naively hopeful perspective or an apocalyptic scenario.

#### A PRECARIOUS AESTHETICS OF RENEWAL

In a moment of uncharacteristic optimism, Kurzweil speaks of the ending of *Betrothed* as an exhilarating episode in which the “Song of Songs of true love” emerges with great resonance (‘*ole u-metsaltse*).<sup>57</sup> Poetry appears sporadically in Rechnitz’s mesmerized gaze at the seaweed and in the different scenes of remembrance, but here, indeed, a whole section has something of the intensity and force of sheer poetry. Lunar light seems to entrance not only the characters of this novella but also its narrator. More than ever before, the tale breaks away from prose and moves beyond normative genre boundaries, into poetry, as if moving even closer to the original mode of the Song of Songs.

Is Agnon intimating that whether or not the Song can offer renewal at the personal or national spheres it has the capacity to serve as a base for aesthetic renewal? To some extent this is the underlying melody of the final sequence. But for the forever ironic Agnon—who steers away from the flamboyant praises

of aesthetic renaissance one finds in the writings of the Hareuvenis, Schatz, and Bialik—prose remains the predominant genre even when he experiments with poetry.<sup>58</sup> The very final note of the story is accordingly a prosaic, ironic coda of the narrator: “Here, for the time being, we have brought to an end our account of the affairs of Jacob Rechnitz and Shoshana Ehrlich. These are the same Shoshana and Jacob who were betrothed to one another through a solemn vow. Because of it, we have called this whole account ‘Betrothed,’ though at first we had thought to call it ‘The Seven Maidens’” (139). Agnon flaunts the artistic work behind the scenes and treats authorial choices with pseudo-naive, ironic recognition that they are not as innate as they may seem at first. There is always the ghost of another potential title or plot, of another potential love. I would add that there is also a sense of another potential genre, of a latent Poem, which was ultimately replaced by prose.

In a famous passage from his banquet speech on receiving the Nobel Prize in 1966 (quoted on the Israeli fifty-shekel note), Agnon recounts:

As a result of the historic catastrophe in which Titus of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of the Exile. But always I regarded myself as one who was born in Jerusalem. In a dream, in a vision of the night, I saw myself standing with my brother-Levites in the Holy Temple, singing with them the songs of David, King of Israel, melodies such as no ear has heard since the day our city was destroyed and its people went into exile. I suspect that the angels in charge of the Shrine of Music, fearful lest I sing in wakefulness what I had sung in dream, made me forget by day what I had sung at night; for if my brethren, the sons of my people, were to hear, they would be unable to bear their grief over the happiness they have lost. To console me for having prevented me from singing with my mouth, they enable me to compose songs in writing.<sup>59</sup>

Agnon regards biblical songs (he refers to David’s songs, but Solomon’s Song hovers in the background) as a primary, legendary genre that may appear in the world of dreams but not in daylight.<sup>60</sup> In his wakefulness, in the exilic world that follows catastrophe, Agnon can only grieve over the poetic “happiness” that had been lost and find some consolation in composing “songs in writing.” He supposedly distinguishes between “song” and “poem” (in Hebrew the term *shir* refers to both), between oral culture and written culture. But given that Agnon is primarily a writer rather than a poet, he seems to imply that prose—or prose that aspires to be “songs in writing”—is the most suitable

mode of expression in a fallen world where truly divine songs can no longer be heard or uttered.

In his renowned “Revelment and Concealment in Language,” Bialik compares the “masters of prose” to “one who crosses a river walking on hard ice frozen into a solid block. Such a man can divert his attention completely from the covered depths flowing underneath his feet.” Conversely the “masters of poetry” are likened to “one who crosses a river when it is breaking up, by stepping across floating, moving blocks of ice. He dare not set his foot on any block for longer than it takes him to leap from one block to the next. . . . Between the breaches the void looms, the foot slips, danger is close.”<sup>61</sup> Agnon reverses Bialik’s distinction: poetry may well be located on the brink, but it is above all the writing of prose that resembles the precarious experience of leaping from one block of ice to the next, far from any sense of security. Closer to Hegel, Agnon treats prose as a belated genre that is more attuned to the modern rift of loss and disenchantment. “The world of prose,” writes Hegel, is “a world of finitude and mutability, of entanglement in the relative, of the pressure of necessity from which the individual is in no position to withdraw.”<sup>62</sup>

