

S. Y. AGNON: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

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When Shmuel Yosef Agnon z"al received the Nobel Prize in 1966, I made a few TV appearances here, answering questions about the man and his creation. When Agnon learned about this, he wrote to me: "I hope that the forty years that have passed since you gave the first lecture on my work have prepared the public for a proper understanding of the subject."

In this hour of farewell and mourning, to pause and to ponder over the question: What has made Agnon really great, what is his lasting contribution, what is the innermost essence of his multifaceted creation.

The most comprehensive study in the fiction of Shmuel Yosef Agnon is the book "Nostalgia and Nightmare," by Arnold J. Band, Professor of Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Los Angeles. I have the highest regard for the author of that book and what I have to say now in the way of criticism refers to the title of the book rather than to its content. The title of the book reflects a cliché of opinions and judgments about Agnon's work, which has received popular acceptance in the wake of the literary criticism in vogue.

Nostalgia is understood here as yearning for something that is unretrievably lost, namely, Jewish Galicia, with its intense communal life, its warm family atmosphere, its religiosity, its Talmudic learning, its Hasidism, its rejoicing in God. Instead of the biting satire of a Medele Mocher Sefarim who had to fight the environment of the Jewish shtetl of Eastern Europe, because at his time it was fully alive, and he strived to reform it, Agnon, it is argued, romantically idealized it, because he witnessed its rapid decline and lived to see its final destruction.

This is conceived as one aspect of Agnon's creation. The other one is expressed in the term "Nightmare," that means, Agnon, like Franz Kafka and many other great writers of this century had become aware of and alarmed by the growing dissolution of modern society, the dwindling of its established order, its moral values and its esthetic attainments. In other words, Agnon is essentially the writer of crisis, breakdown, and nihilism.

Formerly, it had been customary to divide Agnon's work chronologically to ascribe the stories and novels about traditional life in Galicia, partly also in Palestine, to the period of nostalgic romanticism, and to attribute the creations, having as its scene modern Galicia and contemporary Palestine or Germany to a change of mind, due to both observation and the influence of new literary trends.

Of late, professional literary criticism has recognized that this chrono-

logical dichotomy cannot be fully sustained, for the so-called Kafkaesque mood is already recognizable in the stories devoted to traditional Galicia and long before Kafka's work was published, even in some of Agnon's Yiddish writings such as the "Toitentants," written in 1907.

I believe that neither the term "Nostalgia" nor that of "Nightmare" adequately characterize the mood and essence of Agnon's creation. What I perceive in it throughout is neither romanticism nor despair. What, then, is its true nature? In a nutshell: Traditional Judaism, in both its Talmudic and Hasidic forms, as it presented itself in Galicia and in Palestine in the preceding generations, is not a matter of the past.

It is an eternal reality, it is a model, which, God willing, can be realized anywhere and at any time. Its vision makes good, makes strong. On the other hand, human wickedness, human frailty or ridiculous emptiness are present everywhere, not only in the dissolving society of today but also among the vociferous Zionists of yesterday Galicia and even sometimes in the traditional world of the shtetl. But where the enduring good is to be found, about this Agnon never leaves us in doubt.

If so, if the religious world of traditional Judaism is the absolute value for Agnon, why did he devote so much of his creation to changing Jewish society or to a society entirely devoid of Jewish values?

There are two answers to this question. First, the very display of loss or of emptiness is a challenge, is a reminder that something must be replaced and filled up. And secondly, Agnon was a writer, a story teller, not a preacher. He described what occurred to his observation, what was near to his mind, and to that of his audience. He and most of his readers were witnesses of two worlds, the Jewish shtetl or its reminiscences, and modern society; and, quite naturally, both inspired his pen. It is a nightmarish place, this modern world, seemingly without exit, but not for Agnon. He is not in despair. He quietly, often humorously, draws his pictures; for he is not involved in that world. He has his firm stand elsewhere on the safe, or seemingly safe, ground of Jewish religiosity.

It must be remembered, though, that a large portion of Agnon's works, and in particular, his greatest novel, "Temol Shilshom," ("Yesterday") were written during the period of the Nazi horrors and their aftermath. I suspect—although Agnon could never be had for an answer on this question—that the end of "Yesterday" was originally conceived quite differently from what we read now. The undeserved, senseless and cruel end of the hero is understandable as evoked by the equally undeserved, senseless, and cruel fate of the six millions.

A short glimpse on Agnon's biography is necessary for explaining my views on his creation.

Agnon was born on Tish'ah be'Av, 1888, the Fast Day dedicated to the memory of the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. According to an old

legend, on the day of the destruction of Jerusalem, its redeemer, the Messiah, will be born. Agnon ascribed much significance to the date of his birth. He certainly felt somehow that he was rebuilding with his pen what time and enemies had destroyed.

