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REB NAHMAN KROCHMAL IN JAFFA: A HALLUCINATORY VISION IN S. Y. AGNON'S TEMOL SHILSHOM

- Avraham Holtz -

אותה שעה ישב חמדת במרפסת שלפני חדרו והביט לתוך האפלה שכל מיני צללים טיילו בין אילנות שבגינה. נתעלמו הצללים פתאום ודמות אדם זקן עלתה מתוך האפלה. פניו ארוכות וזקנו מגודל, עשוי חטיבה אחת אדמדמת חומה, ומצנפת של צוביל בראשו, וידו אחת נתונה על לבו. וזיו של ענוה וצניעות מבהיק ויוצא ממנו. יום אחד קודם הפסח כמה שנים קודם לכן נזדמן חמדת לביתה של רבקה דודתו הזקנה ומצאה מנענעת תמונה כדי לנערה מן האבק. הביט חמדת והיה תמיה, שמימיו לא ראה בהכרה ברורה שכזו תמונת איש מצויירת. הרגישה דודתו בדבר ואמרה לו, זו צורת רבי נחמן קרוכמל שעשה ספר. ועדיין לא היה חמדת יודע שאנשים עושים ספרים, שהיה סבור שספרים מוציאין מן הארון כפרחים שמוציאין מן הגינה וכיין שמוציאין מן המרתף. כשהגדיל בא אותו ספר לידו. קרא בו קצת דברים שהיה נבוך בהם. נפעמה רוחו ונתעוררה הנפש המבקשת, והיח זיו איקונין של רבי נחמן קרוכמל, עושה הספר מהלך לפניו. עלה לארץ ישראל ולא נזדמן לו לא אדם לדבר עמו על ר׳ נחמן קרוכמל ולא ספרו של ר׳ נחמן קרוכמל. נשתכח מלבו הספר ועושהו. אמש הלך אצל ברנר. מצאו יושב לפני ביתו כשהוא עצב. אמר לו ברנר, נזכרתי קיץ שעשיתי בזולקוב ונזכרתי יהודיה הלבביים הילדותיים קצת וקצת ליריים פטטיים המושכים את הלב כאגדה על ידי העממיות הפנטסטית שבהם, ומתוכם מזדקר רנ״ק, שאם אני כותב את שמו כותב אני ע׳ במקום ר׳. והנה אני מתאווה לכתוב פרקים אחדים על ענק זה. לא טומוס של צרות על האנומלי שבחיינו, כי אם לגולל קצת מגילת חיי אדם שנחה עליו רוח דעת להעמיק חקר ברוח האומה ולהתבונן התבוננות אמיתית בתכונותיה. אילו ניתן לי סגנון מתאים לכך הייתי מתקרב אל המלאכה. עכשיו שישב חמדת יחידי נזכר לו ר׳ נחמן קרוכמל, שכל הספרות שלנו שבאה אחריו דומה כתפילת ערבית שלאחר נעילה. נתמלאה נפשו של חמדת כיסופים נעלים. כנפשו של אדם מישראל בשהיא נזכרת בגדולי ישראל.

At that time Hemdat was sitting on the balcony in front of his room and peering into the darkness, where shadows of all sorts strolled among the trees in the garden. Suddenly the shadows disappeared, and the image of an old man arose from the darkness. His face was long with a long, thick, reddish-brown beard. A fur hat was on his head. One hand was on his heart, and he was radiant with an aura of humility and modesty. A few years ago, on the day before Passover, Hemdat happened to be at his elderly Aunt Rivka's house, where he found her shaking the dust off a picture. Hemdat watched and was surprised, for he had never looked so intently at any portrait. His aunt sensed this and said to him, "This is a portrait of Reb Nahman Krochmal who wrote a book." Hemdat was not yet aware that people write books; he thought that books come from bookcases as flowers come from gardens and as wine comes from wine cellars. When he grew up, he chanced upon that book. He read some chapters on subjects that perplexed him. He was bestirred; his searching soul was aroused, and the radiant image of Reb Nahman Krochmal, the author of the book, accompanied him. After he arrived in Erets Yisrael, he found neither anyone with whom to discuss Reb Nahman Krochmal, nor a copy of Reb Nahman Krochmal's book. He forgot about the book and its author.

