AGNON FROM A MEDIEVAL PERSPECTIVE[1]

David Stern

Agnon's short story "Agunot" has been justly celebrated for many reasons. First, it was the story from which its youthful author, the nineteen-year-old S. Y. Czaczkes, took his pen name when he published it in *Ha'omer* in 1908, shortly after emigrating to Palestine from his birthplace in Galicia.[2] It was also Agnon's first published Hebrew story in Palestine, and it immediately won him recognition, thereby beginning his illustrious career. Finally, it was in "Agunot" that Agnon discovered and cemented the fictional persona that became the unmistakable trademark of all his later writing: the unreliable narrator in the form of the pious, naïve storyteller steeped in the law and lore of Jewish tradition and seemingly oblivious to the deeply disturbing depths lurking beneath his innocent and simple tales. As Agnon critics have long recognized, the figure of this narrator, aside from being its author's faithful literary persona, has effectively personified the essential tension behind

[1] My earliest encounter with Arnold Band was through his words, specifically his classic book on Agnon, which I first read as a graduate student when I was applying for teaching positions. I had to deliver a lecture on Agnon as part of an interview for a job in modern Hebrew literature, not exactly my field but one that I tried to convince an interview committee I could nonetheless teach. The ploy didn't work. But I was fortunate to get another position, and it was there, in Los Angeles, that the words became flesh and I finally met Band. In the three years I lived in Los Angeles, Band taught me many things—among them, the essential oneness of Hebrew literature from the biblical period to the modern, and the indispensable importance of mastering Hebrew grammar in all its niceties if one wished to work in Hebrew literature. In being asked to contribute to this volume in his honor, the circle now comes fully round, for at last I have an occasion to return to the lecture on Agnon I hastily began some twenty-plus years ago. It is therefore with special gratitude for the opportunity, and for all Band has taught me and others over the years, that I offer this article.

[2] For biographical background, see Dan Laor, *Ḥayyei Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), 54–68 especially.

all Agnon's writing, namely, the conflicted and problematic relationship of tradition and modernity, the quandary of religious faith in a world of existential doubts and uncertainties.

"Agunot" is profoundly shaped by this quandary. Compounded out of intertwined tales of disappointed, thwarted love and artistic catastrophe, the narrative is prefaced by an introductory homily that, because of its centrality to the story that follows, I will quote in full:[3]

> It is cited in the writings: A thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves—strand on strand—a precious shawl all grace and all lovingkindness, for the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in, for times of happiness, for the joy of the commandments. Radiant in the splendor of the shawl's beauty, on Sabbaths and holidays, she glows even in these, the lands of exile, as she did in her youth in her Father's house, in the Temple of her Sovereign and in the city of sovereignty, Jerusalem. And when He, may He be blessed, sees her, and that she has been neither sullied (God forbid) nor stained even here, in the realm of her oppressors, He—as it were—leans toward her and says, "Behold thou art fair, my beloved, thou art fair" [Song of Songs 1:15]. And this is the secret of the power and the glory and the majesty and the tenderness in love that every man in Israel, every woman, and every infant, feels at this moment.
>
> But there are times—alas!—when some hindrance is aroused, and it snaps a thread in the loom. Then the shawl is damaged; evil spirits hover about it, enter into it, and tear it to shreds. At once a sense of shame assails all Israel, and "they know they are naked" [Genesis 3:7]. Their days of rest are wrested from them, their feasts are fasts, their lot is dust instead of luster. At that hour the Congregation of Israel wanders in her anguish, crying, "Strike me, wound me, take away my veils from me" [Song of Songs 5:7].
>
> Her Beloved has slipped away, and she, seeking Him, cries, "If ye find my Beloved, what shall ye tell Him? That I am afflicted with love" [Song of Songs 5:8]. And this affliction of love leads to darkest melancholy; it thoroughly deforms her, as though—heaven forbid—she were a woman given over to abandonment ... until, from the heavens above, He breathes down upon us the spirit to repent and to muster deeds that are pride to their doers, and again draw forth that thread of grace and lovingkindness before the Lord.

[3] My analysis is based on the original 1908 version published in the literary journal *Ha'omer;* unless noted otherwise, all page references are to the *Ha'omer* text. Later in his life, Agnon returned to the story several times, significantly revising it in 1921 and 1931, and somewhat less so, in its final published version in 1951. The translations in this essay are based on Baruch Hochman's masterful translation of the 1951 text but revised to accord with the original 1908 version.

