The disappointments
Halkin, Hillel
The New Republic; Aug 7, 2000; 223, 6; ProQuest Research Library
pg. 39

ment of their bills, he wrote that their efforts had been "arduous, long and often unpleasant"; that they had supported the "weaker of the two contending communities" in a struggle "with a stronger one"; and that the "best interest of the Cherokee people would have been promoted . . . by avoiding the conflicts and controversies" into which the legal representation had plunged them. In his stated view, the lawyers' "labors from first to last have been one unmitigated curse to the Cherokee people." Wirt himself apparently received only $500 on a claim for $20,000.

I SHALL END the story here. In this extraordinary struggle over American first principles, there was an obvious winner, the Supreme Court of the United States, and an obvious loser, the Cherokee Tribe, and an obvious irony, that the Supreme Court and the Cherokee Tribe had been allies, fighting on the same side of the issues.

The outcome of this sad, premonitory tale may also provide support for those who believe that politics and force, not law, determine the facts of history. But I would draw a different lesson: a lesson about the insufficiency of a judicial decision alone to bring about the rule of law. This lesson helps us to understand John Marshall's comment that the "people made the Constitution and the people can unmake it." For our constitutional system does not consist only of legal writings. It consists of habits, customs, expectations, settled modes of behavior engaged in by lawyers, by judges, and by citizens, all developed gradually over time. It is *that* system, as actually practiced by millions of Americans, that protects our liberty.

One hundred and twenty-five years after *Worcester*, the Supreme Court decided another case, *Cooper* v. *Aaron*, that involved a different governor who was defying a different Court order, an order demanding that black children enter the door of a white school. This time the president sent in paratroopers; and the children entered that schoolhouse. Perhaps President Jackson's actions helped President Eisenhower to understand both the importance of enforcing a rule of law as well as the importance of protecting fundamental liberties. And perhaps that experience can help us understand our own responsibility to preserve and to transmit the traditions, the habits, and the expectations of behavior that underlie our modern system, creating the freedom that we enjoy not only on paper but also in reality. If so, then an old and dangerous episode in the Court's history, and an old and tragic story in the history of the Cherokee Tribe, may help others whose basic liberties are threatened. ■

The Disappointments

By HILLEL HALKIN

Only Yesterday
by Shmuel Yosef Agnon
translated by Barbara Harshav

(Princeton University Press, 652 pp., $35)

The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God
by Amos Oz

(Princeton, 304 pp., $29.95)

I.

IN THE SPRING and summer of 1923, sick with tuberculosis in Berlin and with barely a year left to live, Franz Kafka was studying Hebrew. Not for the first time he was thinking of starting life over in Palestine, under whose hot sun he would recover from his illness in an optimistic atmosphere of Jewish renewal. It was an unrealistic fantasy, and by July of that year he had conceded as much. Yet Kafka stuck to his Hebrew, and soon he was reading, with the help of a dictionary, Yosef Haim Brenner's recently published novel *Breakdown and Bereavement*. He found it hard going, especially as he did not care for the book.

It is easy to see why. The Russian-born Brenner was a powerful but ramshackle writer, and his novel, set in Palestine around 1910, is anything but optimistic. Its main protagonist, Yehezkel Hefetz, a Zionist pioneer determined to be a Jewish farmer, works briefly on the land until he suffers a physical injury; moves to Jerusalem, where he ends up living in a Jewish religious neighborhood; and is gradually sucked back into the ghetto life of Eastern European Orthodoxy, from which Palestine was meant to be an escape. The book's final pages find him thinking: "Enough brave words!... He had no illusions about the fact that he was beaten. In every way. A beaten man. Not just by the inevitable death that was yet to come, but by the other, the potentially living side of him too, which had never been able to express itself, though it had gone on existing inside him."

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Not exactly what Kafka, who might have seen himself in these words, wished to read. And not what young Zionist pioneers wished to read, either. Killed at the age of forty in the Arab riots of 1921, Brenner was a Zionist hero even before his death, a writer admired for his harsh honesty, who held that the Jewish people were prisoners of an economically parasitical past and must "start everything over again from the beginning, from scratch... Only physical labor can create a present tense for us." That his last and most ambitious Palestinian novel should have been about the abysmal failure of such an attempt—a failure that, even if limited to a single character, demanded to be read symbolically—was a bitter pill for his Hebrew-reading audience.