Last night he visited Brenner. He found him sitting sadly in front of his home. Brenner said to him, "I recall the summer I spent in Zolkiew, and I remember the open-hearted Jews there who attract you like a fairy tale with their fantasy-like simplicity, a little childlike and a little romantic. And among them Ranak stood out; I begin his name with the letter ayin, instead of a resh. I'm really anxious to write a piece about this giant, not a tome of tribulations about the anomaly of our lives, but rather to unroll the scroll of a life of a person upon whom the spirit of knowledge rested so that he was truly able to fathom the spirit of our nation and to examine its essential characteristics faithfully. Were I granted the appropriate style, I would begin this project." Now that Hemdat sat alone he recalled Reb Nahman Krochmal because all of our literature that was written after him is like the evening service after Ne'ilah. Hemdat's soul was filled with sublime yearnings like those that Jews feel when they think of the great sages of Israel.¹

Temol shilshom (Only Yesterday), like most of Agnon's novels, belongs to the genre of documentary or historical fiction.² While the background

¹ S. Y. Agnon, *Temol shilshom (Only Yesterday)* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 414–15. The translation is mine.

² Temol shilshom is a bound biblical phrase (Exodus 5:8 and elsewhere), rendered in English as "heretofore" or by some other synonym. The title of Agnon's novel could be translated as "Only Yesterday" or "Yesteryear." See S. Y. Agnon, Only Yesterday, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press,

details are accurate, verifiable, and authentic, the plot, action, and characterization are patently fictitious. Events in this novel describe the life and times in Jaffa and Jerusalem, the two major urban centers in the Land of Israel, during the years 1908–1911.

Yitzhak Kumer, the novel's central protagonist, leaves eastern Galicia (preface), arrives in Jaffa (book 1), visits Jerusalem for an extended period (book 2), returns to Jaffa (book 3), and then moves to Jerusalem. There he marries a young woman from the ultra-pious Hungarian Quarter, is bitten by Balak, a rabid dog, upon whose back, during his earlier sojourn in Jerusalem, he had fatefully written the words "Mad Dog," and dies shortly thereafter (book 4). While in Jaffa, Kumer befriends Hemdat, a romantic, enigmatic, and bashful upstart writer, marginally a part of bohemian Jaffa. Although the stories of Hemdat and of Kumer bear many

2000). In this article, I cite only English critical sources. For summaries of this novel and critiques, see Arnold J. Band, Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 414-47; Baruch Hochman, The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), especially 134–57; Harold Fisch, S. Y. Agnon (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1975), especially 51-53; Jeffrey Fleck, Character and Context: Studies in the Fiction of Abramovitsh, Brenner, and Agnon (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 87-102; Gershon Shaked, Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1989), especially 146-52; Anne Golomb Hoffman, Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 125-48; Amos Oz, The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God (trans. B. Harshav; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. 61–191. For some examples of documentary or historical fiction, see Avraham and Toby Berger Holtz, "S. Y. Agnon's Temol shilshom As a Medical Record," Korot: Israel Journal of Medicine and Science 9 (Fall 1989): 629-49; Avraham and Toby Berger Holtz, "The Adventuresome Life of Moritz Hall: A Biographical Sketch," Bibliotheca Nubica 3; Piotr O. Scholz, ed., Orbis Aethiopicus (Albstadt: Karl Schuler, 1992), 1:49-66.

³ The subtheme of Balak, the mad dog, has given rise to many studies and interpretations. See, for example, Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 432–39; Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon*, especially 138–45, 153–57; Fleck, *Character and Context*; Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return*, 128–32; Ann Golomb Hoffman, "Inscription and Madness in *Temol shilshom*," in Leon Yudkin, ed., *S. Y. Agnon: Texts and Contexts* (New York: Markus Wiener, 1988), 163–97; Ann Golomb Hoffman, "'Mad Dog' and Denouement in *Temol shilshom*," in David Patterson and Glenda Abramson, eds., *Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994), 45–63.

