Childish Distortions of Rabbinic Texts in S. Y. Agnon's "Hamitpaḥat"

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אלמלא לא לימדתני אמא שאין עומדין על כסא ואין עולין על השולחן ואין מגביהין את הקול הייתי עולה על השולחן וצועק לה׳ הארץ ומלואה, כאותו תינוק בגמרא שהיה יושב באמצעיתו של שולחן של זהב משאוי ששה עשר בני אדם ושש עשרה שלשלאות של כסף קבועות בו וקערות וכוסות וקיתוניות וצלוחיות קבועות בו ועליו כל מיני מאכל וכל מיני מגדים ובשמים מכל מה שנברא בששת ימי המעשה והיה מכריז לה׳ הארץ ומלואה.

> Had my mother not taught me that you do not stand on chairs and do not clamber onto the table and do not shout, I would have climbed onto the table and shouted out, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof"; like the child in the Talmud who used to be seated in the middle of a golden table which had to be carried by sixteen men; sixteen silver chains were fixed in it; and plates, goblets, pitchers, and flasks were set thereon and upon it were all kinds of food, dainties, and spices of all that was created in the six days of creation; and he used to proclaim, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."[1]

Arnold Band has praised S. Y. Agnon's story "Hamitpaḥat" ("The Kerchief," 1932) for its "unique fusion of nostalgic memoir and mature understanding of the loss of innocence."[2] In recounting the narrator's

[1] S. Y. Agnon, *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), 263–64; S. Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1970), 54. I have adapted each of the English translations of I. M. Lask that I quote in this article so that the choice of words is as close as possible to that of the Soncino translation of the Talmud that I have used for corresponding talmudic passages, because Agnon quoted Hebrew expressions in the talmudic texts verbatim. I have also modernized the style of the Soncino translation.

[2] Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 224.

transition from a naïve, childish perception of reality to a gradually more sophisticated realization of the complexities of human existence, Agnon transcends the tension between modern Jews' longing for the positive qualities of the world of tradition and their highly critical view of that very world, which they have abandoned in favor of modernity. The story is not solely a maskilic satire on the limitations of traditional Jewry nor a nostalgic remembrance of a community steeped in learning and piety. In a certain sense, it is neither and it is both.

In "Hamitpaḥat" Agnon expresses an appreciation for what was nurturing in the world of his childhood, while at the same time conveying to his readers why he was not content to live solely in that world as an adult. Many aspects of the story would seem to reflect the author's nostalgic evocation of the traditional side of his upbringing, highlighted by his account of the tranquility of his family's Sabbath observance, with all of the exposure to modernity that he experienced in Buczacz filtered out. At the same time the story conveys some very strong social criticism of the author's childhood milieu when the narrator recounts, albeit from a naïve perspective, the harsh treatment of a poor beggar who arrives in town.

Agnon strikes this balance between nostalgia and a critical adult perspective, in part, by means of connections the narrator recalls sensing as a child between his own situation and narrative aggadic texts found in the Talmud. It is not surprising that this traditionally raised child frequently blends his present reality with the world of rabbinic narratives. Children throughout the world make sense of life, at least in part, in terms of the literature and lore of their community, and the heroes with whom they identify are often the heroes of their culture's narrative traditions. Each time the narrator refers to an aggadic text, however, he does so in a distorted manner that reflects more his own self-centered childish concerns than the original meaning of the text. It is these very distortions deliberately introduced by Agnon into the story that serve to convey his mixed nostalgic/critical relationship to the world of Jewish tradition, and in particular to the effect of traditional Jewish texts on the culture in which he grew up.[3]

In the passage quoted above the narrator as a boy feels carried away by ecstasy as he experiences his father's return from the Sabbath morning synagogue service and the rituals conducted by his father in preparation

[3] For a discussion of the relationship between classical textual references in Agnon's fiction and the author's ambivalent relationship to the Jewish tradition, see Dov Landau, "Hashimush bemuva'ot bekhitvei Agnon," *Biqqoret ufarshanut* 2–3 (1972): 80–86.

for the Sabbath lunch. It is all the boy can do to restrain himself from defying his mother's norms of proper table manners by standing on the table and praising God. But who is this child in the Talmud, who for some reason was not restrained by his mother from doing what the narrator wanted to do as a child? In truth, there is not even the trace of such a boisterous, religiously ecstatic child in the talmudic text to which the boy alludes. I doubt that any reader would attribute this distortion of the intertext to carelessness on the part of Agnon. In fact, Agnon has the boy quote the description of the table and that which was on the table exactly as it appears in the talmudic passage. On one level, this distortion of the text can be attributed to the child's imaginative invention of a hero with whom he could identify. It certainly can be seen as contributing to the charming nature of the story's portrait of the child. A close comparison of the original talmudic text and the child's distorted version, however, suggests that it is just such childish distortion that serves Agnon's more general purpose of balancing nostalgia and criticism.