Brenner is one of a half-dozen historical figures to have a cameo role in *Only Yesterday*, the most ambitious Palestinian novel of S.Y. Agnon (1887–1970), modern Hebrew literature's sole Nobel Prize winner. Published in 1945 and now translated into English for the first time, *Only Yesterday* is set partly in Jaffa and partly in Jerusalem in the years 1908–1912. Its main protagonist, Yitzhak Kumer, a young Zionist pioneer from a Hasidic family in Agnon's native Polish province of Galicia, arrives in Palestine planning to till its soil. He seeks, but he cannot find, work in its Jewish colonies, because their effendi-caste of farmers prefers cheap Arab labor; and so settles in Jaffa, on whose northern dunes the first houses of Tel Aviv are being built, and, casting off the religious observance in which he was raised, becomes a house painter, and has an affair with a young woman. Eventually he breaks up with his girlfriend, drifts off to Jerusalem, and falls in love with the only daughter of a family

in the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Me'ah She'arim, then as now a bastion of religious anti-Zionism. He tries living in Jaffa once more; returns to Jerusalem; gradually returns, too, to a Jewishly observant life; marries the girl; and soon after is bitten by a mad dog and dies of rabies. In Jaffa he meets Brenner at an informal gathering. The famous writer speaks little in the course of the evening but ends it by saying in Yiddish, "*Kinderlakh, m'darf geyn aheym,*" "Children, we had better go home." The words could serve as the novel's ambiguous motto.

S.Y. Agnon and David Ben-Gurion in Jerusalem in 1965

AGNON KNEW BRENNER well and admired him greatly, though perhaps more as a man than as a writer. Borrowing the outlines of *Breakdown and Bereavement's* plot, certainly, seems a back-handed literary tribute, a way of saying, "Good idea, and now let me show you how to do it." Agnon's way of "doing" fiction, indeed, was so vastly different from Brenner's as to appear almost a reaction against it: understated rather than overstated, slyly ironic rather than passionately confessional, sphinx-like rather than direct. And in contrast to *Breakdown and Bereavement*, the ending of *Only Yesterday* is as inscrutable as the rest of the book. After a drought-breaking rain that falls on the day following Yitzhak Kumer's funeral, the novel's final paragraph tells us (in Barbara Harshav's highly literal translation, which works best when Agnon is parodying the kind of old-fashioned Hebrew that he himself favored):

> And every bush and every blade of grass emitted a good smell, and needless to say, so did the oranges. Like a blessed dwelling was the whole Land and its inhabitants were blessed by the Lord. And you, our brothers, the elite of our salvation in [the recently established *moshavim* or socialist farming cooperatives of] Kinneret and Merhavia, in Eyn Gannim and Um Juni, which is now Degania [the first full-fledged kibbutz], you went out to your work in the fields and the gardens, the work our comrade Yitzhak wasn't blessed with. Our comrade Yitzhak wasn't blessed to stand on the ground and plow and sow, but like his ancestor Reb Yudel Hasid... he was blessed to be given an estate of a grave in the Holy Land. May all mourners mourn for that tortured man who died in a sorry affair. And we shall tell the deeds of our brothers and sisters, the children of the living God, the nation of the Lord, who work the earth of Israel for a monument and fame and glory.

The takeoff on the sentimental language of religious Zionism—for early twentieth-century Orthodoxy had its Zionists, too—is instantly recognizable. But at what, or at whom, is it aimed? At the innocence of such rhetoric, which could be that of Palestine's chief rabbi, the religious Zionist thinker Abraham Isaac Hacohen Kook? At Yitzhak Kumer, for believing in it? At the moshavniks and the kibbutzniks of Kinneret and Degania, for failing to realize that their socialist-Zionist idealism is but a secularized version of it? At *Only Yesterday's* readers, for being as embarrassed to laugh at it as they are to take it seriously? At the narrator himself, for falling helplessly into it just as he strives to marshal his powers for a symphonic finale? This is Agnon at his most typical, laying down multiple choices of interpretation and leaving them entirely up to us. As the Israeli critic Nitza Ben-Dov has written, "It is a mark of his modernism that his narratives appear to have no objective content that is independent of the point of view of the observer."

Put less academically, Agnon is twentieth-century literature's greatest tease. And for a great writer he flirts dangerously with parody all the time, his pseudo-rabbinic Hebrew being so exquisitely stylized that it teeters constantly on the brink of self-mockery. He uses language like a bullfighter's cape, daring us to fume at it and charge, only to find the blade of his irony plunged into us up to the hilt.

II.

AMOS OZ, A fine Hebrew novelist in his own right, writes well about Agnon. *The Silence of Heaven*, a book grown out of years of teaching Agnon's works, consists of extensive commentaries on three of the master's novels, of which a chapter on *Only Yesterday* is the longest. An almost page-by-page analysis, it is less a critical essay than a running guide.