⁴ On the figure of Hemdat, the story by that name, Kumer, and Agnon, read Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 364–66. He correctly concludes: "One of the dominant personae of the writer, Hemdat, is clearly Agnon's self-image as the young

resemblances to Agnon's biography, both characters ultimately remain personae whose features are defined by the contours of the literary works in which they appear.

The passage cited here is from book 3 and follows immediately after a lengthy depiction of Hemdat's cohorts who set out to top off their evening's raucous tomfoolery by shocking Hemdat as he sits alone on the balcony that adjoins his rented room,⁵ in a trance, transfixed by other times, places, and people. While these bawdy Jaffans are cast as "shadows of all sorts," Hemdat relives a cherished scene from his naïve, sheltered childhood. A vivid image of an old man appears through the darkness. His features are distinct: a long face, a full brownish-red beard, a fur hat on his head, one hand on his heart, and a radiant, virtuous demeanor.⁶ One Passover eve, Hemdat had paid his elderly aunt a visit and, as part of her zealousness to rid her home of leavened food as required by Jewish tradition, he had found her dusting off a portrait that adorned the wall. His aunt, sensing that Hemdat was mesmerized by the picture, had informed him that it was a painting of Rabbi Nahman Krochmal (1785–1840), who was universally acclaimed

poet and lover.... Indeed, it may very well be that this narrative ["Hemdat," published in 1947, two years after *Temol shilshom*] was originally composed for *Temol shilshom*, but deleted because of the need to suppress the figure of Hemdat so that Yitshak Kummer, a different persona of the writer, could emerge as the pale, but doomed hero of the novel. Hemdat and Yitshak are identical in background though different in temperament; they are, in effect, two sides of the same person. But Hemdat could never be the hero of *Temol shilshom*" (364). On Hemdat, see also Alan Mintz, "Agnon in Jaffa: The Myth of the Artist As a Young Man," *Prooftexts* 1 (1981), 62–83, especially 67ff.; and Miri Kubovy, "Sleeping Prince, Beggars of Love," in Patterson and Abramson, eds., *Tradition and Trauma*, 187–206.

⁵ Hemdat's rented room in an apartment in Neveh Tzedek, a Jewish suburb of Jaffa, has been identified with the room in which Agnon resided from 1908–1912. Presently, there is a plaque on the building at 2 Rokach Street that reads: "In this building the author Shmuel Yosef Agnon lived from 1908–1912." The building has undergone some structural renovations.

⁶ Although not specified, it becomes clear that this image of Krochmal is based on the portrait that Hemdat had seen in his aunt's home during his childhood. The picture that accompanies Rozshansky's essay lacks any of the details presented by Agnon in this description, aside from the full, dark beard.

⁷ On Rabbi Nahman Krochmal, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 10:1269–73. Notice that, in this article, in place of a picture of Krochmal, there appears a photograph of the monument at his grave in Tarnopol, Ukraine. See also Israel Zinberg, *A History of Jewish Literature*, ed. and trans. Bernard Martin (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1977), 10:45–78. See also the more recent scholarly monograph by

as the foremost philosopher of Galician Jewry during his lifetime and for decades thereafter.

Curiously, Hemdat's aunt does not refer to Krochmal's book by name. For unexplained reasons the significant and well-known title of Krochmal's work is entirely absent from *Temol shilshom*, although one can assume that the readers of this Agnon novel would readily be able to supply this title. *Moreh nevukhei hazeman* (*Guide to the Perplexed of the Time*) was originally suggested as a title by Krochmal himself and so designated by Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), who edited the volume after Krochmal's death. The title clearly associates Krochmal's treatise with that of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), whose classical philosophical work is entitled *Moreh nevukhim* (*Guide to the Perplexed*). In addition, as Ismar Schorsch indicates, "the very title of Krochmal's book with its stress on the word 'time' illumines the chasm. The term embraces a *double entendre* which alludes simultaneously to the book's audience and to its central problem. Krochmal wrote for contemporary Jews confused and distressed by the introduction of time into Judaism."

