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IS TEHILLAH WORTHY OF HER PRAISE?

Risa Domb

In his book entitled *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, Arnold Band describes the eponymous character of the story "Tehillah"¹ as "a loving yet wistful glorification of a pious old lady, a type that, the narrator suggests, is very rare today." Band goes on to say that "the heroine, Tehillah, whose name means 'praise' and 'psalm of praise,' is clearly one of Agnon's finest character creations, one whom he loves and admires." He also characterizes the story as "a wistful lament for the Old City types, personified in a pious, pleasant old lady."² Most critics endorse Band's evaluation of Tehillah and, like him, sing her praises. Gershon Shaked, for example, recognizes in Tehillah a pious heroine who suffers for the sins of her parents and represents the highest ideals of Jews in the Old City of Jerusalem in the 1920s. Hillel Barzel cites other critics whose perception of Tehillah is similar. Leah Goldberg suggests that Agnon employs her to express his yearning for a lost world, to which Barzel adds that the key to Tehillah's character lies in the book of Psalms and in particular the atmosphere of devotion described in it.³ He cites, among other critics, Baruch Kurtzweil's allegorical reading regarding Tehillah not only as a perfect individual but also as a metaphor for the Jewish people, its beauty shrouded by traditions. For Hillel Weiss she is a metaphor for Jerusalem and the eventual advent of the Messiah, whatever delays are involved.

Eddy Zemach sees, in Psalm 104 in particular, an explanation for Tehillah's attitude to the world and to God, and he reminds us that she

¹ First published in 1950. For the Hebrew version, see *Ad henah* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1971), 176–206. All English quotations are from I. M. Lask's translation in S. Y. Penueli and A. Ukhmani, eds., *Hebrew Short Stories* (Tel Aviv: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1965), 1:24–52. Another translation, by Walter Lever, may be found in *Ariel* 17 (1969): 75–108.

² Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 398–99, 406, 409.

³ Hillel Barzel, *H. N. Bialik, S. Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Yahdav, 1986), 308–13.

was 104 when she died. For him Tehillah personifies this psalm, and he points out that a talmudic discussion of it happens to refer to the biblical book not by its full name *Tehillim*, but as "Tillie," which happens to be Tehillah's pet name. He concludes by saying that in no other work does Agnon sing such "a hymn for love, humanity, and faith."⁴ He identifies the opening three paragraphs as one of Agnon's more successful pieces of poetic writing, which he also divides into lines to demonstrate how they work as blank verse.⁵

There is, however, another dimension of the story that has not received sufficient attention. As Band notes,

Tehilla evokes in her creator nothing but the fondest admiration. And yet, beneath the admiring, wistful description there is an acute awareness of loss, of crime and punishment, expressed most pointedly by the story of Shraga. In spite of her composure before death, we see that Tehilla's personal life was ruined by religious strife, by her father's objection to Shraga who was then a Hasid.⁶

In my reading of the story I hope to show that Agnon has snared the reader with ironic deftness into thinking that Tehillah is wholly admirable, in order to highlight the deceptive and deceived course of her life. He hints that, far from being "praise"-worthy, as her name suggests, she is a vehicle for the author's critique of the doctrinal conflict between Hasidic and Mitnagdic Judaism current in his time, his exposure of the misery it caused, and his expression of regret for the flight from Judaism that it created among those alienated by its vigor.⁷ She is, according to this reading, more victim than exemplar, but that is not to exclude other readings along different lines. Indeed, the fact that this story lends itself to such varied readings is an indication, I would argue, of its greatness.

In departing from admiring readings of the character of Tehillah and proposing a different approach, I shall examine certain aspects of the text in new ways. I shall begin by attempting to identify and qualify the voice of the narrator, as his is the viewpoint that shows us the moral qualities of the characters and that determines our view of the events in which

⁴ Eddy M. Zemach, *Fine Letters: Hebrew Literature of the Twentieth Century* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1990), 68, 88.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89–90.

⁶ Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 408.

⁷ For more on irony, see Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 3–85; D. C. Mucke, *The Compass of Irony* (London: Methuen, 1969).

they are involved. The voice or voices presented as speaking in any literary composition determine the nature of the address, and their qualities guide our judgment of what happens in the created fiction. Most writers have found it useful to employ direct judgment, whether in the form of "descriptive adjectives" or "extended commentary,"⁸ and the first few sentences of the story offer just such judgmentally descriptive adjectives: "The light in her eyes spoke kindness and mercy, and the wrinkles in her cheeks, blessing and peace. Were it not that women were to be compared to angels, I would say that she was just like one of God's own angels" (24–25). But until we have formed an idea of what kind of a narrator this may be, how can we be sure that his evaluation of Tehillah is reliable? We are told that he met her only a few times and that each encounter save one was by chance. When he first met her after his return from abroad, he did not even recognize her (27–28). The narrator's voice can therefore be defined as that of a protagonist in the same fiction as that which Tehillah also inhabits. He is a reporter without privileged insight into other characters and is limited to realistic vision and inference. The reader, accordingly, is free to read between the lines to draw conclusions independently of the narrator.