> And it was this matter that the author intended to address in telling the following true story....[4]

As Agnon scholars have demonstrated, the passage is a dense weave of intertextual references: to the midrashic interpretation of the Song of Songs as an allegory of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, to the Garden story in Genesis as background to the disruptive moment in the narrative, and to other biblical passages.[5] The opening image of the thread of grace and lovingkindness is conflated out of rabbinic and mystical sources, while the divine shawl (*tallit*) derives as well from medieval and kabbalistic texts.[6] All these sources and texts are woven together into a homily as seamless as the vision of mutuality it describes. From Israel's good deeds God weaves the *tallit* with which He garbs His bride and proclaims her beauty, which is in turn the "secret" of the love for God that fills the heart of every Jew. On the other hand, when the unspecified hindrances intrude and tear the shawl Israel is left to wander heart-stricken at the loss of her Lover. Her melancholy is cured only when God breathes down upon her the spirit of grace that leads the Jews to repent and thereby to perform the good deeds out of which He can once again spin the thread to repair the shawl.

This homily, an almost perfect imitation of the classical literary form of the *derashah,* introduces the narrative that is, as I have already noted, a double tale. A venerable and wealthy Jew named Ahiezer emigrates to the Land of Israel with his only daughter, the beautiful and virtuous Dinah. When she reaches the age of marriage, Ahiezer sends emissaries abroad to the great yeshivot of Europe to find a worthy husband for her. Meanwhile

---

[4] The story first appeared in *Ha'omer* 2 (October 1908). The later revised version can be found in *Elu ve'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953), 405–16. Hochman's translation appears in N. Glatzer, ed., *Twenty-One Stories* (New York: Schocken, 1970), 30–44. On Agnon's revisions of the story, see Yitzhak Bakon, "Al 'Agunot' leShay Agnon," *Moznayim* 16 (1977–1978), 167–79; and Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 54–57. As Band points out, Agnon's revisions were mainly in the way of "condensation"; in the course of his changes, he shortened the story by almost half.

[5] See especially Gershon Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative: Agnon's 'Agunot,'" in G. Hartman and S. Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 287–93; and reprinted in a Hebrew version in Gershon Shaked, *Panim aḥerot byetsirato shel Shay Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hemeuhad, 1989), 11–27. Cf. Hillel Barzel, *Sippurei ahavah shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1975), 92–97.

[6] See Gershom Scholem, "The Paradisic Garb of Souls and the Origin of the Concept of *Ḥaluka de-Rabbanan*," *Tarbiz* 24 (1954): 290–306.

he builds a great mansion in Jerusalem, and with it a prayer hall, and he commissions a young artist, Ben Uri, to build a Torah ark as its centerpiece. Ben Uri sets to work and, as he fashions the ark, he sings. When Dinah hears the song, she is magically drawn to watch him and she falls in love with the young artisan as he does with her. But Ben Uri becomes so enraptured by his work, pouring his entire being into the ark, that he forgets Dinah. The moment he completes the ark, however, he finds himself in a state of utter loss and creative emptiness, as if he has been abandoned by his completed work. Weeping for his loneliness, he leaves the workroom and descends to the garden outside, where he falls asleep. At that moment, Dinah comes to the workroom in search of Ben Uri, but when she sees the ark that has stolen him from her, she is aroused to jealousy by demonic thoughts—in the story, Satan himself is said actually to appear!—and she pushes the ark out the window where it falls to the garden.

The next morning, when the ark is discovered in the garden, the Jews of Jerusalem are scandalized and interpret its mysterious "fall" as a sign of divine displeasure. The rabbi of Jerusalem orders another ark to be made in its place, and the first ark, Ben Uri's, is hidden away. But the second ark cannot replace the first one, and Ben Uri himself disappears. At this point, Yehezkel, the young scholar who has been chosen to be Dinah's husband, arrives for their marriage. Dinah, bereft of her true love and guilt-ridden over having pushed the ark out the window, goes to the rabbi and confesses all. He attempts to console her, tells her that all her sins will be forgiven on her wedding day, and orders Ben Uri's ark to be restored to the synagogue. But when his messengers go to find the ark, it has disappeared just like its maker.