At the age of twenty approximately, he emigrated to Palestine, where he soon became noted as a writer of short stories. His reputation became established with the publication in 1912 of *We-haya he 'aqov le-mishor* ("The Crooked Becomes Straight") in some respects his most perfect creation. At the advice of his fatherly friend, Arthur Ruppin, whom he revered very much all his life, Agnon left for Germany, where he remained for full eleven years, 1913-1924, certainly a seminal and decisive period in his spiritual and literary career.

Here, a word about Agnon's religious development is imperative. The atmosphere of the so-called Second Aliyah, in which Agnon moved in Palestine, definitely was anti-religious. The young writer could not escape its influence. But with him, this was a loosening of ties rather than a sudden and complete break. In Germany, a movement in the opposite direction set in, of which I could observe only the later stages of an ever increasing adherence to Jewish belief and practice.

My acquaintance with Agnon came about through two entirely different agents. Being familiar with Hebrew literature, I naturally hailed the new star, and Agnon was always very appreciative of people who appreciated his work. Moreover, I had known his future wife, Esther Marx, a person not less remarkable than Agnon himself, a considerable time before they married. Esther had visited Palestine as a young girl in 1914 and recognized there the importance of Arabic. When she came to Frankfurt in the fall of 1918, I was recommended to her as a teacher of Arabic, quite wrongly, because then I was in my very first year at the University. Anyhow, we read Arabic together and met almost daily.

Before, in Berlin, Agnon had taught her and her sister Hebrew; but that must have been on a very high level, because in her communications to me, she wrote in flawless language and beautiful, trained Hebrew script. On *La"g Be"omer*, 1920, they married and soon settled in Homburg, a watering place near Frankfurt, where, naturally, I was an occasional guest.

Esther wished to return to Palestine, Agnon hesitated. Then, in June, 1924, something terrible occurred. While Agnon was in a hospital with some illness, his apartment burned down, and all his collections and writings, in particular his *chef-d'oeuvre*, called *biTsrer ha-Hayyim* ("In the Bond of Life"), perished in the conflagration. Agnon believed, or at least repeatedly said that he never wrote and never would be able to write anything like that work.

That traumatic event had an unexpected effect. Agnon almost immediately afterwards set out for Jerusalem, where he remained, with only short inter-

ruptions, until his death. This clearly was an act of *Teshuva*; of repentance and penitence. During all the time he lived in the Holy City, he practiced strictest and most rigorous observance of Jewish religion. Any literary critic who disregards this fact necessarily misinterprets Agnon's creation.

It is not correct to say that Agnon implicitly questions Jewish religion because he lets his pious heroes either suffer cruelly, such as the hero of "The Crooked Becomes Straight," or depicts some of them as ridiculous and comic figures, such as Reb Yudel, the hero of "The Bridal Canopy" ("Hakhnasath Kalla"), that most Agnonic of Agnon's novels.

In "The Crooked Becomes Straight," the writer does not discover and decry God's injustice. Such a thing as an unjust God does not exist for the religious mind, and the story says so expressly. But life is life; as we all see, it can be merciless and cruel. The question is only how *we* respond to it, how *we* overcome misery through the quality of our spirit, in short, how the crooked becomes straight in *our* hands. And when Reb Yudel, the hero of "The Bridal Canopy," and the heroes of many other stories of the folktale type seem to be comic figure, and all they say and do appears to the outsider strange and ridiculous, this is all right and proper. The pious man is and should be a stranger to the people of the world. If he appears as a fool, if he cuts a comic figure, he plays his role truly and appropriately. He does not discredit religion by such behavior, but confirms it.

Naturally, we must remember that Agnon was a very playful writer who loved to juggle with words and absurd situations. He was not different in conversation, at least, with friends. There rarely did five minutes pass without a bon mot or a witty allusion to a Talmudic saying or a humorous story about people, known and unknown. Therefore, if we find sometimes in Agnon a play with words or men or situations which puzzles, we need not always try to dig deeply. Occasionally, it seems to be nothing more than fun for fun's sake.

In conclusion, as rightly expressed in the bestowal of the Nobel Prize, Agnon is the representative Hebrew writer of our age. Since Biblical times there has not been in Hebrew language a corpus of narrative prose of the magnitude, dignity, and meaningfulness of Agnon's creation. He has done for Hebrew prose what Yehuda Halevy has achieved in religious poetry. Halevy wrote in the forms and the spirit of the 12th century. Agnon expressed the mood and the refinement of the 20th. But both are the mouth-pieces of genuine and integral Judaism.

For my taste, both Yehuda Halevy and Agnon are a little bit too Jewish. I mean, in both the mere human element is too often subordinated to the specifically Jewish aspect. But this cannot be helped. This is the way in which a comparatively small religious community, which had played a very particular role in world history looked upon itself. Yehuda Halevy in religious poetry and Shmuel Yosef Agnon in narrative prose are the most genuine and most perfect artistic exponents of post-Biblical Judaism.

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