The talmudic narrative (Shabbat 119a) reads as follows:

דאמר רבי חייא בר אבא: פעם אחת נתארחתי אצל בעל הבית בלודקיא, והביאו לפניו שלחן של זהב משוי ששה עשר בני אדם, ושש עשרה שלשלאות של כסף קבועות בו, וקערות וכוסות וקיתוניות וצלוחיות קבועות בו, ועליו כל מיני מאכל וכל מיני מגדים ובשמים, וכשמניחים אותו אומרים: לה' הארץ ומלואה וגו', וכשמסלקין אותו אומרים השמים שמים לה' והארץ נתן לבני אדם. אמרתי לו: בני, במה זכית לכך? אמר לי: קצב הייתי, ומכל בהמה שהיתה נאה אמרתי: זו תהא לשבת. אמרתי לו: [אשריך שזכית], וברוך המקום שזיכך לכך.

For Rabbi Hiyya b. Abba related: I was once a guest of a man in Laodicea, and a golden table was brought before him, which had to be carried by sixteen men; sixteen silver chains were fixed in it, and plates, goblets, pitchers, and flasks were set thereon, and upon it were all kinds of food, dainties, and spices. When they set it down they recited, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, and so forth" [Psalms 24:1], and when they removed it [after the meal] they recited "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord; but the earth has He given to the children of men" [Psalms 115:16]. Said I to him, "My son, whereby have you merited this?" "I was a butcher," replied he, "and of every fine beast I used to say, 'This shall be for the Sabbath.'" Said I to him, "Happy are you that you have [so] merited, and praised be the Omnipresent who has permitted you to enjoy [all] this."[4]

[4] The translation is from *Shabbath*, trans. H. Freedman (London: Soncino, 1935), 2:586–87. I modified the translation to read in a more contemporary style. There

The boy recalls much of the original text with remarkable fidelity: as noted above, the description of the table bearing the utensils and plentiful food is word for word exactly as it appears in the Talmud. There are, however, a number of significant differences: in the original version the hero is a man whose wealth is presented as a reward for paying careful attention to the honor of the Sabbath. The boy has eliminated this hero and substituted a child who makes no reference to the need for people to prepare for the Sabbath, but instead refers only to God's role in providing the bounteous meal. Another significant departure from the original text is when the boy recalls only one of the two verses from Psalms contained in the talmudic version: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," leaving out the second verse, "The heavens are the heavens of the Lord, but the earth has He given to the children of men," thereby once again putting more emphasis on the role of God in the world than on the role of people.

A second example of a distorted version of a talmudic narrative occurs in an earlier passage in the story when the boy's father returns home from a business trip on the eve of the Sabbath. The original talmudic narrative (Ta'anit 21a) tells of the appointment of a man named Nahum to bring a gift from the Jews to the Roman emperor:

ואמאי קרו ליה נחום איש גם זו דכל מילתא דהוה סלקא ליה אמר גם זו לטובה זימנא חדא בעו לשדורי ישראל דורון לבי קיסר אמרו מאן ייזיל ייזיל נחום איש גם זו דמלומד בניסין הוא שדרו בידיה מלא סיפטא דאבנים טובות ומרגליות אזל בת בההוא דירה בלילא קמו הנך דיוראי ושקלינהו לסיפטיה ומלונהו עפרא (למחר כי חזנהו אמר גם זו לטובה) כי מטא התם [שרינהו לסיפטא חזנהו דמלו עפרא] בעא מלכא למקטלינהו לכולהו אמר קא מחייכו בי יהודאי [אמר גם זו לטובה] אתא אליהו אדמי ליה כחד מינייהו א"ל דלמא הא עפרא מעפרא דאברהם אבוהון הוא דכי הוה שדי עפרא הוו סייפיה גילי הוו גירי דכתיב יתן כעפר חרבו כקש נדף קשתו הויא חדא מדינתא דלא מצו למיכבשה בדקו מיניה וכבשוה עיילו לבי גנזיה ומלוהו לסיפטיה אבנים טובות ומרגליות ושדרוהו ביקרא רבה כי אתו ביתו בההוא דיורא אמרו ליה מאי אייתית בהדך דעבדי לך יקרא כולי האי אמר להו מאי דשקלי מהכא אמטי להתם סתרו לדירייהו ואמטינהו לבי