Dinah and Yehezkel marry, but their marriage is never consummated. Dinah can think only of Ben Uri, while Yehezkel has his own true love, Freydele, the daughter of his father's housekeeper, back in Poland. When Yehezkel learns that Freydele has married another, he too becomes inconsolably depressed. Dinah and Yehezkel are divorced, and the yeshivah Ahiezer has built for his son-in-law is abandoned by its students. Following the failure of all of Ahiezer's projects—the yeshivah, the synagogue, the ark, and his daughter's marriage—Yehezkel returns to Poland, and Ahiezer and Dinah depart Jerusalem in shame:

> [Ahiezer's] house was deserted, the House of Study stood desolate. And the quorum that had gathered in the synagogue to honor Sire Ahiezer so long as he was there, now did not assemble there for even the first round of afternoon prayers on the day of his departure.

In an epilogue, the narrative shifts to the rabbi of Jerusalem, who, immediately after Ahiezer and Dinah depart, has two dreams in which

the *shekhinah,* the divine presence, appears to him in the form of a beautiful woman in mourning. When he inquires after the meaning of the dream, he is shown a vision of the afterlife, of the souls of the dead, and among them, *neshamot agunot vetohot,* abandoned, wandering souls in search of their partners.[7] This is the line from which the story takes its title. The word *agunah* (pl. *agunot*) is a technical term in Jewish law for a woman whose husband has disappeared and who, according to the law, cannot remarry as long as he does not formally divorce her or there is no evidence of his death. In his story, however, Agnon uses the term in a more figurative sense to refer to those stranded in a state of helpless, bereft abandonment, caught in a condition of interminable limbo and purgatorial exile. Indeed, in the midst of the rabbi's dream, Ben Uri himself emerges from the darkness to admonish him. "Why have you banished me from my share in God's inheritance?" he accuses the rabbi. "I will not leave you until you restore me and my ark to our place, to Jerusalem, the house of the Temple." Whereupon the good rabbi leaves his wife and home, willingly taking upon himself the life of exile in order to pursue a mission of restoring *agunot* to their rightful partners. "They say that the good rabbi still wanders," the story concludes, with several increasingly legendary and fantastic reports of rabbi-sightings: in one, he is seen floating off into the Great Sea on a red kerchief with an infant child in his arms; in another, young school children claim to have met him in Jerusalem where he stops them in the street, peers into their eyes, and then vanishes. "*LElohim pitronim,*" the story ends, quoting Joseph in Genesis 40:8: "Interpretations are God's alone."

In retrospect, this last line may appear less like a final adieu from the story's naïve and pious narrator than like a sly word of advice from the story's author to literary scholars. Not surprisingly, given the story's incredible power as a work of narrative art, and because of its strategic position in Agnon's career, immense interpretive efforts have been expended upon "Agunot." Most of these begin with the prologue quoted earlier and its connection to the story that follows it. As Arnold Band has correctly noted, the connection between the two is profoundly disjunctive. The prologue, with its vision of the *tallit* woven from threads of grace that are spun in turn from the good deeds of Israel, suggests that "human action is responsible for human destiny" and that "divine grace is dispensed upon merit." The actual story, in contrast, depicts a world devoid of divine grace in which its human protagonists suffer their state

[7] In the later revisions, the phrasing was changed and the word *agunot* left out of the line, though it reappears shortly thereafter when the rabbi announces that he is leaving home *letaqqen agunot,* "to restore *agunot.*"

of *aginut*, abandonment and deprivation, for no good reason of their own doing. "Why is this a world of *agunot?*" Band asks, reiterating the disturbing question that the story implicitly poses.[8]

Part of the answer to this question, I would suggest, lies in the generic status of the story as a whole and of the prologue in particular. In virtually all the scholarship on "Agunot" I have seen, the prologue is regularly described as a midrash, and the tale as a kind of story woven around the midrash, a homiletical expansion or "realization" or "concretization," as it were, of the more abstract themes related in the prologue.[9] To be sure, there is indeed a midrashic substratum to the prologue, but the passage is not really a midrash, an interpretation, so much as it is an aggadic homily. This last point is not simply a nit-picking academic distinction. The prologue is in fact the key to identifying the genre of classical and medieval Jewish literature upon which Agnon modeled "Agunot." To the best of my knowledge, that genre has not been discussed in the scholarship, and it is, I propose, the critical category for correctly appreciating the meaning of this enigmatic story.

