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It will readily be seen that for Agnon time is a central issue. Our childhood lives with us in the present; past obligations and promises, those of ourselves as individuals and those of the total community to which we belong, remain with us, a presence not to be put by.

Yet, in a different sense the past is irrecoverable. We look yearningly toward it knowing that Henrietta will never again be to Manfred Herbst what she once was, knowing that we shall never again enjoy the patrician charm of the garden and the goldfish pond in the childhood of Susan Ehrlich. Agnon's sense of the past is dialectical; it is eternally present, and yet it is lost to us, as in T. S. Eliot's *The Four Quartets*:

Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

Agnon's world has been summed up under the heading of nostalgia and nightmare.¹ When the past is viewed without a living connection with the present, it becomes merely a nostalgic dream, and much of Agnon's writing is nostalgic and elegiac in this way; but when the present is viewed unsupported by meanings derived from the past it becomes a nightmare. When this happens, Agnon's writing takes on a nightmarish quality. Ultimately it is a question of reality. We may imagine that to live simply and naturally in the present moment is to occupy reality. For Agnon, however, the present when detached from the past becomes grotesquely unreal, just as the past when viewed as mere past, i.e., unenduring, fossilized, romanticized, also becomes unreal. What is needed is the purposeful conjunction of the two.

The long novel in which Agnon makes his most

intense exploration of the theme of time—a novel comparable in this respect to Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*—is his *Oreah Nata Lalun*, 1939 (*A Guest for the Night*). It has been described as Agnon's central masterpiece, that in which all his potentialities were realized.²

The hint for the novel was provided by a visit to his native town of Buczacz in the year 1930. This visit of a few days, after an absence of sixteen years, stirred up in Agnon the memories of the past in much the same way as the taste of the *madeleine* awoke in Proust all those latent memories from which his great novel took its rise. Agnon's narrator therefore is seen to visit his native town of Shebush and to reflect on its past glories and on the experiences of his childhood. There are three time-levels in the novel: there is the time of writing itself, i.e., the middle thirties—the period of the rise of Nazism and of increasing tension between Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine. These matters though not directly discussed cast their shadow over the whole work. Then there is the time of the "return of the native," i.e., the year 1930, which Agnon expands into a full twelve months giving a kind of Greek unity to the work after the manner of Hardy's novel. And finally, there is the time of retrospect, the years of the turn of the century when the narrator was a boy. All the older characters refer back to this period in some way or other. This triple time-scheme creates a complex structure unified by the first-person narrator himself who holds all three together, and shares this multiple awareness with the reader. The effect is to give to the narrator an unusual degree of command over the novel as a whole.³ He is the main actor, and his is also the consciousness within which the action proceeds,

for the important events in this novel are inward events—reflections and memories.

So far, this is very like Proust, but Agnon, unlike Proust, is not primarily recording his private experience or exercising his private sensibility. He is ultimately involved in an epic enterprise, in recording the experience of a total community in a time of change. His theme is the Jew at the crossroads of contemporary Jewish history, before the Wars and between the Wars: one kind of historic Jewish community, viz., the *shtetl*, disintegrating whilst that which was evidently to replace it, viz., the new *Yishuv*—the national community in Palestine—is not yet fully formed and established. All the major characters, as well as having a relation to the past of the *shtetl*, have a relation, whether of hope, disappointment or skepticism, to the new enterprise in the Land of Israel. Past, present, and future are thus beheld in a kind of triangle of forces, with the narrator somewhere at the center of the triangle.

At the opening of the novel, the narrator, a resident of Jerusalem, arrives at the railway station of Shebush on the eve of the Day of Atonement. The first inhabitant whom he sees is the guard on the platform, one Gumowitz, who had lost a hand in the war and has a rubber hand to replace it. The next Jew he encounters, Daniel Bach, is also mutilated. His leg, replaced now by a wooden stump, was lost soon after the war in a train accident whilst he was trying to earn a living by smuggling saccharine into the country. Crippling and loss are evidently the signs of the new era in Shebush. The service in the Great Synagogue on the solemn eve of the fast immediately focuses for us the sharp contrast between past and present. The synagogue seems no longer so "great" as it was to the narra-

tor in his childhood. It has shrunk. It has also become darker; the great candelabra have disappeared—evidently plundered in the war. But these are merely the outward signs of an inner spiritual change. The people in the synagogue are no longer so vitally involved in the meanings of the Day as once they were. Not only have the silver "crowns" disappeared, which once adorned their prayer shawls, but the glory is gone from the prayers themselves. They finish the routine of prayer hastily and shuffle off to their homes.

Walking out toward the river after the service, the narrator, never once identified by name in the course of the novel, meets a group of freethinking youth ostentatiously desecrating the holy day. They have just held a party, and are now smoking their cigarettes to show how little the Day of Atonement means to them. On the following morning the narrator goes to the old *Bet Midrash* (The House of Study) to worship. This had been in times past the true spiritual and intellectual center of the community. He notes how bare the bookshelves now are, and how few people, maybe twenty in all, have come to the service. Most of them do not even possess a prayer shawl. The signs of poverty and decline are all around, and the worshippers tell him that soon after the festival they plan to move out—some to America, others to different parts of the globe. The world of the *shtetl* is becoming empty—emptied of meaning as well as of people. But the past lives with those who are left as it does with the narrator himself. Toward evening at the closing service there is a deeper solemnity, and even the skeptical Daniel Bach, who had earlier expressed doubts as to whether the Day of Atonement could bring either good or evil to anyone, is seen near the door, prayer book in hand, whilst his father, the pious Reb Shlomo, a true and

uncorrupted survivor of earlier days, intones the service. The narrator himself has moments of meditation in which past and present fuse together, as for instance when he stands by the window and sees once again the mountainside opposite raised protectively above the *Bet Midrash* as it always had been, reminding him of the time in his youth when he had stood by the same window and had composed his first poems in moments snatched from his *Talmud* studies. In this respect, his visit to the old *Bet Midrash* is like Wordsworth's second visit to Tintern Abbey. It disturbs him with a sense of something far more deeply interfused than he had experienced in the past. And even when walking in the forest, he becomes more intensely aware of its beauty than ever before. "I don't know whether something was added or whether perhaps just my own eyesight had doubled."⁴ Paradoxically the visit to his native town thus becomes a new revelation, a way of entering into his deeper self.