The narrator produces a mixed speech: the basic voice is his own, but he is the reader's sole source of information on the speech of other characters, whose voices are introduced through direct quotations. Since the narrator is presented as the voice of the implied author, it is his function to persuade and convince the reader to accept these apparent norms. Only when this has been done can the reader rely on whatever the narrator discloses. The reader, together with the narrator, can then judge the characters in the light of those norms, which, indeed, might not necessarily be the reader's own. Yet if the narrator is a protagonist distinct from the author, the reader must ask what the implied author may wish the reader to conclude, or at least to ask. If the narrator cannot be regarded as reliable, therefore, stronger demands are made on the reader's power of inference and interpretation.

Let us examine next how the narrator establishes the norms in this story. In the opening paragraph he compares Tehillah to "an angel," relying on the assumption that the reader will agree that this is a "good" thing. He continues throughout the story to reinforce the norms that he tacitly regards as good, while overtly introducing his own self. He tells us how he was appalled to see, while wandering through the alleyways of the Old City of Jerusalem, that passers-by gave no money to the poor. He

⁸ As termed by Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

then impresses the reader by reporting how "I had a pocket full of small coins with me, so I went from one beggar to another giving each of them his alms" (26). He was at that time on a mission to visit a lonely old woman, the widow of a rabbi, in order to keep a promise made to her grandson whom he had happened to meet abroad. When he found the *rebbe* living in poverty, he bought her a portable stove, pretending that the grandson had given him the money to do so (27). When Tehillah praised him for his good deed, he reports, "I bowed my head like one embarrassed at hearing himself praised" (28). Hearing that Tehillah—who was "nicer than anybody you have ever seen"—told him that he was a good person inclines the reader to accept this evaluation. The narrator is believed because he seems to be not only objective but "good." Later, when he saw that the *rebbe* was offended because Tehillah was speaking to him and not to her, he left, showing himself also to be kind. His sensitivity emerges when he listens to her story and puts his finger to his eyes to wipe away the tears (49). His piety is established by the way in which he likens her room to a place of worship, and his religious background is indicated by the description of how, as a boy, he had written an Esther Scroll "in accordance with all the proper rules" (40). The norms regarded as desirable by the narrator are goodness, piety, kindness, sensitivity, and patience, and he encourages us to recognize these in Tehillah.

In this way Agnon lures the reader into a trap in which Tehillah is regarded as a paragon of virtue. But there is evidence that this is not so. The narrator praises those who emulate the good deeds of earlier generations "who had been full of good qualities" (31). Yet, ironically, Tehillah, who belonged to that older generation, was not completely good, even to judge by the evidence supplied by the narrator. This, I would argue, suggests that although on the surface the narration seems to be objective and reliable, it in fact is not so, suggesting that the reports of the narrator have to be viewed critically. When Tehillah tells the narrator that she believed her years to have been prolonged because she had not yet finished the amount of words allotted to her by God, the narrator does not support this reasoning and relies on the reader to doubt her words. Even if she accepts the idea of determinism, it is not clear that the narrator does. He therefore does not claim omniscience, but rather to be a witness reporting what he has seen and heard. Agnon deliberately subverts the impression of objectivity in his account of Tehillah's life by means of the intrusion of the narrator's personality. The narrator, although he seems to be an objective observer because he stands apart from the other characters in the story, is himself, in the end, a character in need of interpretation.

Band rightly places this story within the genre of the folktale, one of eight Agnon published between 1942 and 1953 under the influence of early nineteenth-century German Romanticism. There, as here, the epic

element contains lyricism blended with autobiographical elements, producing parallels between the lives of the narrator and the author.⁹ For example, both Agnon and the narrator returned to Jerusalem, a feature that should alert us to the narrative technique that he employs and the genre on which it is based. Folklore was an important component of Romanticism, and Agnon accordingly adopted and adapted Hasidic tales as a suitable mode for his writing.¹⁰ For historical reasons, Hebrew writers in the early part of the twentieth century were influenced by the Social Realism that dominated much Eastern European literature. But Agnon liberated many younger Hebrew writers from its narrower aspects by injecting both realism and fantasy into his own writing. We accordingly glimpse here the reality of Palestine, and particularly of Jerusalem, in the mid 1920s: the poverty of Jews and Arabs living without running water and the milling tourists. He refers to the Balfour Declaration and the British Mandate and to an event that took place around Passover in 1922, when Muslims prevented Jews from bringing chairs to the Western Wall, their place of prayer. (The British authorities thereafter decreed that chairs were indeed not allowed around the Western Wall.) Yet in Agnon's story historical reality serves only as a background to more fantastic elements.