The genre to which I am referring is that of the medieval *ma'aseh.*[10] As a literary term, the word is usually translated as "exemplum," that is, a story that exemplifies a moral tale. In rabbinic literature, the term takes on the additional sense of referring to a story that actually took place, as opposed to being a mere fiction (like a *mashal*). In this sense, it is also the term for a legal precedent, that is, a story that proves or confirms a certain practice or law. These two connotations—that of being exemplary and of being historically verisimilar—are not opposed or exclusive. Precisely because the story claims to have taken place—a claim that is, above all, rhetorical, not necessarily factually true—it offers itself as a strong proof of the moral it exemplifies. Indeed, the more far-fetched the story, the stronger its claims to verisimilitude and the greater its capacity for being a compelling exemplary story.

As a literary genre, the *ma'aseh* makes its first appearance in Hebrew literature of the rabbinic period, but it fully comes into its own in the Middle Ages in such story collections as the "Midrash [*sic*] on the Ten

---

[8] Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare,* 61.

[9] See ibid., 59; Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative," 288–93; Bakon, "Al 'Agunot' leShay Agnon," 171–73; Barzel, *Sippurei ahavah,* 72–76.

[10] On the *ma'aseh,* see David Stern, *Parables in Midrash* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 240–42; David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky, *Rabbinic Fantasies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 15–22 especially; and Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning,* trans. J. Teitelbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 283–96.

Commandments" and Nissim of Kairouwan's *Ḥibbur yafeh min hayeshu'ah* and *Sefer hama'asim,* as well as in such works as *Ma'aseh haYerushalmi.* Indeed, the *ma'aseh* becomes, arguably, the quintessential literary form of medieval Hebrew literature. From there, it passed on to the various hagiographical genres that subsequently developed about the Ari (R. Isaac Luria), the Baal Shem Tov, and other Hasidic masters. Undoubtedly, the genre had some impact as well on Nahman of Bratslav's parabolic stories.[11] There is no question that Agnon would have read the latter works, and he very well may have been familiar with the more obscure medieval texts, or at least some of them. From a tender age, as we know, Agnon was an insatiable consumer of classical Jewish literature of all types.

Even if he knew only a few of these works, Agnon would have been familiar with the *ma'aseh*'s basic literary form—which generally consists of a moral or lesson followed by a story intended to exemplify the moral—and the genre's essential narrative logic. Just as the narrative follows upon the lesson it purportedly illustrates, so too these narratives are meant to teach that good deeds invariably issue in merit and reward, and evil ones in punishment and disgrace. What this means, in other words, is that the logic of the genre is essentially causal, both formally and thematically. But even if he had been familiar with only a few examples of the genre, the young Agnon would have recognized one of its most distinctive endemic features, namely, the degree to which these exemplary stories do *not* in fact perfectly exemplify the morals they are intended to exemplify. Their formal causality is, to a degree, distorted or out of joint. In the narrative sections, justice itself is often skewed, with the rewards or punishments (usually the latter) way out of proportion to the characters' deeds or misdeeds. To rephrase both points somewhat differently: Agnon would have been familiar with the ways in which the pious and traditional moral frames of the *ma'asim* are variously at odds with the profane and morally ambiguous worlds actually depicted in their narratives.

The relevance of this description of the *ma'aseh* as a genre to the interpretation of "Agunot" should by now be obvious. In choosing the literary form of the classic medieval *ma'aseh* for his story, the young writer was able to exploit both the classical structure, with its inherently causal logic, *and* the essential disjunction that tends to characterize the literary form in practice, namely, its violation of the ideal rules of causality. What distinguishes Agnon's use of the genre from its medieval model is one thing: Agnon was self-consciously aware of the features I have described. By

[11] On the Hasidic tale, see Joseph Dan, *Hasippur haḥasidi* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975); and Arnold Band, ed. and trans., *The Tales of Nahman of Bratslav* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

choosing to foreground these features and make them thematic, he effectively made disjunction itself—the distance between desire and its fulfillment, intention and deed, traditional ideals and human reality—the story's primary subject.