On preferring prose in his renderings of the Song, Agnon underscores his exilic position and the limits and pressures of the prosaic world. Even if one were to reiterate the words of the Song verbatim, as Shoshana asks Rechnitz to reiterate the oath, such speech acts, he intimates, couldn’t possibly provide access to the “real” sounds and hues of the ancient gardens of love. And yet Agnon, as we have seen, doesn’t entirely relinquish poetry. He is intrigued by the interdependence of prose and poetry and by the ways in which they may haunt each other.<sup>63</sup> Through the rare moments in which poetry suddenly erupts in *Betrothed*, battering against the surrounding prose, against all odds, Agnon ventures to capture the tremendous craving for an aesthetic renewal, the wondrous vitality of the race for a new Song, even in a world in which it is lost.<sup>64</sup>

### 3. RECHNITZ'S BOTANY OF LOVE

- 1 Agnon, *Shevu'at emunim*, in *Ad hena*, 168; my translation. On Agnon's Jaffa, see Barbara E. Mann, *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv, and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2006), 186–93.
- 2 The expression “my vineyard” (*karmi sheli*) appears in Song 1:6 and 8:12. The expression “my orchard” (*pardesi sheli*) does not appear as such in the Song, but the Shulamite is likened to an orchard in 4:12–13.
- 3 *Shevu'at emunim* literally means an “oath of faith.” A more accurate translation is that of Band, who renders the title as “The Betrothal Oath.” Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 367.
- 4 Arnold Band, “Me-Hemdat le-doktor Rechnitz” [From Hemdat to Dr. Rechnitz], in *Kovets Agnon* [Essays on Agnon], ed. Emunah Yaron, Rafael Weiser, Dan Laor, and Reuven Mirkin (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994), 286–94.
- 5 Anne Golomb Hoffman offers another interesting link in pointing to the affinity between Rechnitz and Otto Weininger. In his book *Sex and Character* (which is mentioned in passing in the novella), Weininger, Hoffman writes, “refers to beautiful sketches of processes of fertilization in Mediterranean seaweed that illustrate natural forces of attraction.” Hoffman, “A Streetcar Named Desire: A Note on Otto Weininger in *Shevu'at emunim*,” in *Essays on Hebrew Literature in Honor of Avraham Holtz*, ed. Zvia Ben-Yosef Ginor (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2003), 54.
- 6 Israel Asael, “Midrash ‘atzot” [A Midrash of Seaweeds], *Keshet*, Fall 1966, 22.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 25.
- 8 Ephraim Hareuveni to Agnon, December 5, 1946, folder ARC, 4, 1270 05 0280, Agnon Archive, the National Library, Jerusalem.
- 9 *Shevua't emunim*, 212 (Hebrew text).
- 10 A similar critique of academic pretensions at the Hebrew University appears in Agnon's *Shira*.
- 11 Quoted in David Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 40.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 41. Myers calls attention to the intricate oscillation of scholars at the Institute of Jewish Studies in the early years of the Hebrew University, between a commitment to the founding principles of *Wissenschaft*, with its standards of scientific validation and critical distance, and a quest, however idiosyncratic at times, to break with some of its presuppositions—whether because of changing perceptions of what counts as Jewish Studies or because of a growing need to contribute to the burgeoning national project of Zionism and its sense of mission.
- 13 In tracing the Jewish line behind the classical one, I am indebted to Dov Sadan's reading in *Al Shai Agnon*, 88–107.
- 14 My translation, *Shevu'at emunim*, 170 (Hebrew text).
- 15 Band briefly refers to the profusion of echoes from the Song in the gardens of *Betrothed in Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 381.
- 16 *Shevu'at emunim*, 193 (Hebrew text).