Yet it is not without its incisive generalizations. One of these concerns what Oz calls Yitzhak's Kumer's "naïve synthesis," by which he means Yitzhak's ability to bridge or gloss over the contradictions between traditional Judaism and secular Zionism even after encountering them first-hand in Palestine. True, Yitzhak does not remain equidistant between the two: dropping his religious observance in Jaffa, he resumes it in Jerusalem while neglecting his Zionist ideals. But just as his Zionism is never a conscious rebellion against religion (as it is for Brenner and other characters in *Only Yesterday*), so his religion never dictates (as it does for the inhabitants of Me'ah She'arim) a principled rejection of Zionism. Yitzhak comes to Palestine, as Oz observes, both "as a pioneer working the soil" and "to observe the Commandments in the Land of Israel," and "armed with the naïve synthesis in his heart, [he] walks among these drawn swords, noticing neither that they are swords nor that they are drawn."

But what is Yitzhak not naïve about? Zionism, religion, politics, economics, personal and sexual relationships, his own and other people's psychological motives: he puts the best face on everything. Not for nothing are we told that he is the great-great-greatgrandson of Reb Yudel Hasid, the pious hero of Agnon's comically

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picaresque novel *The Bridal Canopy* (1935)—a man who, safely protected by an innocent faith, runs the gauntlet of experience unscathed. Yitzhak's Jaffa romance with Sonya Zweiering, the first sexual affair of his life, is a case in point. Characterized by Oz as taking place "between a virginal, erotically illiterate male and a female professor of love," it is a casual fling for the fun-loving Sonya, whereas Yitzhak, unaware of how she has seduced him or of what her verbal and body language means, takes the relationship so seriously that, long after being thrown over by her, he blames himself for not having married her like an honorable young man. It is precisely his absurd sense of guilt that keeps him from feeling cruelly rejected, so that, as Oz writes, "Reb Yudel Hasid's genes seem like antibodies protecting [Yitzhak] from disappointment."

So it is, too, with Yitzhak's perceptions of Zionist Jaffa and Orthodox Jerusalem, both portrayed in *Only Yesterday* as hot, dusty, and shallow provincial worlds bearing no resemblance to the romantic image of them propagated in the Diaspora. Each is inhabited by a majority of quite ordinary people, a small clique of manipulative politicians and rabbis, a transient population of lost souls and drifters, and a handful of genuine individuals—and Yitzhak manages to think highly of them all. The ordinary people he views as dedicated idealists; the manipulators as distinguished leaders; the lost souls as spiritual seekers; the individuals as mentors and models.

Yitzhak is drawn to the latter's strong sense of self, and yet he himself remains hesitant and passive. Not even the profession that he has mastered, becoming a skilled worker in place of the mere "paint smearer" that he was when he started out, can give him a sense of achievement, since he continually berates his failure to live on the land. Indeed, house painting is a central metaphor in *Only Yesterday.* It is literally a covering-up of reality.