From its very beginning, such questions of disjunction and skewed causality virtually riddle the narrative of the story. Agnon doubtless wished the reader to believe that the opening homily was authentic, not one he had made up. But the author's real agenda in hooking the reader through the homily emerges in the transition from the homily to the narrative with the formulaic statement: "And it was to this matter [i.e., the lesson of the homily] that the author intended (*nitkavven*) in telling the *ma'aseh* that follows" (53). The word *nitkavven* has kabbalistic connotations—*kavvanah*, "intention," being the essence of a commandment—but its true meaning for the narrative is laid bare a few lines later, at the end of the transition:

> O Lord, credit him kindly, this lord and patron [Ahiezer], for his deeds on behalf of his brethren, sons of his people, who dwell before God in the Land of the Living, *and this though he ultimately failed.*[12]

From its inception, the tale to be told is characterized within the narrative itself as a tale of good but failed intentions. Walter Benjamin once remarked about Kafka, "Once he was certain of eventual failure, everything worked out for him *en route* as in a dream."[13] "Agunot" possesses the same dreamlike, inexorable, perfectly scheduled rhythm of failure.

Instances of failed, unrealized, or misfired intentions regularly repeat themselves in major and minor episodes in the narrative. For example, when Yehezkel prays and tries to concentrate upon the words of the *Shema,* he can think only of Freydele, his former love. Her *shekhinah* (Agnon here is using the term very playfully) steals into his heart and does not budge until Yehezkel finishes his prayers and puts his *tallit* and *tefillin* back into the bag she had sewn for him in Poland before he left her (61). Another instance of such failed good intentions occurs when the rabbi tries to console Dinah after she confesses to him that she pushed the ark out the window. He tells her that, according to the Sages, God will forgive the sins of a bride on her wedding day. He also speaks to her the praises of her bridegroom, in order to endear him to her, and he assures her that he will restore the condemned ark to its rightful place

[12] Italics are mine.

[13] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 148. The text was actually part of a letter to Gershom Scholem dated June 12, 1938.

in the synagogue. But the ark has disappeared and is never recovered. Dinah's heart is never drawn to Yehezkel, and their marriage is never consummated. As for Dinah's act, whether or not it is ever forgiven, it has irrevocable, tragic consequences for everyone involved. Even the rabbi, despite all his good intentions, is finally held personally responsible for all the other failures. He is condemned to leave his own home and wife (leaving *her,* in effect, as an *agunah!*) in order to restore and reunite the abandoned souls of the other characters—a mission that, by the tale's end, is still incomplete. Indeed, by the narrative's conclusion, the rabbi has become "the wandering Jew," whose wandering, by definition, will never be completed.

The problematics of intentionality—of the relationship between intention and deed, and of the human possibility of realizing one's intentions at all—is also intimately connected to the role of the various demonic or supernatural spirits that appear in the narrative at virtually all its crucial moments. For example, when Ben Uri begins to build the Torah ark we are told that "another spirit" (*ruaḥ aḥeret*) immediately possesses him (55). Then, when he begins to sing, his song comes to possess an "odd power of attraction" (*koaḥ moshekh meshuneh*) that attracts Dinah, whose heart is drawn to the song "as though through witchcraft" (*kemo al yedei keshafim*) (55). Presumably we are meant to understand that Dinah has fallen in love with Ben Uri. But significantly, the narrator never says this much, only that she descends to the workroom to see the "works of the artisan." Here again, only to confuse matters more, the narrator adds: "And he [Ben Uri] too [*ve'af hu*]—it was as though he intended [*ke'ilu hu mitkavven*] to draw her with his melody more and more, so that she would stand there longer and longer and never ever leave him" (55). Does he intend to draw her to him or not? What is the nature of this mysterious melody? What is the source of its power? Has it independently possessed Ben Uri and then used him to entrance Dinah? Does Ben Uri sing because of his art or because he wishes to attract Dinah's attention? Where does the magic begin and end?

The same ambiguous causality informs the central act in the story's first movement, namely, the catastrophic accident that befalls the ark. Dinah, it will be recalled, comes to Ben Uri's workroom just after he has completed the ark and descended to the garden. When Dinah does not find him and instead sees the ark, she is filled with anger and jealousy. But then Satan himself appears, and he "prepares a glass of vengeance in her heart, and whispers to her, 'This is your rival.' Ideas come into her head, they spread out on their own—and suddenly they pushed the holy ark with a great push, and it teetered and fell out the open window" (57). Who has pushed the ark out the window—Dinah, Satan, the "ideas" in her head?