- 17 My translation, *Shevu'at emunim*, 194 (Hebrew text).
- 18 See Sadan, *Al Shai Agnon*, 96; Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 377. Note that some of the Hebrew translations of the Grimms' tale follow the German model and use "Shoshana bein ha-hohim" as a title rather than "Ha-yefeifiya ha-nirdemet" (sleeping beauty). Agnon plays with both titles. In Agnon's "Hill of Sand" ("Givat ha-hol"), another Jaffa story, there is a similar somewhat morbid revision of "Sleeping Beauty" and the Song, though in reference to a male protagonist. Hemdat (the young artist) defines himself, in a confessional moment, as a *ben-melekh nirdam* (a sleeping prince): "I'm a sleeping prince whose true love puts him back to sleep. I'm love's beggar walking around with love in a torn old bag." Agnon, "Hill of Sand," trans. Anne Golomb Hoffman, in *A Book That Was Lost*, 113.
- 19 The identification of these flowers varies from one translation to another. Given that in his use of *shoshana* Agnon has a rose in mind and given that this is the common usage in modern Hebrew, I'll be using the term "rose" as translation for *shoshana*—instead of the OJPS's (and KJV's) "lily." To preserve floral variation, I will use "lily" for *havatselet*.
- 20 See Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 200–203. For more on the metaphorical network of the Song, see Francis Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983).
- 21 Blochs' translation, *The Song of Songs*, 85.
- 22 *Shevu'at emunim*, 190 (Hebrew text).
- 23 My translation, *Shevu'at emunim*, 190 (Hebrew text).
- 24 See Band, "Me-Hemdat le-doctor Rechnitz," 289.
- 25 For a historical account of the early years of psychoanalysis in the Zionist context with a brief discussion of Agnon, see Eran J. Rolnik, *Osey ha-nefashot: 'Im Freud le-Eretz Yisrael 1918–1948* [Freud in Zion: History of Psychoanalysis in Jewish Palestine/Israel, 1918–1948] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2007), 270–77.
- 26 Freud acknowledges the death instinct only in "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."
- 27 See Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, 170–87; and Gershon Shaked, "Portrait of the Immigrant as a Young Neurotic," *Prooftexts* 7, no. 1 (1987): 441–52.
- 28 Adhering to the Hebrew text, I use the name "Arzaf" rather than "Ilyushin" (in Lever's translation). For more on Agnon and Bezalel, see Shmuel Werses, "Agnon be-'olamo shel Bezalel" [Agnon in the World of Bezalel], in *Shai Agnon ki-fshuto*, 287–90. In *Only Yesterday*, Agnon provides a more detailed account of Arzaf. His zoological inquiries of Jewish sources are mentioned along with his solitary, semi-mad, or even demonic, embalming of animals. Like Hareuveni, Aharoni was a fervent explorer of the natural realities of the Bible and Talmud in the Land of Israel. In *Memories of a Hebrew Zoologist* (*Zikhronot zoolog 'ivri*), he depicts in detail his dialogue with Gustaf Dalman, the founder of the Jerusalem Research Institute of the Holy Land who conducted a whole array of studies of local customs, botany, and zoology. Although the renowned Dalman was familiar with variegated Jewish sources (unlike other Christian zoologists and botanists who ignored postbiblical materials), Aharoni presents himself as far more familiar with these ancient texts