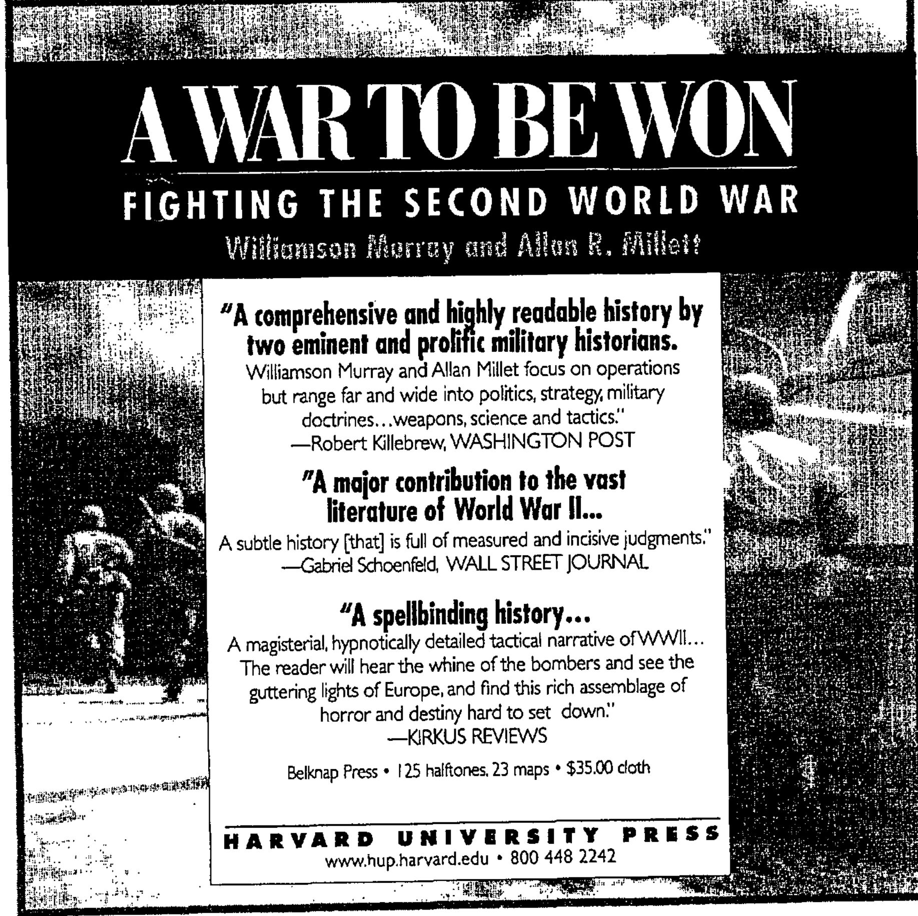
It is as a "paint smearer" that Yitzhak brings about his own death. Befriended one day by a stray dog named Balak, he takes his brush and prankishly daubs the Hebrew words *kelev meshuga,* "mad dog," on its fur. A central character in *Only Yesterday* (in fact, its most engaging one), this dog and his adventures take up long sections of the book. Until his unfortunate encounter with Yitzhak, Balak has been a contented resident of Me'ah She'arim, whose kosher food and pious Jews, more tolerant of dogs than of Zionists, he likes; but now, driven from the panic-stricken neighborhood, which takes the warning on his fur at face value, he is forced to survive by his wits, wandering through Jerusalem's many Christian and Muslim quarters while reflecting on their inhabitants, the nature of dogginess, the inscrutability of mankind, the injustice of his fate, and the many messages conveyed by his powerful senses to his weak intellect—all in language that, as befits his traditional Jewish education, breaks at times into the rhymed prose of the medieval Hebrew *maqama* and at times into the poetic quatrains of the nineteenth-century Haskalah.

Little by little, as word of Balak spreads to Jaffa and overseas, he becomes a *cause célèbre* in the Jewish world. Newspaper articles are written about him, debates take place over him, various theories regarding him are proposed: he is a victim of anti-Zionist Orthodox persecution—no, of the Zionist use of Hebrew for secular purposes—no, he is neither, for he is a mere allegorical beast. He, for his part, now infected with a real case of rabies picked up in the course of his abject street life, pines for Me'ah She'arim and its Jewish cooking until, throwing caution to the winds, he returns to it. There he catches sight of Yitzhak, realizes in a flash that here is the man responsible for all his woes, and deliciously sinks his teeth into him.

Clearly Balak is an allegory—but of what? Agnon criticism has had a field day with the question. Is the dog Yitzhak Kumer's alter ego, the sensual and animal shadow of him that, stewing beneath a repressive consciousness, finally goes mad? Is the dog secular Zionism? Or the Jewish people in exile? Or the demonic power in life, always ready to break loose and wreak havoc? Or simply, defying all attempts at interpretation, the principle of literary indeterminacy? Agnon, who has great fun with Balak, keeps us guessing, and Oz wisely cautions against letting him drive *us* mad while doing it. "It is enough to note," Oz writes, "that the main theme of Balak in the novel is the orphanhood and abandonment of a dog who is and is not like a proper Jewish dog, is and is not like every other obsequious stray dog looking for a home and love and attention, is and is not out of his mind."

III.

Balak, at any rate, longs for the traditional Jewish world that he has left, and in this he resembles Yitzhak Kumer, who even at his happiest longs for Galicia. Not that he consciously admits it; but unconsciously this is where his mind pulls him, as in the following passage describing a Jaffa evening (this and subsequent translations are my own):



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> A peaceful hush lay over the city and its houses....Each house shone through friendly windows and through the spiked spires shone the moon. The very stones had made their peace with you. The leaves fluttered on the trees. Was that a sound coming from the earth? You strained to hear. An Arab caravan drew near, its camels bearing the good things of the land of Israel. Joining it in your thoughts, you let it carry you away to your father.

The "you" and "we" modes of narration in *Only Yesterday* are deliberately ambiguous, but the clandestine movement of Yitzhak's thought is clear. For a moment the night's tranquility reconciles him to life in Palestine, whose very stones have seemed hostile; then, gazing at the Oriental romance of the scene with its minarets and camels, he involuntarily fantasizes being taken.... back to his parents' home in Poland.