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is another, shorter version of this story with some variations in Bereshit Rabbah, Parashah 11. Agnon may also have had this version in mind, since it contains the expression, "everything that was created in the six days of creation," but he also clearly had the talmudic version in mind, which contains expressions not found in the midrashic version. Since the talmudic passage is longer and provides for a richer comparison, and also since the boy alluded to the Talmud, I am using the talmudic passage as the intertext for purposes of this analysis.

מלכא אמרו ליה האי עפרא דאייתי הכא מדידן הוא בדקוה ולא אשכחוה וקטלינהו להנך דיוראי.

Why was he called Nahum Ish Gamzu? Because whatever befell him he would declare, "This also is for the best." Once the Jews desired to send to the Emperor a gift and after discussing who should go they decided that Nahum Ish Gamzu should go because he had experienced many miracles. They sent with him a bag full of precious stones and pearls. He went and spent the night in a certain inn and during the night the people in the inn arose and emptied the bag and filled it up with earth. When he discovered this next morning he exclaimed, "This also is for the best." When he arrived at his destination and they undid his bag they found that it was full of earth. The king thereupon desired to put them all to death saying, "The Jews are mocking me." Nahum then exclaimed, "This also is for the best." Whereupon Elijah appeared in the guise of one of them [i.e., as a Roman] and remarked, "Perhaps this is some of the earth of their father Abraham, for when he threw earth [against the enemy] it turned into swords and when [he threw] stubble it changed into arrows, for it is written, 'His sword makes them as dust, his bow as the driven stubble' [Isaiah 41:2]." Now there was one province which [the emperor had hitherto] not been able to conquer but when they tried some of this earth [against it] they were able to conquer it. Then they took him [Nahum] to the royal treasury and filled his bag with precious stones and pearls and sent him back with great honor. When on his return journey he again spent the night in the same inn he was asked, "What did you take [to the emperor] that they showed you such great honor?" He replied, "I brought there what I had taken from here." [The innkeepers] thereupon razed the inn to the ground and took of the earth to the king and they said to him, "The earth that was brought to you belonged to us." They tested it and it was not found to be [effective] and the innkeepers were thereupon put to death.[5]

[5] The translation is from *Ta'anith,* trans. J. Rabbinowitz (London: Soncino, 1938), 105–6. I modified the translation to read in a more contemporary style. I left the name of the hero in its original Hebrew, Nahum Ish Gam Zu, in order to preserve the play on words created by alternative vocalizations of the letters *gimel, mem, zayin, vav:* vocalized *gimzo,* it can be taken to refer to the town of Gimzo as the place from which Nahum came (i.e., he is *ish Gimzo,* a man from Gimzo, a town in Judea mentioned in 2 Chronicles 28:18); vocalized *gamzu,* it can be taken to refer to Nahum's persistent optimism captured in his tendency to say about even bad occurrences, *gam zu letovah* (this also is for the best). See *Sanhedrin,* trans. H. Freedman (London: Soncino, 1935), 2:474 n. 5. There is a similar version of this aggadah in Sanhedrin 108b–109a. However, since Agnon makes use of some expressions found only in the version in Ta'anit, it is most likely that the latter version is the intertext.

As a man of great faith and indomitable optimism Nahum merits miracles, and therefore he is the best person to send on the perilous mission of trying to promote good relations between the Jews and the Roman emperor who rules them. In the end, Nahum is indeed rewarded for his optimism when Elijah appears disguised as a Roman and convinces the emperor that the earth the robbers had placed in Nahum's box was the earth of the patriarch Abraham that could miraculously turn into swords. An important aspect of this narrative is the role reversal that takes place when the Jews are transformed from relatively powerless subjects of the Roman emperor to providers of a weapon that provides victory to the emperor. Nahum himself experiences a dramatic transformation: at the beginning of the story he is a mere supplicant to the emperor; by the end he is in a position to return the Jews' tribute and have vengeance visited on the people who had robbed him.

