

TRUMAN 10 (2001)  
[U. HEIDELBERG]

ZIPORA KAGAN

## Halachah and Aggadah as a Cultural-Poetic Code in *A Guest for the Night* by S.Y. Agnon\*

Many times I ran to the Beit Midrash [study-hall]. Perhaps the Holy One, blessed be he, would perform a miracle for me and open the door for me. I even looked in the pile of Shemot [worn-out religious texts containing the names of God]; when I was a young man and I came to the Beit Midrash early in the morning and in the evening, I would hide the key there, so that if someone would arrive before me, he would find it there.

S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night* (p. 78 /77)\*\*

### *The Code*

The search for a cultural code is characteristic for periods of crisis, in which the need to discover cultural continuity increases, whether as a defense against the danger of disintegration, or whether as a necessary condition for continuity. The search process itself consists of a dialectic dialogue between the present and the past, between new forms and old forms. The discovery of the literary code enables us to read the text differently, to define additional possible events in it, some of which are unexpected.

The code is a mark, or a system of marks, which coordinates between a given marker and the object it marks. More than the code is an apparatus which makes communication possible, it is an apparatus making transformation between two internally connected systems possible. Such a connection has a dual significance, which springs from its two faces: the one, the transmission of information between the two texts; and the other, the building of mutual links.<sup>1</sup>

Lotman<sup>2</sup> notes, that the question with which code is an artistic text to be enciphered, is indeed the first question, but it entails a second question: what is the code

---

\* This is a new version, changed significantly here, of an article first published in: Dapim lemchkar besifrut 5-6 (Pages for Literary Research), (Hebr.), University of Haifa, Department for Hebrew and Comparative Literature, 1989, pp. 29-42.

\*\* The citations are translated from the Hebrew, 7th edition of Agnon's "A Guest for the Night", Tel-Aviv, Schocken, 1970. For comparison – see also the English edition, translated by Misha Louvish, New York 1968. The first number in reference-page brackets, refers to the Hebrew, and the second one refers to the English translation. An English translation for some important Hebrew words used in this article will be given in square brackets amidst the text.

<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington 1971, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> Juri Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, Michigan 1977, pp. 23-25.

used by the recipient for the deciphering of the text? Lotman distinguishes between two cases: in the first, there is a common code shared by the recipient and the sender; and in the second, the recipient uses a code different from that of the sender.<sup>3</sup> Even in the first case – that of a common code shared by the recipient and the sender – there are two possibilities. The one, in which the process of decoding symbols is ‘natural’, and most of the effort is invested in the discovery of structures and meanings; and the other, in which the deciphering is not only a mean for understanding the text, but rather a process of constructing a common language (i.e. culture), in which a text or a part of a text is encoded and shared by the author and the reader.<sup>4</sup>

In light of the above, I intend to propose a reading of *A Guest for the Night*, based on the code of *Halachah and Aggadah*<sup>5</sup>. Halachah [the law] and Aggadah [the tale] are connected in Jewish cultural consciousness with Rabbinic literature, especially with the Talmudic tapestry composed of the overt and covert dialogue between the two of them, the objective element (Halachah) and the subjective one (Aggadah). In other words, not only all the tensions and contradictions, but also the richness of Jewish life, are spread out between the signs and symbols of the Aggadic language, on the one hand, and those of the Halachic language, on the other hand: between ideas and plots, symbols and deeds. Without discovering the dialogical (and for the most part dialectical as well) links which are active here, both visibly and in a concealed manner, it is impossible to attain the full significance of texts in our literature, both new and old. This intellectual and poetic principle imparts solidity and depth to the text, assures its continuity and uniformity, and in the same time serves as its cultural code. This means that the deciphering of the various functions of the code (linguistic, symbolic, and structural) in a given text, is by itself a condition for a dialogue between the reader and the text’s meanings.

The readers of *A Guest for the Night* are well aware of the difficulties of searching for a common code, shared by the author and his addressees, though such a code is crucial for detecting the central formative structure of the work, and for deciphering its meaning. A work like *A Guest for the Night* is constructed by linguistic links with an external system of literary texts, and therefore it is possible to reveal its core, its organizing principle, only by finding the linguistic code, which internally connects between these two presumably separate and disconnected systems. The deciphering of the connections, which many times are concealed within semiotic ‘molds’, releases contents and forms which until now were imprisoned and hidden in the two texts, and builds not only the understanding of the text, but also a new literary reality based on the inter-textual relationship.

<sup>3</sup> Regarding the problematic of reading texts in modern Hebrew literature, caused by a cultural-linguistic gap between the sender’s (author) codes and models, on the one hand, and those of the recipient (reader), on the other hand, see Gershon Shaked’s article (Gershon Shaked, *Hilufei merkazim betoldot hasifrut ha’ivrit hahadasha – Tzefanim vemodelim*, (Exchange of Centers in the History of Modern Hebrew Literature), in: *Yetzirot venimaneihen: Arb’a perakom betorat hahitkablut*, Tel Aviv 1987, pp. 12-36.

<sup>4</sup> Lotman (see n. 2), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Zipora Kagan, *Halachah verged kezofen shel sifrut* (The Halachah and Aggadah as a Literary Code), (Hebr.), Jerusalem 1988.