It is not only Galicia's "realm of gemutlichkeit," as Oz calls it, that Yitzhak misses—the family warmth, the familiar food, the cooler climate, the literally greener pastures. He misses also the religion that he was raised in, the sweetly remembered wholeness of the Jewish ritual day, week, and year. Having come to Palestine in search of camaraderie and greater meaning, Yitzhak finds loneliness and ennui. It is left to the narrator to remind us that traditional Judaism was eroding in early twentieth-century Eastern Europe, too, while commenting on the difference between a religious sensibility, which Yitzhak has retained, and the religious structure he has discarded:

> When we were young and studied Torah, we knew it to be eternal....Later, however, we discovered other books and found unimagined things in them. We began to doubt, and having entered doubt's chambers, grew careless in our religious duties. If we performed them at all, it was to avoid angering our parents, and when we came to Palestine and put them behind us, we put the Torah behind us as well....Though no intellectual, Yitzhak cast off his religion too, so that even if he caught a glimpse of divine light, it went out as quickly as a flame in a cracked lamp. It might shine in him when visiting the Wailing Wall on a Sabbath eve, but he returned home from there to his old self. All alone then with no Sabbath cloth on the table, no Sabbath candle to light the house, no Sabbath wine and no Sabbath bread, he felt as sad as could be....

Emotionally, Zionism turns out to be an unsatisfying substitute. And the most unsatisfying thing about Zionism is that it *is* a substitute. As Oz remarks, "the stream of Yitzhak's thoughts reveals the fact that the 'root of his soul' is a Hasidic, religious root, and even his Zionism is merely a Hasidic, religious impulse displaced for a while into a new channel."

Oz is overly restrictive, though, in limiting this judgment to Yitzhak, for it applies equally well to all of Yitzhak's Jaffa friends. Young Zionists from Eastern Europe like himself, they continually, and often unconsciously, re-live the religious world in which they grew up. They may go to the beach rather than the ritual bathhouse on Friday afternoons, and they may eat their Friday-night meal together in a local restaurant, but the first stars in the sky make them think wistfully of the Sabbath candles that they have not lit, and as "the gates of the west redden and the sea rises," they, too, are seized by "a hidden yearning too fine for the senses." Though by the end of the evening they are whirling, boys and girls together, in a *hora*, that ecstatic ritual of Zionist pioneers, this too, Agnon implies, is nothing more than a thinly disguised Hasidic circle dance. Indeed, before "pushing back the tables and dancing out into the street and into town," they engage in the half-jesting, half-nostalgic singing of traditional Sabbath hymns, keeping time by banging forks and knives on the table.

SEEN IN HISTORICAL perspective, it is now obvious that secular Zionism in its heyday—and the politically dominant anti-religious Zionist Left most of all—was propelled by the very religious attitudes and emotions from which it ostensibly had emancipated itself. Up to a point, indeed, it acknowledged as much; a supremely dialectical movement that was both an ultimate affirmation and an ultimate negation of the Jewish past, it continually stressed both aspects of itself. It never denied that the Zionist dream of a return to *eretz-yisra'el*, "the land of Israel," had a strong religious component. It took Jewish pride in the link between the socialist-utopian ideology to which this dream had been harnessed and age-old Jewish messianism. It even patterned the vocabulary of this ideology on biblical and rabbinic language—*gola*, "exile"; *aliyah*, "going up" or immigration to Palestine; *kibbush- ha'adama*, the agricultural "conquest of the land"; *kibbutz*, originally a small commune of yeshiva students; *ge'ula*, "redemption"; *tehiya*, "[national] resurrection," and so on—and promoted a cult of rapturous devotion to physical labor markedly like the traditional yeshivah ethos of study.

And yet, boastful of the new "Zionist man" that it was creating, it celebrated the transformation of religious tradition into something radically and self-sufficiently different. Palestinian Hebrew literature is replete with such transformational imagery—the secular version, as it were, of the "naïve synthesis," as in the poet Abraham Shlonsky's well-known lines from the 1920s:

> Dress me, good Jewish mother,
> in a coat of many stripes
> And bring me at dawn-prayer-time
> to work.
>
> My land dons light like a prayer shawl.
> Its houses are cubes of phylacteries.
> Like thongs of phylacteries
> wind its paved roads.
>
> Well-built, the city prays at dawn
> to its maker.
> And a maker
> Is your son Abraham,
> A poet and road builder in Israel.

Tenderly devotional, Shlonsky's poem is at the same time brashly blasphemous. In a world without God, both nature and human artifice pray to Man the Creator, and Father Abraham has become the revolutionary son, brought by his mother to the road gang rather than the synagogue, a Jewish proletarian demiurge.