The narrator as a boy recalls this aggadic passage as his father goes to open his trunk:

> לבסוף נעץ את המפתח במנעול ופתח את המלתחה והכניס ידו לתוכה ופשפש בין מטלטליו. פתאום הביט בנו ושתק. כלום שכח אבא ליתן שם את הדורונות? או שמא לן במלון וקמו אנשי המלון והוציאו את הדורונות, כמעשה התנא ששלחו בידו דורון לקיסר, ארגז מלא אבנים טובות ומרגליות, הלך ולן לילה אחד במלון, בלילה עמדו בעלי המלון ופתחו את הארגז ונטלו כל מה שבתוכו ומלאוהו עפר. באותה שעה עמדתי והתפללתי בלבי, כשם שנעשה נס לאותו תנא שאותו עפר היה מעפרו של אברהם אבינו, שכשהיה אברהם זורק עפר נעשו חרבות, כך יעשה הקדוש ברוך הוא עמנו נס ואותו דבר שמלאו בו בעלי הפונדק מלתחתו של אבא יהא מעולה מכל המתנות.
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> Finally [Father] pressed the key into the lock, opened the trunk, put his hand inside, and felt among his possessions. Suddenly he looked at us and became silent. Had Father forgotten to place the presents there? Or had he been lodging at an inn where the inn people rose and took out the presents? As happened with the sage by whose hands they sent a gift to the Emperor, a chest full of precious stones and pearls, and when he lodged one night at the inn, the inn folk opened the chest and took out everything that was in it and filled it with earth. Then I prayed that just as a miracle was done to that sage so that that earth should be the earth of Abraham our father, which turned into swords when it was thrown into the air, so should the Holy One, blessed be He, perform a miracle with us in order that the things with which the innkeepers had filled Father's trunk should be better than all presents.[6]

[6] Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 261; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 51.

In this distortion of the aggadic passage, the boy has cast his father in the role of Nahum (the bearer of the gifts) and himself in the role of the emperor. The boy has eliminated the central focus of the plot on Nahum's heroic role as a mediator between the emperor and his fellow Jews. Instead, the story becomes merely that of a self-centered boy whose primary concern is to know what his father brought him from his trip. It is not the miracle of earth turning into arrows that will right the balance of power between Jews and a gentile authority that interests him; instead, he hopes for a miraculous transformation of the earth into wonderful presents.

While these first two examples of intertextuality occupy relatively limited space in "Hamitpaḥat," another example pervades the story. Three times the narrator as a boy alludes to a talmudic aggadah, each time in a distorted manner that gives him a central role. The talmudic text (Sanhedrin 98a) begins with a conversation between the third-century *amora* Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and Elijah the prophet:

רבי יהושע בן לוי אשכח לאליהו, דהוי קיימי אפיתחא דמערתא דרבי שמעון בן יוחאי, אמר ליה: אתינא לעלמא דאתי? — אמר ליה: אם ירצה אדון הזה. אמר רבי יהושע בן לוי: שנים ראיתי וקול שלשה שמעתי.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met Elijah standing by the entrance of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai's tomb. He asked him: "Have I a portion in the world to come?" He replied, "If this Master desires it." Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said, "I saw two, but heard the voice of a third."[7]

Elijah does not go so far as to make a definitive prediction that Rabbi Joshua will merit a place in the world to come. He merely states that such matters are dependent on God's will. When Rabbi Joshua then asks when the Messiah will come, Elijah tells him he can go and ask the Messiah himself:

—אמר ליה: אימת אתי משיח? —אמר ליה: זיל שייליה לדידיה. —והיכא יתיב? —אפיתחא דרומי. —ומאי סימניה? — יתיב ביני עניי סובלי חלאים, וכולן שרו ואסירי בחד זימנא, איהו שרי חד ואסיר חד. אמר: דילמא מבעינא, דלא איעכב.

He then asked him, "When will the Messiah come?" "Go and ask him himself," was his reply. "Where is he sitting?" "At the entrance of Rome."

[7] The translation in this and subsequent quotations of this aggadic text is from *Sanhedrin*, 2:664.