Agnon leads us to expect that here, as in most folktales, there will be "good" and "bad" people, but he seems deliberately to sow confusion concerning the two old ladies whom he presents as embodying these qualities. The contrast is already diminished by the fact that their lives were so enmeshed that they had nearly become relatives. But in other respects, although they are startlingly opposite—Tehillah appearing to be the good one and the *rebbetsin* the bad one—the final picture is more nuanced than a reader who views the story as folklore will think. The narrator testifies that "The one who had seen me to the home of that sage of mine was amiable while the one to whom I sent the oven was rude even to someone concerned about her welfare" (27). The eyes of Tehillah "spoke kindness and mercy," while the *rebbetsin* appears as a grumpy and graceless old woman. However, we soon learn about Tehillah's failings. For example, she herself acknowledges that economy of speech, which was a desirable quality, had been difficult for her. As a child she had been a chatterbox: "From morning to night I simply never stopped chattering" (31). The *rebbetsin* seems not to have suffered from this fault.

⁹ Gershon Shaked, *Omanut hasippur shel Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1973), 264.

¹⁰ For more on this subject, see Leah Goldberg, *Ha'omets leḥulin* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1976).

Only when Tehillah was frightened that this might make her dumb did she manage to control her tongue. Again unlike the *rebbetsin*, who was unable to write letters, Tehillah ensured that she was properly equipped and could turn down the use of a fountain pen, saying "take this quill which I myself have prepared. I don't doubt your pen, but I want my letter to be written with my own utensils. Here is a sheet of paper, a first-grade paper which I have kept from bygone days" (39). Although on the surface of the text it seems to be unfortunate that the old world should disintegrate in the face of modernity, the reader knows that the narrator thinks differently, for it is clear that the fountain pen and the portable stove are good things.

The dissolution of this contrast between Tehillah and the *rebbetsin*, I believe, points to the possible resolution of the central tension of the story deriving from the confrontation between the Hasidim and their opponents the Mitnagdim. Tehillah, I suggest, embodies major characteristics of Hasidic belief and practice. The first of these is a belief that since the will of the individual cannot resist the power of Divine Providence, it is necessary to overcome one's finite nature and aspire to *bittul hayesh*, "negation of existence," particularly during prayer. The second is a commitment to resist melancholy attitudes and to embrace *hitlahavut*, "burning enthusiasm." A third principle of Hasidism is the realization that this program of utter devotion to God is impossible for most people, so that it is necessary to rely on a *tsaddiq*, a "righteous man," to pray on one's behalf.

This subversion of the folkloric contrast between the characters is supported by kabbalistic motifs in the story. But although it seems that the *rebbetsin* is the "other side," the *sitra ahra*, in kabbalistic terms, her qualities are not only negative. This is symbolically important because, according to the central work of mysticism, the Zohar, there is a spark of holiness even in the "other side." The *rebbetsin* is described in opposite terms to those applied to Tehillah, and a comparison between the two old ladies is inevitable. Indeed, the *rebbetsin* is cast as a negative figure on several levels. Before we even meet her we encounter the cat outside her door, a creature that is one of the forms taken by Lilith, the female demon, which in the world of sin fulfills a function parallel to that of the Divine Presence in the world of sanctity.¹¹

Yet in an important respect Tehillah joins the *rebbetsin* on the negative side, for she is seen seeking after the "hidden light" of mystical and erotic joy that humanity was unworthy to possess. It has been pointed

¹¹ Agnon used the cat in *Hakhnasat kallah* as the redeemer of a whole community. In *Temol shilshom*, the dog can be seen as the reflection of the protagonist, Yitzhak Kumer.

out that the deprivation of erotic joy occurs in many of Agnon's stories and that this arises particularly when an engagement to marry was not kept.¹² Tehillah longed for the forbidden "hidden light" in the form of her first fiancé Shraga and in doing so was unfaithful to her husband and transgressed a major moral prohibition. *Shraga* means "candle" in Aramaic and also suggests something used at an inappropriate time or place and therefore of no benefit, as in the talmudic expression: "a candle at noon, what can we benefit from it?" Zemach even suggests that Tehillah committed adultery with Shraga, if only in her imagination, a sin that would certainly justify her suffering more convincingly than the view, held by many critics, that she was punished because her father tore up the marriage contract. Ninety-three years after their separation, thirty since Shraga's death (after which she came to Jerusalem) and shortly before her own death, she thinks only of him. In support of this reading, one sees that, throughout the story, neither Tehillah's husband nor her children are mentioned by name. She does not want to be separated from Shraga in death any more than she did in life, and she plans to be buried together with her letter to him.¹³