This notion of the entry into the deeper layers of consciousness is now strikingly dramatized by an important symbol introduced into the novel at this point. It is the great brass key of the *Bet Midrash* which one of the older inhabitants, Elimelekh Kesar, presents to the narrator scoffingly saying they have no further use for it, and why shouldn't he have it since he seems so drawn to the place where his fathers had worshipped? The narrator takes charge of the key and his emotion is so great that he cannot utter a word. Possessed of the key to the past, he now lets himself into the *Bet Midrash* every day to spend the morning hours in solitary study and meditation, and to find new meaning in old books. But this reunion with the past is short-lived. Arriving one morning at the *Bet Midrash* he finds he has lost the key, and gloom descends on him as he

paces round the *Bet Midrash* trying to find a crack or crevice through which to enter:

But our forefathers built the *Bet Midrash* strongly of stout timbers, doors and locks. You can only get in if you have the key.⁵

Now that the "key" is lost he also loses his zest for conversation with his many friends in the *shtetl*, and he loses his pleasure in his country walks in field and forest. All the world becomes for him a mighty stranger. For after all, it is the past, symbolized by the key, which had given meaning to the present. In this dilemma, Daniel Bach advises him to do as he had done: having lost his true leg, he had made a substitute out of wood. Let the narrator do the same: let him have a new key made to replace the original! A new iron key is therefore ordered, and when it is made and handed to him, the narrator's peace of mind is restored. Once again he can resume his connection with the *Bet Midrash* and all that it represents, but now he does more: he creates a rapport between the *Bet Midrash* and the world around him (the new key symbolizing evidently the possible junction of past and present): Winter is at hand and he brings wood to heat the *Bet Midrash*; he also organizes prayer and study sessions for those who are interested in sharing with him the warmth of the place. A kind of community is established for a short period around and within the *Bet Midrash*.

We follow the key right through the tale. Before he leaves Shebush at the end of his stay, the narrator locks the door of the *Bet Midrash* for the last time and presents the key to a newborn child of some dear friends, at the circumcision ceremony. Significantly, Yeruham, the father of the baby, is not a pious Jew but

a freethinker; nevertheless, the newborn child represents continuity and hope. Shebush had long been a place where people died. This birth—the first in some years—and the circumcision that follows it indicate a glimmer of hope. The key is therefore properly handed over to the child by the narrator who acts as godfather.

But this is not the end of the tale of the key. Returning to his Jerusalem home, at the end of the novel, the narrator is astonished when one day his wife produces from his luggage the identical key which he believed he had presented to his godson. Closer inspection reveals that this is not the substitute iron key but the brass original which he thought he had lost, but which had slipped between the folds of his traveling bag during his stay in Shebush and now turned up again in Jerusalem. It is a moment of joy and relief comparable to the discovery by Bunyan's hero of the Key of Promise, enabling him to escape from Doubting Castle and proceed on his pilgrimage to the Celestial City. The narrator wonders whether perhaps he ought to send the key back to Shebush, but decides that the remaining inhabitants would have no use for it, and so he keeps it against the day when, according to rabbinic belief, "the Synagogues and Houses of Study of the Diaspora will find their way to the Land of Israel to be re-erected there." From now on he will guard the key and cherish it:

I entered my house and hid the key in a box, locking the box on the outside. Then I strung the key to the box over my heart. I knew of course that no one was all that interested in the key to our old *Bet Midrash*; but said I to myself, when one day it comes over here to be re-erected in the Land of Israel it is as well that I should have the key ready to hand. Well, the key is tucked away where I put it and I am back at work. But whenever it comes into

my mind I say to myself, "The Synagogues and Houses of Study of the Diaspora, etc." Then I open my window and look out to see if they have come trundling back to the Land of Israel to be set up again. But oh dear, no, the Land is silent and desolate, and not the faintest sound of those synagogues and houses of study can be heard. But still the key is safely put away waiting with me for that day. Of course a key made of iron and brass can stand the strain. For me, flesh and blood as I am, it's harder.⁶

The Land of Israel is still not what it ought to be. It remains, in some sense, a desolation. But one day the key will come into its own. The symbolism is clear. The recovered key, which the narrator will preserve against the time when the spiritual treasures represented by the *Bet Midrash* are to be reinstated in the Land of Israel, is the key to the future, just as it had earlier been the key to the past, and just as the substitute key was the key to the present. It is a unifying symbol. More than an isolated motif, it is in a way the theme of the whole novel—its metaphysical depth undiminished by the tone of irony and whimsy with which it is handled.

In *A Guest for the Night*, past and present can still somehow be brought together; the narrator is a sign of that. He finally comes home and brings with him his burden of memories. There is a sense of redemption: the demons of the past have been exorcised, its promises will be in some measure fulfilled. But no such reconciliations are possible in the third of Agnon's longer novels, *Temol Shilshom* (*The Day Before Yesterday*) published in the grimmer context of the year 1945. Although it is set in the early part of the century and refers to events in the period of the Second Aliyah, the overall perspective is that of the Second World War. Holocaust, madness, and death have swept away