Upon reading this reference to a Krochmal portrait, I wondered if such a portrait exists. According to Simon Rawidowicz (1897–1957), the foremost scholar of Krochmal's *œuvres* and biography, a portrait of Krochmal did exist prior to World War I. However, the original portrait or any reproductions of it could not be located after World War I, and Rawidowicz was

Jay M. Harris, *Nachman Krochmal: Guiding the Perplexed of the Modern Age* (New York: New York University Press, 1991). Except for various citations translated by critics, no English translation of Krochmal's *Guide* is available. See also Edward Breuer's review of Harris's study in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 85 (3–4) (January-April 1995): 419–21.

⁸ Concerning the historical facts related to the title of Krochmal's book, see Ismar Schorsch, "The Production of a Classic: Zunz As Krochmal's Editor," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 31 (1986): 281–315, especially pages 281 and 289. The cited quotation is from Ismar Schorsch, "Historical Consciousness in Modern Judaism," *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 28 (1983): 45, reprinted in Ismar Schorsch, *Text and Context: The Turn to History in Modern Judaism* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, Brandeis University Press, 1994), 179. Cf. Ismar Schorsch, "The Ethos of Modern Jewish Scholarship," *Leo Baeck Institute Year* Book 35 (1990): 64, where he reiterates the point that "*Moreh nevukhei hazeman* as title conveys a sense for both the audience and the problem and hence is best rendered as a guide for contemporaries perplexed by the problem of time. Only a paraphrase can capture the subtlety of the *double entendre*" (*Text and Context*, 166). Other essays of Ismar Schorsch on Krochmal include "The Philosophy of History of Nachman Krochmal," *Judaism* 10 (3) (1961): 237–45; and "Krochmal: The Galician Socrates," *The Reconstructionist* 28 (8) (1962): 19–22.

thus unable to include a picture of the writer in his comprehensive edition of Krochmal's works. Yet, since Hemdat's visit to his aunt's house occurs about two decades prior to World War I, it is indeed possible that this reference is to a popular reproduction of the original portrait.

Curiosity led me to Professor Sid Z. Leiman, who possesses a wellknown collection of pictures of famous rabbis, Jewish dignitaries, and scholars. Initially, he confirmed Rawidowicz's conclusion that no portrait of Krochmal exists. Subsequently, he informed me that a volume published in Argentina contains a picture with the caption "R[eb] Nahman Krochmal."10 The essay that this picture accompanies was written by Shmuel Rozshansky (1902–1995). I have been unable to verify the source of the picture or its provenance. Professor Leiman and other experts seriously doubt that it is an authentic portrayal of Krochmal. One wonders, however, on what basis Rozshansky considered this picture to be as authoritative a portrait as the accompanying photograph of Professor Dov Sadan (1902–1989). Incidentally, no mention is made anywhere in the article or elsewhere in the volume concerning the source of the picture, nor is there any discussion of Rawidowicz's claim about the disappearance of all copies of Krochmal's portrait. It is possible that a copy of the picture was brought to Argentina before World War I and was the source for the illustration that appears in Rozshansky's article. By now I am as intrigued by this purported picture of Krochmal as Hemdat was by the portrait he saw in his aunt's home.

Continuing his stream of reflection, Hemdat recalls that some years after his initial contact with Krochmal's captivating portrait, he chanced upon a copy of Krochmal's book and read several chapters dealing with philosophical issues that had baffled him. The phrase "that perplexed him" clearly alludes to the accepted title of the book. Probably Hemdat, like most of his enlightened contemporaries, was perplexed by the apparent and

⁹ The English title is *The Writings of Nachman Krochmal*, ed. with an introduction by Simon Rawidowicz, 2d enlarged ed. (London: Ararat, 1961). Concerning Krochmal's portrait, Rawidowicz (20 n. 1) records that many Galician Jews, including Krochmal's son-in-law Dr. Biegeleisen, attested to the fact that Krochmal's portrait was available in Brody up to the time that the Russian army entered the city during World War I. The painting and Krochmal's manuscripts disappeared sometime during this period. After the war, Rawidowicz spent a year in an unsuccessful search for these materials.