- and far more aware of their relevance to the study of zoological life in Palestine. For more on Dalman, see Yehoshua Ben-Aryeh, “Orhot hayim u-minhagim shel ha-’ukhlusiya ha-mekomit ha-Eretz Yisraelit kefi she-nilmedu ba-me’ a ha-19 ve-’ad 1948” [Modes of Life and Customs of Local Communities in Eretz Yisrael from the 19th Century until 1948], in *Ve-Zot l-Yehuda: Mehkarim be-toldot Eretz Israel vi-yeshuva* [Studies in the History of the Land of Israel: Presented to Yehuda Ben-Porat], ed. Yehoshua Ben-Aryeh and Elhanan Reiner (Jerusalem: Yad ben Zvi, 2003), 477–80.
- 29 Agnon, “Al ha-sheina” [On Sleep], in *Me’atsmi le-atmi* [From Myself to Myself] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2000), 442.
- 30 Band, “Me-Hemdat le-doctor Rechnitz,” 292–93.
- 31 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage, 1983), 206. Freud provides the quotation in Latin: *Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo* (see the title page of *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1899], Standard Edition, 4:9). I am indebted to Ruth Ginsburg for calling my attention to the relevance of the epigraph of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. What adds a heretical touch to this descent downward is Rechnitz’s use of the terms *elyonim* and *tahtonim* on speaking of upper and lower worlds. These terms are charged with mystical resonance—all the more so given that the tree is a major trope in depictions of the upper spheres in the Zohar. Rather than seek supernal knowledge up high in sefirotic plants, Rechnitz ironically searches for the hidden truths of the lower rungs of seaweeds. And perhaps this is a playful evocation of the inverted character of the tree of *sefirot*, imagined as a cosmic tree growing downward from its roots above.
- 32 Brown provides a detailed consideration of Agnon’s debt to Freud’s “Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*” in “A Pompeian Fancy under Jaffa’s Sea: Agnon’s *Betrothed* and Jensen’s *Gradiva*,” *Prooftexts* 16, no. 3 (1996): 245–70.
- 33 Freud, “Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*,” 34.
- 34 Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 5:525.
- 35 Interestingly, Freud, as one recalls, primarily relied on classical models in his theories until his very last book, *Moses and Monotheism*.
- 36 Avraham Kariv, “Min ha-hol ‘el ha-kodesh” [From the Profane to the Holy], *Gevilin*, September 1960, 12–13.
- 37 Sadan, *Al Shai Agnon*, 103.
- 38 Hannan Hever, *El ha-hof ha-mekuve: Ha-yam ba-tarbut ha’ivrit u-vasifrut ha’ivrit ha-modernit* [Toward the Longed-for Shore: The Sea in Hebrew Culture and Modern Hebrew Literature] (Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2007), 89–99.
- 39 Dina Stern offers an elaborate discussion concerning the allegorical aspects of *Betrothed* and devotes a chapter to traditional allegories of the Song. Nonetheless, she does not take into account its reception in Zionist culture. Stern, *Ha-begidah ve-likcha: Shevu’at emunim me’et Shai Agnon* [Betrayal and Its Moral: S. Y. Agnon’s *Betrothed*] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1989).
- 40 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.
- 41 The relevance of Benjamin’s renowned essay on allegory to this tale is noted by