But Agnon was conservatively minded. Having immigrated to Palestine in 1908 as a religious young Zionist like Yitzhak Kumer, and lived in Jaffa, where he abandoned his observant life, he re-emigrated to Europe in 1912, and there he reverted to a moderate Orthodoxy. He spent the war years and their aftermath in Germany tottering on the brink of chaos, which he left to settle permanently in Jerusalem in 1928. Germany left him deeply fearful of revolutions. *Only Yesterday* is his nightmare vision of where the Zionist belief in revelation must lead: fatally back to the now sterile womb that gave birth to it.

IV.

WHY THIS VISION? And why in 1945, when Eastern-European-style Orthodoxy appeared annihilated forever, wiped out practically to its last adherent by the Nazis, its small Palestinian offshoot a pitifully doomed remnant, while secular Zionism was brimming with confidence? Why, for that matter, the same vision thirty years earlier, at a time when assimilation and emigration to the West had caused mass defection from Orthodoxy's ranks, in a novel by the anti-religious Brenner? What did Brenner see that produced the terrible shudder of *Breakdown and Bereavement?* What did Agnon see that produced *Only Yesterday*?

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One is tempted to answer: he saw the year 2000—that is, an Israel in which socialist Zionism has long been dead; and the "conquest of the land" has largely reverted to the hands of Jewish landowners employing non-Jewish labor; and secular Zionist ideology is exhausted and disparaged by a "post-Zionist" intelligentsia; and the "naïve synthesis" has fallen apart (its last serious proponents were the ideologues of the religious settlement movement in the occupied territories, who sought to breathe life into the old Kookian notion of secular Zionism as a profane means to sacred ends); and a triumphantly renascent religious Orthodoxy rides a social and political high tide.

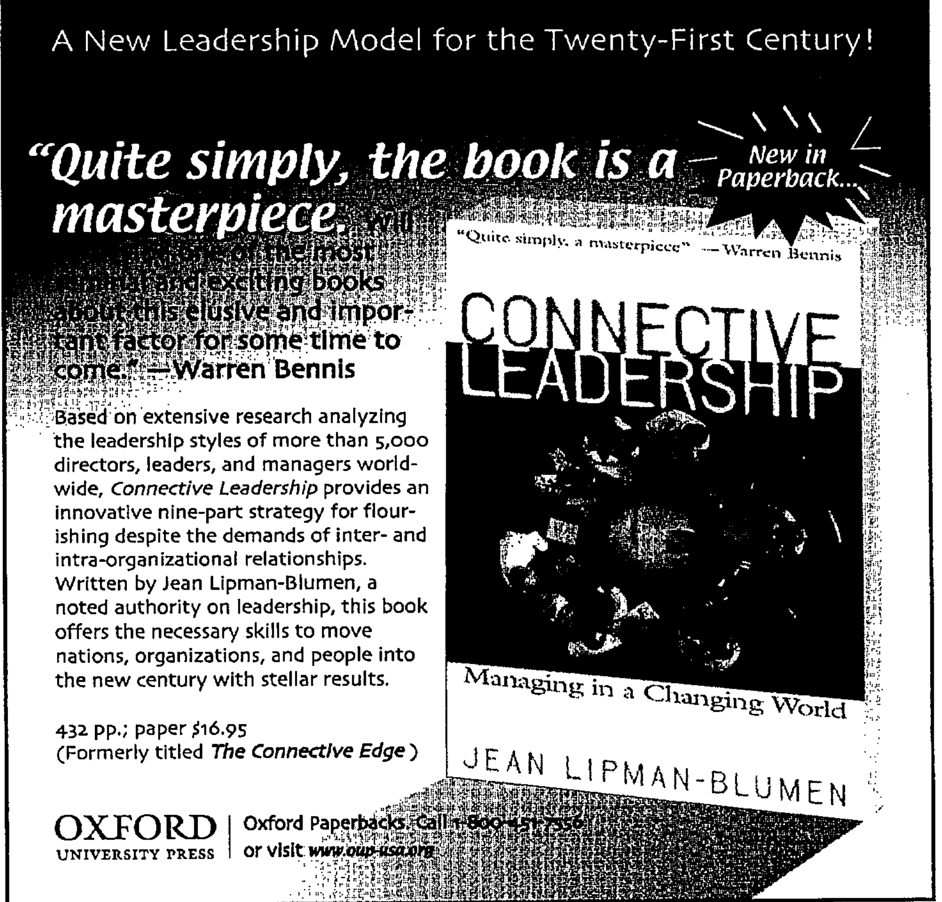
The last few months alone have seen Israel's political life practically paralyzed by the parochial demands of a non-Zionist or anti-Zionist religious party named Shas, barely existent a decade ago and now holding seventeen seats in the 120-member Knesset. (Other religious parties hold ten more, making an all-time high.) Just when Prime Minister Ehud Barak needed all his energy for the critical stage of negotiations with the Palestinians, he had to divert much of it, unimaginably from the vantage point of fifty years ago, to negotiating with a political directorate of fundamentalist rabbis that holds the country's fate in his hands—and that, even after repeated capitulations by him, deserted him just as he left for Camp David.