> "And by what sign may I recognize him?" "He is sitting among the poor lepers: all of them untie [them] all at once, and rebandage them together, whereas he unties and rebandages each separately [before treating the next], thinking, should I be wanted [it being time for my appearance as the Messiah] I must not be delayed [through having to bandage a number of wounds]."

There is, of course, much significance to the description of the Messiah provided by Elijah. The Messiah's location at the entrance of Rome creates a meaningful link between the seat of power of the empire that destroyed the Temple and the hope of redemption that the Messiah represents. It is as if the Messiah must always stay close to the source of evil that brought about the Jewish people's exile in order to be ready to reverse that exile and restore the Jews to their land. The fact that the Messiah sits among those who are poor and sick associates him with the end of suffering that will come with the Messianic era. Particularly striking is Elijah's description of the Messiah never allowing more than one bandage to be untied at any one time so that he is always ready to appear when God calls him to do so.

Rabbi Joshua then goes to Rome, puts his question to the Messiah, and brings back to Elijah the Messiah's puzzling answer, which is then interpreted by Elijah:

> אזל לגביה, אמר ליה: שלום עליך רבי ומורי! —אמר ליה שלום עליך בר ליואי. —אמר ליה: לאימת אתי מר? —אמר ליה: היום. אתא לגבי אליהו. —אמר ליה: מאי אמר לך? —אמר ליה: שלום עליך בר ליואי. —אמר ליה: אבטחך לך ולאבוך לעלמא דאתי. —אמר ליה: שקורי קא שקר בי, דאמר לי היום אתינא, ולא אתא! —אמר ליה: הכי אמר לך היום אם בקלו תשמעו.

> So he went to him and greeted him, saying, "Peace upon you, Master and Teacher." "Peace upon you, son of Levi," he replied. "When will you come, Master?" asked he. "Today" was his answer. On his returning to Elijah, the latter inquired, "What did he say to you?" "Peace upon you, son of Levi," he answered. Thereupon he [Elijah] observed, "He thereby assured you and your father of [a portion in] the world to come." "He spoke falsely to me," he rejoined, "stating that he would come today, but has not." He [Elijah] answered him, "This is what he said to you, 'Today, if you will hear his voice [Psalm 95:7].'"

It takes the deeper understanding of Elijah to explain the full significance of the Messiah's response. When he greeted Rabbi Joshua, the Messiah actually answered Rabbi Joshua's original question, implying that both the rabbi and his father will have a share in the world to come. As for the Messiah's statement that he is coming "today," Elijah explains,

the Messiah did not lie, but rather he alluded to the verse from Psalms, "Today if you will hear his voice," thereby making the coming of the Messiah dependent less on God's will than on the ability of humanity to obey God's commandments.

In "Hamitpaḥat" the narrator refers to this text at two different points. In each passage the child imagines himself in the role of the hero of the aggadic narrative, Rabbi Joshua. The first reference to the text reflects the concerns of the narrator as a boy during the period before his bar mitzvah and belongs to the realm of fantasy and dreams. A later passage is presented as an actual reenactment of the Rabbi Joshua narrative by the narrator on the day of his bar mitzvah.

In the first reference to the aggadah the narrator recalls how during the week that his father would go to the annual merchants' fair in Lashkowitz, he would lie on his father's bed and before falling asleep would reflect upon the aggadic scene of the Messiah sitting among the poor:

> אתמול היה אוסר ומתיר את פצעיו והיום הוא מלך. אתמול היה יושב עם העניים והם לא הרגישו בו ויש שהקילו בכבודו ונהגו בו בזיון. פתאום נזכר הקדוש ברוך הוא שבועה שנשבע לגאול את ישראל ונתן לו רשות שיתגלה בעולם. אחר במקומי היה מתרעם על העניים שלא נהגו כבוד במלך המשיח, אבל אני הגיתי להם חיבה, מאחר שנתאווה המלך המשיח לישב במחיצתם. אחר במקומי מיקל בכבודם של עניים, שהם אוכלים פת קיבר אפילו בשבת ולובשים בגדים מפוחמים, אבל אני מחבב אותם, שיש מהם שזכו לישב במחיצתו של משיח.
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> Only yesterday he was untying and rebandaging his wounds and today he's a king! Yesterday he sat among the poor and they did not recognize him, but sometimes even abused him and treated him with disrespect; and now suddenly the Holy One, blessed be He, has remembered the oath He swore to redeem Israel, and given him permission to reveal himself to the world. Another in my place might have been angered at the poor who treated Messiah the King with disrespect; but I honored and revered them, since Messiah the King had desired to dwell in their quarters. In my place another might have treated the poor without respect, as they eat black bread even on the Sabbaths, and wear dirty clothes. But I honored and revered them, since among them were those who had dwelt together with the Messiah.[8]