The role of these demonic supernatural interventions in the narrative cannot be explained simply as rationalizations of human behavior. Nor can they be dismissed simply as a function of the pious, naïve Agnonesque narrator who recounts the *ma'aseh.* Certainly through the invention and the masterful use of this persona and his voice, Agnon was able credibly to inject all these elements into the story and to endow it with what we might call a virtual magical realism. But to take the demon and the other supernatural elements simply as tokens of the narrator's religious naïveté and superstitious piety is, I think, to be seduced and taken in by Agnon's rhetorical persona.

In a later revision of the story, Agnon himself made this all but explicit. After Dinah and Yehezkel are unhappily married, Yehezkel goes walking in the Judean hills in the evening. The narrator quotes a famous rabbinic saying, first in its original Aramaic, then in a Hebrew translation:

> Happy is the portion of the man who is granted the privilege of making his home in the Holy Land in his lifetime; and not only this, but he who is privileged to dwell there in his lifetime is also deemed worthy to enjoy the Holy Spirit for ever and ever.[14]

But, the narrator continues (seemingly oblivious to the meaning of what he says), Yehezkel's feet may be planted in the gates of Jerusalem and may stand on its holy soil, yet his heart and eyes are pledged to houses of study and worship in the lands of the Diaspora. Even now he fancies himself among the scholars of his own town, strolling in the fields to take the evening air. The rhetorical discontinuity in this passage has an obvious message. The characters in the story are not behaving as they should—that is, in accordance with the beliefs and structures of tradition—nor is the world in which they live. Here, again, intention—the pious narrator's intention in recounting the rabbinic saying—is at odds with the reality of the narrative, as he acknowledges. Tradition is not working as it should. Good and pious intentions are not sufficient to produce their expected results. The piety of the narrator is not to be taken at face value.

The reason why this is necessarily so—why, in other words, this is a world of *agunot*—is left unexplained. Partly because of this silence—and because of the overwhelming helplessness of the story's characters and their inability to resist or to change their unhappy fates—they tend to appear as virtual automata or allegorical emblems. The story as a

[14] Agnon, *Elu ve'elu,* 413.

whole seems itself at times to be working out some larger cosmic allegory. But what allegory? As scholars have long noted, the names of virtually all the characters are emblematic.[15] Ben Uri obviously alludes to the biblical Bezalel Ben Uri, the fashioner of the Tabernacle in the book of Exodus. Yehezkel refers to the biblical prophet who is also the prophet par excellence of Exile. The name Freydele means "happiness," and its Yiddish form definitively locates that happiness in the Diaspora (and unhappily so for Yehezkel). Ahiezer literally means "my brother, a helper" or "a helper to my brother," both of which are what he wishes to be. Dinah may allude to the hapless daughter of Jacob who is raped by Shechem in Genesis 34, but her name also invokes the idea of *din*, "judgment," the inexorable, oppressive law of fate whose unwitting agent Dinah becomes.

Teasingly emblematic as they may be, however, the names of the characters still do not unravel the mystery of the story's meaning or what its allegory is about. The story of Ben Uri's ark, with its many references to the *shekhinah*, might be taken to allude to the story of the Temple, its destruction, and the consequent spiritual and historical exile of Israel. Equally so, it might be read as an allegory of the modern artist and of artistic creation. This reading is especially convincing in light of the story's pervasive, brooding late romanticism, its notion of art as self-immolation and its almost unmediated identification of creator and creation.[16] Hillel Barzel has noted that the words *Uri* and *aron* (ark) are composed of virtually the same letters. The narrative's account of how Ben Uri made the *aron* itself repeatedly stresses their identity. The double meaning of the word *aron* as both ark and coffin encapsulates the entire story of Ben Uri and his ark from beginning to end.[17]

Nor do these two readings exhaust all the possible allegorical approaches to the story. With its constant use of kabbalistic overtones and terms—specifically, the verb *letaqqen* and its nominal forms *taqqanot* and *tiqqunim*—it is tempting to read the story along kabbalistic lines. Particularly relevant is the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, with its idea of a tragic "accident" that attended the creation of the universe causing the Divine Being to withdraw from the world, and its view of human history as a mirror of God's own exile and redemption. One literary critic has suggested reading the story in more concrete historical terms (in reference to a contemporary secular attempt at figurative redemption, i.e.,

[15] Shaked, "Midrash and Narrative," 295.

[16] For this reading, see especially Bakon, "Al 'Agunot' leShay Agnon," 174, 178–79.

[17] Barzel, *Sippurei ahavah*, 73–78.