- Hever, *El ha-hof ha-mekuve*, 92.
- 42 Matt, *The Zohar*, 1:1. Note that these are the very opening lines of the introduction to the Zohar (Haqdamat Sefer ha-Zohar).
- 43 In another renowned Zoharic passage on the Rose, the Beloved is first imagined as a “lily of Sharon” who yearns to be watered by the deepest of all rivers. Once she is kissed by the King “whose lips are as roses” (Song 5:13), she becomes the “rose of the valleys,” changing colors from green to deep red with white hues (Zohar 1:221a–b). The Zohar thus plays with the parallelism of Song 2:1. Attuned to the intensification that often accompanies the move from the first verset to the second in biblical parallelisms (see Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, chap. 3), the Zoharic exegetes envision the moist rose of the valleys as more intense and sublime than the lily of Sharon. Melila Hellner-Eshed provides an extensive reading of this passage and of the role of the Rose in the Zohar in *A River Flows from Eden*, 341–48.
- 44 In “Shalosh ha-shevu’ot” (“Three Oaths”), Agnon offers an explicit commentary on this allegorical tradition. Aviezer Ravitzky provides a detailed account of the impact of the three oaths in *Messianism, Zionism, and Jewish Religious Radicalism*, trans. Michael Swirsky and Jonathan Chipman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 211–34.
- 45 Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, 148–56. For more on *Moses and Monotheism* and the return of the repressed, see Ruth Ginsburg and Ilana Pardes, eds., *New Perspectives on Freud’s “Moses and Monotheism”* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2006).
- 46 My translation, *Shevu’at emunim*, 210 (Hebrew text).
- 47 Agnon, “The Tale of the Scribe,” trans. Isaac Franck, in *A Book That Was Lost: Thirty-Five Stories*, 186. It is noteworthy that another allegory of the Song is at stake, revolving around the first part of the same verse (6:2): *dodi yarad le-gano* (“my beloved is gone down into his garden”). To give but two examples, in Talmud Yerushalmi, Tractate Berakhot 2:8 and Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah 6:2, it designates God’s descent to the garden of Israel to take away (*lesalek*) true zaddikim, bringing upon them an untimely death. Rafael, as it were, positions himself in the role of God and his wife in the role of the zaddik.
- 48 Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return*, 34.
- 49 Asael, “Midrash Atsot,” 21.
- 50 My translation, *Shevu’at emunim*, 220 (Hebrew text).
- 51 My translation, based in part on Lever’s, 128–29.
- 52 In addition to the Song, there are distinct echoes of Genesis 1:2 in this passage. The spirit of God is replaced in this case with the *levana* and a haunted moon-dominated world that stands in contrast to the biblical one. I am grateful to Robert Alter for calling my attention to this point.
- 53 Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, 202.
- 54 Note that Rosenzweig relies on the Song itself in his attempt to capture its unique qualities (“like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains”) much as Agnon uses the Song’s metaphors in the aesthetic allegories of “And Solomon’s Wisdom Excelled.”
- 55 Robert Alter, “Agnon’s Mediterranean Fable,” in *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish*

- Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1977), 196.
- 56 I provide a more substantive consideration of the moon as a symbol of the Shekhinah in the next chapter.
- 57 Kurzweil, *Masot 'al sipurey Shai Agnon*, 121.
- 58 Agnon's dialogue with Bialik is more nuanced. Bialik was a complex advocate of Hebrew renaissance, who definitely had qualms about its prospects, most evident in the great *poema* "The Dead of the Desert." And yet he did not hesitate to be one of its most flowery advocates, as his letter to the Hareuvenis indicates (see Chapter 2).
- 59 Agnon's speech at the Nobel banquet at the city hall in Stockholm, December 10, 1966, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1966/agnon-speech.html).
- 60 Agnon's evocation of David's songs (Psalms) is accompanied by an implicit allusion to the Zohar's rendition of Solomon's Song as even more sublime. Whereas in David's times the Temple had not yet been built, Solomon's Song emerged after its construction. As such, Solomon's Song could unite the upper and the lower worlds, sung, as it was, by both the Levitical musicians and singers in the Temple below and by their corresponding heavenly choir above. The Zoharic commentary goes as follows: "King David uttered *A song of ascents* (Psalms 125:1). King Solomon opened with *Song of Songs*, a song of those musicians. What is the difference between them, for it seems that all is one? Well, surely all is one, but in the days of David all those musicians were not arranged in their places to play fittingly and the Temple had not been built. Consequently, they were not arranged above in their places; for just as there are watches arranged on earth, so too in heaven, standing corresponding to one another." Matt, *The Zohar*, vol. 5, *Terumah* 2:143b, 310–11 (quoted in Agnon's *Book, Writer and Story*, 71). For more on the privileged position of the Song of Songs in relation to David's Songs of Ascents, see Yehuda Liebes, *Torat ha-Yetsirah shel Sefer Yetsirah* [Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetsirah] (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2000), 123–26. For an extensive consideration of the ways in which the singing of Levites in the Temple is construed as an earthly counterpart of the Song of Songs that is sung in the Temple of the upper worlds, see Shifra Asulin, "Ha-parshanut hamistit le-shir ha-shirim be-sefer ha-Zohar ve-rik'ah" [The Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs in the Zohar] (Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University, 2006), 36–43.
- 61 Haim Nahman Bialik, "Revelment and Concealment in Language," in *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays—Haim Nahman Bialik* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000).
- 62 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols., trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), 1:149–50.
- 63 Bialik too, to be sure, was intrigued by the interdependence of poetry and prose. On his intricate experiments in this connection, see Na'ama Rokem, *Prosaic Conditions: Heinrich Heine and the Spaces of Zionist Literature* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013).
- 64 The craving for renewal through love and poetry (in the broad sense of the term) is the major topic of *Shira*, whose title designates both the name of the sought-for