Here the boy imagines the scene from the aggadah of the Messiah sitting among the poor. Unlike Rabbi Joshua, however, the boy's interest in the

[8] Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 257; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 47.

scene is not motivated by an urgent desire to know when the Messiah will come. He is content to attribute much importance to his respect for the Messiah, which will put him on the right side when that poor beggar is transformed by God's will into the savior of humanity.

This passage is shortly followed by a dream sequence in which the boy assumes a role parallel to that of Rabbi Joshua going to Rome to speak with the Messiah:

> פעם אחת נטלתי את ציציותי וקשרתי עצמי בכנפיו ואמרתי, עוף הביאני אצל אבא. פירש העוף את כנפיו וטס עמי והביאני לעיר אחת רומי שמה. נסתכלתי למטה וראיתי כת של עניים יושבים בשערי העיר ועני אחד יושב ביניהם ומתיר ואוסר את פצעיו. כבשתי את עיני ממנו בשביל שלא אביט ביסורים. כיון שכבשתי עיני ממנו גבה הר גדול מלא קוצים וברקנים וחיות רעות רועות בהר ועופות טמאים פורחים ושקצים ורמשים מרתיעים ובאים. נישבה פתאם רוח גדולה וזרקה אותי על ההר. התחיל ההר מתמוטט ועמדו איברי להתפזר. ביקשתי לצעוק ולא צעקתי כי יראתי שאם אפתח פי יבואו עופות טמאים וינקרו בלשוני. בא אבא וצררני בטליתו והביאני על מטתי. פקחתי עיני להסתכל בפניו וראיתי שהאיר היום. מיד ידעתי שקימט הקדוש ברוך הוא לילה מלילותיו של היריד. נטלתי את ציציותי ועשיתי קשר חדש.
>
> Once I took my fringed garment and tied myself to [a great bird's] wings and said, "Bird, bird, take me to Father." The bird spread its wings and flew with me to a city called Rome. I looked down and saw a group of poor people sitting at the gates of the city, and one poor person among them untying and rebandaging his wounds. I turned my eyes away from him in order not to see his sufferings. When I turned my eyes away there grew a great mountain with all kinds of thorns and thistles upon it and evil beasts grazing there, and impure birds and ugly creeping things crawling about it, and a great wind blew all of a sudden and flung me onto the mountain, and the mountain began quaking under me and my limbs felt as though they would fall asunder; but I feared to cry out lest the creeping things should enter my mouth and the impure birds should peck at my tongue. Then Father came and wrapped me in his prayer shawl and brought me back to my bed. I opened my eyes to gaze at his face and found that it was day. At once I knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, had rolled away another night of the nights of the fair. I took my fringes and made a fresh knot.[9]

This dream sequence contrasts with the boy's fantasy about the Messiah, as well as with the aggadic passage on which it is based. Here the boy

[9] Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 258; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 48.

loses his purported delight in and respect for the Messiah and for the poor people among whom he sits. Furthermore, unlike Rabbi Joshua who goes to Rome to ask the Messiah about redemption, in the dream the boy is carried to Rome when he asks to see his father. Once there, unlike Rabbi Joshua the boy does not have a conversation with the Messiah but rather turns away from the Messiah's suffering and is then thrown into a nightmarishly dangerous world, only to be saved in the end by the miraculous appearance of his father.