Zionism) as Agnon's allegory of the Second Aliyah (in which Agnon himself participated) and its failure.[18]

Yet no matter how much the story suggests that its meaning is not to be taken at face value and that none of these readings should be lightly dismissed, there is also no clear evidence to suggest that any of these allegorical interpretations is the correct one. As past critics have pointed out, Agnon, like Kafka, sacrificed the content of wisdom for its transmissibility, to use Walter Benjamin's terms.[19] By casting his story in the form of a classical *ma'aseh,* Agnon preserved the literary form of tradition even if he could not save its exemplary lessons, the doctrines of tradition that, it seems, were either lost to him or otherwise unavailable. All that remains is the shape of allegory; its content is left amorphously unspecified.

"Agunot" is not, however, a Kafkaesque parable about the impossibility of retrieving wisdom or the absurdity of existence. Rather, it is a story about redemption (or, more accurately, the failure of redemption) and about the relationship of the artistic vocation to redemption—a question, again, of the efficacy of cause and effect, intention and deed, human desire and its consequences in this world. Agnon remained true to the story's origins in the medieval *ma'aseh* even while he translated the genre into the fundamentally modern terms of a frustrated love story and even though he acknowledged that the perils of modernity made the genre's governing premises impossible to sustain.

I have already remarked upon the disjunction between the opening homily and the narrative proper. There is an equivalent, perhaps even more telling, disjunction between the narrative and the story's epilogue about the rabbi and his mission to restore *agunot.* That epilogue does not follow from the narrative of "Agunot." The latter should logically end upon a note of total failure and disappointment.[20] The epilogue does not so much resolve those failures and disappointments as provide a means of escape from them—but an escape into another realm, a different order of discourse, a narrative universe inhabited by a disappearing, reappearing, and all-but-supernatural, out-of-a-*maerchen*-like rabbi. (The narrator's main source for the reports about the wandering rabbi is a Rabbi Nissim, meaning Rabbi Miracles.) The world of the

[18] Orna Golan, "'Agunot' and the Second Aliyah" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 32 (1971): 215–23.

[19] Benjamin, *Illuminations,* 147. For Agnon and Kafka, see Hillel Barzel, *Bein Agnon leKafka* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan Histadrut Hastudentim, 1972); and Robert Alter, *Necessary Angels* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 13–17.

[20] I wish to thank Alan Mintz for pointing me toward this insight and its consequences.

epilogue is fantastic in the classical sense of the word: literally incredible, not to be believed.

In some respects, the character of the rabbi with his restorative mission might also be seen as providing a competing conception of the artistic vocation, an alternative to the artist as a figure of self-immolating creativity. In this second conception, the artist, like the rabbi, is an agent of redemption, one whose task is to restore the *agunot* of the world to their partners. Indeed, according to this conception, the artist is probably the only person in the world who *can* restore and reassemble all the world's *agunot*—that is, the estranged and fragmented shards of reality—and regather them into a new (if imagined) whole.

But true to the complexity of his story's overall vision, Agnon does not leave even this fantasy-laden conception of the artistic vocation untouched by the frustrations and disjunctions of the world of *agunot.* In the first report he receives of the wandering rabbi, the pious narrator of "Agunot" tells us that he heard from an aged *sheluḥa derabbanan*—one of the traditional emissaries who travel abroad seeking donations for yeshivot and other institutions in the Holy Land—the following account (which I will summarize):

> Late one night in a certain holy place in Lithuania, the emissary dozed off after the prayers had long since ended and suddenly woke up to a loud cry. He saw the rabbi standing over a youth, and he cried out, "Rabbi, are you here?" at which point the rabbi immediately vanished. Whereupon, the youth, "out of fear," at once confessed to the emissary his "sin." At that late hour, when no one was left in the synagogue to see him, the boy had been secretly drawing a *mizraḥ,* the decorated placard signifying "East"—the Holy Land, in other words—which is traditionally hung upon the eastern wall of houses of worship in order to signify the direction in which the pray-ers should face. "And that *mizraḥ*"—the emissary testified—"was truly a work of art to exult over!" While the youth was sunk in work over his *mizraḥ,* the rabbi suddenly appeared and began to pull him off and whisper, "Come, come with me to return to Jerusalem." Until, that is, the emissary had interrupted him, and the rabbi had vanished. (65)