It is not Shraga who was imperfect, but Tehillah herself, at least on the deeper level of the text. On the surface level, she had had to pay for her father's objection to the marriage that, even if it seemed right from his religious point of view, the narrator and reader know to have been wrong.¹⁴ The struggle between the Hasidim and the Mitnagdim was futile, and it is ironic that while Tehillah used to belong to the latter camp, her punishment led her to become a follower of Hasidism. She now tells her story to a narrator who is not a Hasid but is prepared to meet her despite her Hasidic characteristics, pointing to the idea that Agnon intended the story as a vehicle for rebuking the negative attitudes of Hasidic and Mitnagdic Jews to each other and to demonstrate the need for a third way, suggested here by the narrator. Agnon presents him as one who has completed the ideological journey that has torn Tehillah's life apart and found a way to the unity of vision exemplified by his acts of charity that reflect a value shared by Hasidim and Mitnagdim alike.

The dissonance that takes over Tehillah's life as a result of this antipathy is illustrated when she tells the narrator so briefly about mourning for

¹² See a detailed discussion on the subject in Zemach, *Fine Letters*, 82–83.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

¹⁴ I disagree with Moshe Granot's reductive crusade against the religious message in Agnon's stories. See *Agnon lelo masveh* (Tel Aviv: Yaron Golan, 1991), 23–27.

her second son.¹⁵ She mentions neither the son nor her husband by name but immediately dispatches the husband to look for Shraga in order to seek his forgiveness for her father's sin of tearing up the marriage contract. Tehillah then tells the narrator about a dispute between two Hasidic rabbis that culminated in the killing of a Jew, sharpening the impression of the futility of such disputes and the tragedies they cause. Her whole life had been governed by the strife between the two sects, yet the husband discovered how easily the gulf could be bridged, for he found that Shraga had become a Mitnaged. Tehillah does not comment on this revelation, although the reader may guess that Shraga's move was motivated by his love for Tehillah, who by this time had become tacitly Hasidic. Her husband's death while searching for Shraga is reported briefly and dryly by Tehillah, as is that of her son. There is no reference to mourning, but merely that she "put up a tombstone over his grave" (48), returned to her hometown, and went into business. Tehillah reflects that "It might have been better if I have been granted wisdom instead of strength and energy, but the Lord is a knowing God Who does not require the opinions of His creatures as to what is good" (48). On the surface this seems to be an expression of religious passivity, but it also comments on Tehillah's flight from the factionalism that overshadowed her life and points to the dangers opened by her search for a third way.

As business increased, Tehillah had time for her home and her surviving daughter only on Sabbaths and Festivals, "and even then half a day was spent in synagogue and half in receiving guests" (48). She thought: "The more wealth I acquire the more I shall benefit her" (48), but the narrator and the reader have already heard that this was an error, even though she only later realized that the accumulation of money is not more important than personally caring for a child. Refusing to participate in the conflict that had brought her such misery, she hired gentile tutors because she suspected the local teachers of being "free-thinkers," which suggests that she wished to exclude the partisan views that she believed prevailed. In so doing, however, she created the conditions in which the daughter would convert to Christianity and become a nun, which in Jewish terms is little less disastrous than the death suffered by her brothers. We hear this from the *rebbe's*in, but Tehillah could say about her daughter only that "an evil spirit entered into my daughter and she went crazy" (49). Was she too ashamed to tell the narrator the truth since she realized that she was to blame for her daughter's fate? The fact that Tehillah did not tell the narrator the true fate of her daughter, even

¹⁵ See the passages on pp. 202–3 in the Hebrew text and on pp. 47–49 in the English translation.

though she seems to be telling him the whole true story of her life, is another indication that we can no longer rely on her narration or his report of it. She is shown by Agnon to be manipulating the report for her own reasons, and this omission suggests that Tehillah's attempt to write a letter asking for forgiveness from Shraga may also fail, since she is still not entirely truthful even to herself. Indeed, his death may represent all the deaths in the story, for we are told that his occurred on 7 Adar, the anniversary of both the birth and death of Moses and the day on which Jewish burial fraternities meet to celebrate their year's work. Again, she does not mention her feelings when she learned of his death, but her desire to escape the conflict that had haunted her can be seen from her decision then to leave Europe for Jerusalem. Tehillah, who is therefore far from as perfect as she is said to be in the first sentence of the story, has erred in her life, is aware of her weaknesses, and is ashamed of them but repents only outwardly by her self-imposed exile and her devotion to good deeds. Inner atonement seems to elude her, and to be lodged with the narrator's account of her life and death.