¹⁰ The picture purporting to be Krochmal's portrait can be found in Nachum Lindman and Mordecai Kaufman, eds., *Galitsianer yidn yoyvl-bukh:* 1925–1965, fertsik yor eksitents funem tsentral farband fun Galitsyaner yidn in Argentina (Buenos Aires: Tsentral Farband fun Galitsianer Yidn in Argentina, 1966), 225.

distressing conflict between traditional Judaism and historicism. Hemdat and his peers were unable to reconcile the compelling conclusions of the nascent philological-critical-historical studies of the biblical, rabbinic, ga'onic, and medieval texts with traditional religious beliefs and practices. Full and frank examinations of this and other contemporary dilemmas were the hallmarks of Krochmal's dialogues with his devotees and later became the basis for his philosophical treatise. In the words of Solomon Schechter,

[Krochmal] had to establish the facts of Jewish history as well as to philosophise upon it.... He had to survey the ground and to collect the materials, besides constructing the plan of the edifice and working at its erection.... It was he who taught us to regard the ancient Jewish literature from a historical point of view. He enabled us to trace the genesis of the tradition, and to watch the inner germination of that vast organism. He indicated how we might derive nourishment from it, and in turn further its growth.¹¹

Precisely because of Krochmal's convincing arguments and compelling achievements, Hemdat laments the distressing realization that presently, in the Land of Israel, he is unable to locate a copy of this monumental work, which he urgently needs to consult in his personal struggle to reassess his positions vis-à-vis the predominant secularist trends that attract his fellow halutsim and wrench them from their traditions. Hemdat feels this profound sense of intellectual deprivation ever more pointedly because there is no one with whom he can converse about Krochmal's inspiring analyses. In the context of the novel's frequent references to the lack of traditional practices, the implication of this Krochmal sequence takes on ever more significant dimensions. The narrator suggests that had Krochmal's work been accessible, or had Hemdat found colleagues with whom to discuss Krochmal's ideas, he and they may not have been so readily inclined to reject, ridicule, and abandon their traditional beliefs. Then, too, the passage implies, the harmful rift between the Old and New Yishuv might have been avoided and the entire course of the Jewish reencounter with the Land of Israel and with the past might have been more conciliatory and more constructive.

Returning to the text, we are informed that the evening prior to this epiphanous experience, Hemdat had visited Yosef Hayyim Brenner

¹¹ Solomon Schechter, "Rabbi Nachman Krochmal and the 'Perplexities of the Time': A Paper Read before the Jews College Literary Society 23 January 1887," (London: Jewish Chronicle Office, 1887), 1–15, where the citation is on p. 12. The same article also appears in *Studies in Judaism: A Selection* (New York: Meridian, 1958), 321–44, where the citation is on p. 339.

(1881–1921).¹² Chronologically, this remarkable, revelatory conversation with Brenner about Krochmal preceded and initiated the entire reminiscence. Brenner, an already-revered, charismatic, yet iconoclastic Hebrew author and journalist, had first met the novice Yiddish and Hebrew poet and storyteller Samuel Joseph Czaczkes (Agnon's original name) in Lemberg in 1908. After Brenner's arrival in Jaffa in 1909, their friendship was renewed.¹³ Brenner here recounts his pilgrimage to Zolkiew in eastern Galicia, the town in which Krochmal lived during most of his adult life. Brenner resided there for several weeks, in order to admire the townsfolk's extraordinary, exemplary virtues and to absorb viscerally the spirit of RaNaK (the acronym of the name of *Reb Nahman Krochmal*), whom he always called ANaK ("giant").