Although the surprising resurgence of Orthodoxy in Israel, and the religious and political hardening of its more moderate elements, is a complicated and not necessarily permanent trend, the great fear of the country's secular population is that it is irreversible. At present a third as large as the secular community, the Orthodox and the ultra-Orthodox have twice its birthrate, and in parts of Israel, particularly in Jerusalem, where something of a demographic panic prevails in secular neighborhoods and there is much talk of flight to Tel Aviv, an Orthodox majority is already on the horizon. There is hardly a secular Israeli who does not know someone who in recent years has become a *hozer biteshuva*, a "penitential" returnee to Orthodoxy; hardly a secular Israeli intellectual who has not wondered if his country has a non-religious Jewish future at all. "I tell you," an acquaintance said to me the week of Barak's latest capitulation to Shas, "between the Arabs and the Orthodox, all this"—he was referring to the state of Israel—"will be a passing episode." It was the same week in which I heard an ultra-Orthodox Jew remark, "Live with secular Jews? What for? They're no longer Jewish and they're finished anyway."

Needless to say, Agnon, although he sometimes had uncanny presentiments (more than one reader of his novel *A Guest For The Night*, which was written in 1939, has been fooled into thinking that it takes place after the Holocaust), was no Nostradamus. What he saw with great prescience in *Only Yesterday*—what the novel is in a sense "about"—was the lack of staying power, the historically short-lived nature, of a secular ideology erected on religious foundations. To the Hebrew reader in 1945, Yitzhak Kumer's fate, like Yehezkel Hefetz's fate in 1920, could only have seemed puzzling and anomalous: why invest so much time and talent in describing the trajectory of an individual who lives and dies by accident, as it were, traveling the wrong way on a one-way street? What general significance could such a life and death have? Only now, the flow of traffic having reversed itself, is it possible to read Yitzhak as the representative character that Agnon, without textually tipping his hand, apparently intended him to be.

There is a joke—which Agnon, I think, would have liked—about the difference between a Jewish atheist and a gentile atheist. The gentile does not believe that there is a God; the Jew *believes* that there is no God. Jews, as this joke and *Only Yesterday* tell us, have been psychologically conditioned, even more than most people, to need to live in a purposeful world. For centuries this need was satisfied by the religious culture of Judaism, which gave meaning to each moment of life. And when, undermined by modernity, the protective walls of this culture fell, Jews surged in disproportionate numbers to other meaning-generating faiths and activities—to the arts and the sciences; to the great social-revolutionary movements of Europe; to secular Zionism. Yet of all these options, it was only the last that remained umbilically tied to Judaism even as it broke with it, and that derived its legitimacy from the perceived ruins on which it built.

Should secular Zionism collapse—or so *Only Yesterday* implies—it would find itself back among those ruins, to which it would instinctively seek to re-attach itself. Symbolically read, this is the story of Yehezkel Hefetz and Yitzhak Kumer. In order to read Yitzhak this way, of course, we have to recognize, as the best Agnon critics have, that Agnon's own attitude toward Orthodoxy, his religious way of life and his posturing notwithstanding, was ambivalent. That he wanted to have faith in Judaism's "eternal" verities, which appealed to the craving for order and the deep fear of social and psychological disintegration that are present in nearly



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everything that he wrote, seems clear; that maintaining such a faith was difficult is equally clear. The same pitilessly satirical eye that he turns on Jaffa is not spared Me'ah She'arim, which, as Oz remarks, is portrayed in *Only Yesterday* as a "fossilized" and "empty" world. Its perfect symbol is Yitzhak's father-in-law, the fanatical Reb Faish, who, in a coma since taking a nasty fall when shocked by the mad dog Balak, lies with his wide-open eyes seeing nothing. The hollow fundamentalism of Me'ah She'arim is a mirror image of the hollow freethinking of Jaffa, and Yitzhak's shrinking into it is a regressive flight rather than a bold step toward salvation.