What is this brief but charged episode about? Is it not an allegory of the relationship between the two competing conceptions of the artist? The wandering rabbi, the restorer of *agunot,* the artist as agent of redemption, mistakes the youth for Ben Uri and is about to restore the artist as creator (even if the latter does not understand what is happening and is all but terrified out of his wits, convinced that his art is really a sin and that the rabbi has come to punish, not redeem him). Yet what prevents the rabbi from redeeming the artist (or, alternatively, "saving" the youth)? The

interruption of the well-intentioned emissary! A figure who is not unlike the pious narrator of "Agunot" himself. Again, another interruption, another disjunction. Even here, in the realm of miracles, no one is safe from good intentions, which, as always in this world of *agunot,* jinx any chance of redemption. Why? *VelElokim pitronim,* as our pious narrator would say. Which we might translate as: Only God knows.

In effect, then, the epilogue only reiterates the question: Why is this a world of *agunot?* Yet even if we cannot answer the question, it is possible to speculate as to what led to the question being asked. The reason, I would suggest, is intimately linked to the rationale that led Agnon to name himself as a writer after the story's title. In calling himself Agnon, the young Czaczkes was following a time-honored rabbinic tradition, according to which sages have regularly come to be known by the names of their works. In taking his name from the word *agunah* with all its connotations of helpless abandonment, he simultaneously severed himself from that tradition. As Anne Golomb Hoffman has noted, the *agunah* is a figure of almost complete passivity. By taking his name from the *agunah,* Agnon was appropriating for himself a comparable passivity, in effect, renouncing his active role in deciding to leave Galicia and emigrate to Israel.[21] Yet how truly strange it is that Czaczkes/Agnon, so soon after emigrating, should write a story in which every attempt "to restore a corner of the anteroom from its state of destruction [so that we might be worthy to see it transformed into a mansion when the Holy One, blessed be He, returns His Shekhinah to Zion]" culminates in catastrophic failure! And how even stranger that all his characters who have emigrated to the land should end up returning to the Diaspora in shame! What really is the relationship between Agnon's emigration to Palestine and his imagining, some four months later, of a story whose contents all effectively renounce the efficacy of settling in the Holy Land?

Agnon was famously reticent about his personal life, and little evidence survives about his inner life that first year in Jaffa after he left home. From a few remarks, however, there are indications that the young Czaczkes dearly missed his mother. She died from a heart condition just a year after he had left Poland. He apparently felt guilty enough about having left her that, in later years, he would claim to have left Poland two years before her death, not one, as though the additional year's absence

[21] Ann Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 66–69. Ilana Pardes has pointed out to me that, in taking his name from the *agunah,* Agnon was also complicating the gender of his identity as writer.

shielded him from the accusation of having abandoned her.[22] It would be safer to place hot coals upon one's tongue than to try to fathom the psychological motivations of a writer as great as Agnon. But as someone who also left home for Israel as a teenager (the only thing this writer shares in common with Agnon), I would like to suggest that it would not be surprising if Agnon sought to displace his guilt over having left his mother and father and birthplace by imagining a world in which all characters are absolved of responsibility for their deeds. They become helpless victims to a fate more powerful than anything they can resist. The irony of the inexorable fate imagined in the story is that it is virtually the reverse image of Agnon's own situation: it moves the story's characters in exactly the opposite direction, back to the Diaspora. But given the inexorable and overpowering quality of the fate that drives the characters in "Agunot," does it really matter in what direction they are forced to travel just as long as it is the opposite of what they desire?

To a certain extent, the world imagined in "Agunot," with all its romanticized brooding, fatalistic determinism, and renunciation of human agency and personal responsibility, might be fairly called an adolescent writer's vision of the world rather than an adult's. The greatness of "Agunot" lies, however, less in what it tells us about its author and his state of maturity than in the bedrock universality of its vision of the fundamental sadness of human existence, of our thwarted abilities to realize our desires as we wish, and of our powerlessness in avoiding disappointment and the failure of our deepest and best ambitions. The story's achievement is all the greater for couching its universal vision in the nuanced particularity of an archaic literary form whose self-conscious language, in the hands of a less gifted writer, would have been the stuff of parochialism. The story was a more than remarkable achievement for a youth of nineteen.

[22] Laor, *Ḥayyei Agnon*, 65. Cf. the interesting comments of David Aberbach pertaining to Agnon's psychological state and the implicit identification of Dinah with Agnon's mother in *At the Handles of the Lock* (Oxford: Littman Library and Oxford University Press, 1984), 84–85.