woman and “poetry.” See Alter’s comments on *Shira* in “Agnon’s Last Word,” 77. See also Dan Miron, “Ashkenaz: Ha-havaya ha-yehudit-germanit be-kitvey Agnon” [Ashkenaz: The Jewish-German Experience in Agnon’s Writings], in *Ha-rofe ha-medumeh: Iyunim ba-siporet ha-yehudit ha-classit* [La Médecin Imaginaire: Studies in Classical Jewish Fiction] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 297–306; and Mintz, *Translating Israel*, 106.

#### 4. THE BIBLICAL ETHNOGRAPHIES OF “EDO AND ENAM” AND THE QUEST FOR THE ULTIMATE SONG

- 1 Adhering to the Hebrew name, I use the transliteration “Grofit” rather than Lever’s “Grofith” here and throughout the chapter.
- 2 Tochner, *Pesher Agnon*, 106–22.
- 3 Tzachi Weiss, *Mot ha-Shekhinah bi-yetsirat Agnon: Kri’ah be-arba’ah sipurim* [Death of the Shekhinah: Readings in Four Agnon Stories and in Their Sources] (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 117–32.
- 4 “Gershom Scholem on Agnon,” interview by Dan Miron, pts. 1 and 2, *Ariel—Israel Review of Arts and Letters* 52 (1982): 94–106; 53 (1983): 61–75, 63. Scholem’s comment on Agnon’s relationships with writers is something of an exaggeration. Especially in his first years in Palestine, Agnon had significant friendships with Yosef Haim Brenner and Bialik. See Haim Be’er, *Gam ahavatam gam sina’atam: Bialik, Brenner, Agnon—ma’arakhot yehasim* [Their Love and Their Hate: Bialik, Brenner, Agnon—Relations] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2002).
- 5 Scholem, “Reflections on S. Y. Agnon,” 62.
- 6 For an English translation of the German version, which includes this reference to “Edo and Enam,” see Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, 103.
- 7 Agnon goes so far as playing with the pun in the Song between *gan na’ul* (locked garden) and *gal na’ul* (locked spring) when the newspapers mistakenly print the name “Gilat” instead of “Ginat” (227).
- 8 Freud, “Female Sexuality” (1931), in Standard Edition, 21:226. Freud returns to the question of matriarchy in *Moses and Monotheism* in his study of the rise of monotheism against its predecessors.
- 9 *Bein Shlomo Dov Goitein ve-Shmuel Yosef Agnon* [Between Shlomo Dov Goitein and Shmuel Yosef Agnon], ed. Ayala Gordon (Jerusalem: private publication, 2008). A copy is available at the National Library at Givat Ram.
- 10 Dan Laor, review of the collection of letters between Agnon and Goitein, in “Gentlemen and Scholars,” *Haaretz*, January 14, 2009.
- 11 See Ayala Gordon’s introduction to *Between Shlomo Dov Goitein and Shmuel Shai Agnon*, 4–11.
- 12 Quoted in Laor, “Gentlemen and Scholars.”
- 13 As Agnon’s American connection, Goitein also informed his friend of the young promising American critic of modern Hebrew literature—Robert Alter. See letter no. 55, in *Between Shlomo Dov Goitein and Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, 88.
- 14 Goitein, “S.Y. Agnon: Personal Account,” in *A Memorial Tribute to Dr. Shmuel Yosef*