In fact, as Agnon knew well, "ultra-Orthodoxy," like secular Zionism, was itself a creation of modernity, a frightened late nineteenth-century response to it that sought to withdraw from contaminating contact with the outside world as Judaism had almost never done before. Jaffa and Jerusalem represent in *Only Yesterday*, as do Tel Aviv and Jerusalem in contemporary Israel, two worlds that, each reacting to the extremism of the other, drive each other to further extremes. The real nightmare of Agnon's novel is that a secular Zionism, running out of the fuel of Jewish tradition, will find a witless robot at the pump.

Thus the correct answer to our multiple choice question concerning the ending of *Only Yesterday* is, all of the above. No one was more drawn to the "naïve synthesis" or convinced of its necessity than Agnon; and no one was more skeptical of its realization. The novel's narrator *is* laughing at himself for falling into the rhetoric of his last paragraph, and his laughter is desperately sad, for when the only language that can save us is naïve, we are beyond saving. "Children, we had better go home"—but where is that? ■

The Human Variables

By CASS R. SUNSTEIN

Why Wages Don't Fall During a Recession by Truman F. Bewley

(Harvard, 576 pp., $55)

WHAT DO WORKERS want? Most people give the same answer: more money. The answer is not entirely false, but it certainly is not right. If employers and government officials act on the basis of that answer, they will make serious mistakes.

To understand this point, it is necessary to back up a bit and to say something about an increasingly intense debate. Economics is known as "the dismal science," in part because many economists work with a dismal picture of human beings. According to a standard account, people combine a high degree of selfishness with an impressive ability to calculate and to promote their interests. They are "rational, self-interested profit-maximizers." Many economists see people's choices as following from that foundation—not merely investment decisions, but decisions about whether to get married, to have children, to commit crime, to discriminate, to have safe sex, to raise or cut wages, to work, to break the law, to have an abortion.

To say the least, this is a simplified picture of human beings; but economists have used it to provide remarkable insights into social problems. We now know, for example, that rent-control legislation will decrease the stock of available housing (a special problem for poor people); that the environmental regulation of new cars can increase pollution, by leading people to keep old, dirty cars on the road; that laws forbidding discrimination on the basis of disability can actually hurt disabled people, by making employers wary of hiring disabled people for fear of a costly lawsuit.

Yet the simplified economic picture of human behavior sometimes goes wrong; and in the last twenty-five years many people have been trying to infuse economics with a more accurate understanding of human beings. Gary Becker has emphasized the role of altruism and social influences on individual behavior. Other economists have worked to create a new field, known as "behavioral economics," which seeks to imbue economics with a more vivid and complicated sense of how people think and what they want. Behavioral economists draw particular inspiration from two cognitive psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and the late Amos Tversky. Through a series of careful experiments, Kahneman and Tversky have tried to provide a kind of "map" of human judgment and decision-making.

Kahneman and Tversky show that we often rely on mental short-cuts, or "heuristics," to help with difficult tasks. Perhaps the most important of these ordinary calculations is the "availability heuristic," by which we judge the probability of an event by asking whether an incident of its occurrence readily comes to mind. Hence, for example, some people think that AIDS is not a problem, while others think that it is a near-epidemic. Kahneman and Tversky also show that people usually hate losses from their current situation—in fact, they dislike losses far more than they like equivalent gains. If, like most people, you do not prefer to sell stocks for a loss, or you get upset whenever gasoline prices rise, you will know what Kahneman and Tversky have in mind. Behavioral economists refer to this phenomenon—the special antipathy to losses—as "loss aversion." Robert Shiller's *Irrational Exuberance*, his surprise best-seller about the stock market, draws on behavioral economics to question the rationality of stockholders' decisions, and ultimately to predict a large decline in market values.

BEHAVIORAL ECONOMISTS ALSO emphasize that people care about things other than money or material self-interest. They are especially interested in status and decency—in being fair and, even more, in being treated fairly. As the economist Robert Frank has emphasized, people often care most not about how much they have in the abstract, but whether they have less or more than others. Many people would prefer earning $70,000 per year in an organization where most people earn $60,000 to earning $80,000 in an organization where most people earn $90,000. And, as Matthew Rabin and Richard Thaler have shown, individuals are sometimes willing to sacrifice their economic self-interest in order to be fair and to punish individuals who are acting unfairly. Most people tip even in out-of-town restaurants. And many people will give up some money in order to harm people who have been unfair to them—not just in an acrimonious divorce, but in daily life.

With an understanding of the fundamental importance of fairness, we can obtain a better sense of some otherwise surprising behavior—why, for example, many companies are reluctant to raise prices even when they can; why some parties to a lawsuit do not settle when settlemen

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