Applying the words of Isaiah's messianic message (Isaiah 11:1–2) to RaNaK's genius—"an individual upon whom the spirit of knowledge rested (or rests)"—Brenner tells Hemdat that were he to discover the proper style and appropriate diction, he would undertake to write a biography of Krochmal, for only Krochmal successfully plumbed the Jewish national ethos and expertly sketched its essence.¹⁴

Returning to the present nocturnal scene on the balcony, we find Hemdat coming to a truly startling realization presented in a formulation that requires familiarity with the liturgy of the most sacred Day of

¹² On Brenner, see *Encyclopedia Judaica* 4:1347–51; Jeffrey Fleck, "Brenner in the Seventies," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 285–94; Avner Holtzman, "Poetics, Ideology, Biography, Myth: The Scholarship on J. H. Brenner 1971–1996," *Prooftexts* 18 (1998): 82–94; and Alan Mintz, *Banished from Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), index "Brenner, Y. H.," 221.

¹³ On the relationship between Brenner and Agnon, read Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, 15–19; and Fleck, *Character and Context*, 87–89.

¹⁴ Brenner's exceptional admiration and reverence for Krochmal are reiterated in Agnon's other writings. Agnon stressed that Brenner adored Krochmal and considered him to be "the father of all seminal ideas in our literature.... What I heard from him is what I am recording. One day before sunset I visited Brenner and found him sitting outside his dark room, in which he had spent the day at a wooden study stand that he had built himself. He was dejected and morose. Life in Eretz Yisrael distressed him. Each day was the same as the previous—joyless, purposeless, and meaningless. Then he began recalling the days he had spent in Galicia with its inspiring ambiance, its staunch, sensitive, altruistic, and idealistic youth. Finally, he spoke to me about his stay in Zolkiew. Then he remarked: 'If only I could hit upon the appropriate style I would write a book about RaNaK and his circle.'" See S. Y. Agnon, *Me'atsmi el atsmi* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), 120–21. (The translation is mine.)

Atonement, Yom Kippur, a full-day fast that concludes the ten-day period of repentance with which the Jewish New Year begins. 15 Traditionally, the liturgy for the eve of the Day of Atonement begins with the famous "Kol Nidrei" declaration and a special evening service. From early morning of the next day until sunset, Jews engage in prayer and scriptural readings. As the sun sets, but before the day's end, an additional, extraordinary service, Ne'ilah, is chanted. The unique name of ne'ilah (which means closing or locking) simultaneously refers to the closing of the gates of the Temple and the gates of repentance. At the day's end, each person's fate for the coming year is about to be sealed. This is the day's prayerful climax, the final opportunity for repentance and forgiveness. One senses anxiety, contrition, and hopeful anticipation for a blessed year. The heightened tension, the intense feeling, and the profound emotions during the Ne'ilah service leave the worshiper with little spiritual energy for the regular weekday evening service, which is recited immediately after the Ne'ilah liturgy. Generally, this evening service is chanted quickly, perfunctorily, and without much fervor, in order to permit the worshipers to return home and break the fast.

Accordingly, then, to compare Krochmal's literary achievement with the *Ne'ilah* service is to view it as the apex of modern Hebrew literature, the epitome of Jewish national creativity. And also, then, all subsequent authors (is Agnon including himself, as well?) are epigonous and lacking Krochmal's stature, profundity, and insight.

Closely following the course of this exceptional series of reverential accolades about Krochmal, the reader, as it were, along with Hemdat, experiences that intense, exquisite empathy and yearning that are evoked by the mention of great Jewish sages. Thus, too, the vivid image of Krochmal that had accompanied Hemdat in Galicia reappears with greater intensity and poignancy in this critical vision in the Land of Israel.

¹⁵ For a brief history of Yom Kippur and a description of its special liturgy, see "Day of Atonement," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 5:1376–87; Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 124–28; and S. Y. Agnon, *Days of Awe* (New York: Schocken, 1965), 183–279. On the *Ne'ilah* service and the weekday evening service that follows it, see Agnon, *Days of Awe*, 264–73.