The aggadic passage plays a role in the climactic passage of the story. On the day of the narrator's bar mitzvah, his mother ties the precious kerchief that she had worn on Jewish holy days around his neck. On his way back from the House of Study, the boy comes across a poor person who had begun to spend time in the boy's town. The poor person, who had been treated unmercifully by the Jewish residents of the town, closely resembles the Messiah as poor person in the aggadic passage and in the boy's fantasy and dream. Now the boy interacts more directly with this poor person in ways that parallel but also are in marked contrast to the way that Rabbi Joshua relates to the Messiah:

> בדרך נזדמן לי אותו עני כשהוא יושב על קופה של אבנים ומתיר ואוסר את פצעיו ובגדיו קרועים ומקורעים, ממש סמרטוטין שאין חופין אפילו את פצעיו. אף הוא הציץ בי, פצעים שהציצו מתוך פניו כעין עינים של אש נראו. באותה שעה עמד בי לבי והתחילו ארכובותי מרתתות ועיני מתעממות והולכות ונתבלבל עלי עולמי. אבל אני נטלתי את לבי בידי והרכנתי את ראשי לפני העני ואמרתי לו שלום והחזיר לי שלום.
>
> On the way I found that poor person sitting on a heap of stones, untying and rebandaging his wounds, his clothes rent and tattered, nothing but a bundle of rags which did not even hide his wounds. He looked at me as well. The wounds on his face seemed like eyes of fire. My heart stopped, my knees began shaking, my eyes grew dim, and everything seemed to be in a whirl. But I took my heart in my hand, nodded to the poor person, and greeted him, and he returned the greeting.[10]

As Rabbi Joshua and the Messiah greeted each other in the aggadic passage, so do the boy and the poor person. In contrast to the aggadic passage, however, the mutual greeting is nonverbal, and Rabbi Joshua's grandiose question to the Messiah regarding when he would bring redemption is subsequently replaced in this version with a simple act of charity when the boy gives his kerchief to the Messiah to bandage his wounds.

[10] Agnon, *Elu ve'elu*, 266; Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, 57–58.

The three aggadic narratives that the narrator as a child distorts each reflect the ongoing tension in Jewish religious thought regarding the relative roles of divine and human agency in assuring human well-being. The aggadah of Nahum Ish Gam Zu deals with the relative political powerlessness of the Jews under Roman rule. Nahum's eventual triumphant raising of the Jews to a status of parity with the Romans is achieved by a combination of human optimism and faith and divine supernatural intervention. The aggadah of Hiyya bar Abba is about a wealthy man whose material needs are more than adequately satisfied. He attributes this material well-being to his own personal diligence in honoring the Sabbath, for which he receives divine reward. The aggadah of Joshua b. Levi suggests a divine control of personal salvation in the world to come, but a dependence by God on humanity to obey the commandments in order to bring the messianic redemption.

In each distorted version of an aggadah the boy upsets the delicate balance between human and divine agency found in the original aggadic narratives. In his first two distorted versions, he tips the scale to the side of divine intervention: the Sabbath meal that the boy experiences is associated only with what God gives and not with the necessary human preparations related in the aggadic text, while the earth's supernatural transformation into swords occurs with no reference to the human hero Nahum. The boy's interactions with the beggar as Messiah, however, move from the experience of total dependence on an outside power (the Messiah will one day miraculously rise to power; the father can save him from the evil that the Messiah suffers) to an almost complete focus on the role of humanity in bringing about redemption by such charitable acts as giving a poor person a kerchief with which to bind his wounds.

Beneath the surface of this story of individual maturation lies a critique of the ways that misreadings of rabbinic Judaism have fostered inappropriate approaches of traditional Ashkenazic Jews seeking to meet their basic needs. The childish distortions in this story mask a deeper radical declaration that the world in which the author was raised was excessively dependent on God. In the spirit of prevailing modern Jewish political trends (Zionism, Socialism, etc.), the author declares, in effect: Reject excessive dependence on divine sources of redemption and take matters into your own hands. Political, material, and spiritual well-being can only be accomplished if humans act. If this means sacrificing long-standing sanctified worldviews, so be it. Even if this involves the abandonment of the world of one's childhood, it is preferable to a blind attachment to religion that serves as a refuge from taking on the problems of human existence.

By alluding to talmudic aggadic texts, however, Agnon subtly avoids the antirabbinic bias of much modern political thought. It is as if he is

saying: Go back to the original texts of the rabbinic tradition to discover the balance between the roles of God and humanity. Only then will you realize that if Diaspora Ashkenazic Jews have been prone to passivity, it is because they have chosen a distorted, overly simplistic approach to meeting their needs. The future of Jewish culture is dependent on a mature return to the wisdom of tradition, which will reestablish a balance between human practicality and religious faith that will assure a true and lasting material and spiritual Jewish revival.