The majority of Agnon's researchers have already indicated the existence of many Halachic and Aggadic expressions and motifs in his texts, revealing and formulating its imparted meanings, added by these sources.<sup>6</sup> The reading proposed here is a continuation of its predecessors; its main thrust, however, is to follow the manners of connection between the two systems – the Talmud and Agnon's novel – in order to decipher the novel's meanings and to examine Agnon's poetic stance regarding the creation of new literature in accordance with the Mishna's and the Talmud's literary codes. It is not incidental that the text of *A Guest for the Night* contains many quotations from any form of distinction between Halachah and Aggadah:

What is the difference between the tales of the Hasidim and the stories about the other Sages of Israel? If you want, I may say that there is no difference between them, that what one contains is contained in the other, only that the other Sages of Israel are masters of Halachah and they are mentioned in reference to their teachings, while the former are men of deeds and are mentioned in reference to their deeds. [...] Or if you want, I may say that there is a difference between them, that most of the stories about the sages of Israel come to teach regarding the Torah and the commandments, ethical teaching and proper conduct, which every person is capable of acquiring, while the stories of the Hasidim are intended to increase the honor of the Tzadik'im [Hasidic masters], who were merited by heaven to perform awesome deeds, which not every person is capable of doing. The author of 'Leket Yosher' wrote his book so that people would know how his teacher, the Gaon [great scholar] conducts himself, so that they would learn the practical law, while regarding the tales of the Hasidim, your soul is moved by them and your heart is inflamed, but you are not capable of performing such deeds as theirs (240/257).

An additional manifestation of this observation is expressed in the fashioning of Rabbi Hayim's character, who represents the tendency towards "Halachah" without "Aggadah"; towards a general principle without a correct human reality:

In all his talks he didn't mention any person, neither in his favor, nor against him. This is one of the things in which Rabbi Hayim surprised me, that he did not joint a person to his events, but rather would open every talk by saying: "The Cause of Causes has caused in his mercy, may He be blessed", and when he concluded he would say, "by the action of the Cause of All Causes, this act was done". Also I and you, beloved brethren, know that every thing comes from the One of the world, but I and you join the action of people to His actions, as it were, as if He and they are partners in the matter, while Rabbi Hayim did not include any person with him" (402/429-30).

For many years the key to the Beit Midrash has also served as a code, with which the conceptual significance of the novel was to be deciphered. Most researchers, led by Kurzweil, referred to the 'key' in *A Guest for the Night*, both as a lexical and semantic code, and also as a symbolic and hermeneutic one. Kurzweil emphasizes the dominant appearance of the key in the work, regarding it as a central character, the 'hero' of the novel, which bears its message: The total destruction of the past.

<sup>6</sup> Ephraim Urbach, *Shnei talmidei hachamim hayu be'ireinu* (There were two Scholars in our City), (Hebr.), in: Le-Agnon Shai, Jerusalem/Tel Aviv 1959, pp. 9-26; Dov Sadan, *Al Shai Agnon* (On Shai Agnon), (Hebr.), Tel Aviv 1959, pp. 94-97; David Tamar, *Levush vetokh* (Apparel and content), (Hebr.), in: Le-Agnon Shai, Jerusalem/Tel Aviv 1959, pp. 331-341. Tamar emphasizes that Agnon's work cannot be understood without the proximity of the sphere of Halachah and Aggadah (p. 335).

The new key, even if it will open the doors of the Beit Midrash, will only reveal the truth from which the guest is fleeing: a new world, a new era, require new ways. [...] Similarly, the loss of the key shakes the guest, because it demonstrates the artificiality of all the too-late returnee's attempts to create a sort of reconstruction – possibly alive, possibly dead – of something that no longer exists. Therefore it becomes clear that though the key was still in the guest's hand, it had no longer the power to unlock worlds, since these worlds had already declined. [...] It is certain that here, in Jerusalem, it is impossible to open with this key the old Beit Midrash in Shibush. The loss of the father's world is proven, beyond any doubt, by the epic confession. Now that one holds the key, there is nothing left to open.<sup>7</sup>

The Aggadic solution proposed at the conclusion of the novel – “Synagogues and Bate Midrashot [study-halls] abroad will establish themselves in Eretz-Israel” [the land of Israel] – shows, according to Kurzweil, that the brutal reality in *A Guest for the Night* puts the lid, both on Shibush, the novel's hero birthplace [Shibush in Hebrew means ‘breakdown’, or ‘disruption’] and on the past, and that only “in the world of Aggadah and miracles, will the great key be important as well. And then, at the End of Days, ‘that man’ will also arise, too late, with the key in his hand.”<sup>8</sup>

Shimon Halkin regards *A Guest for the Night* as “a sort of a new Midrash Lamentations Rabbah [the homiletic interpretation on the Book of Lamentations] for us, the book of our history in recent generations, in which the footsteps of the Messiah are indelibly engraved, but almost without any hope in the hearts of most of the people, for his coming”.<sup>9</sup> He argues that “the sensation of the Holocaust in *A Guest for the Night* is so heavy and threatening from both the material and spiritual aspects”<sup>10</sup>, that it is impossible not to hear its clearly expressed significance: “From now on it is no longer possible to maintain the force of the nation as the bearer of the ‘Eternal Absolute’, as long as it is not in the land of Israel – and even in the land of Israel.”<sup>11</sup>

Gershon Shaked, who, employing the analogic plot and analogical techniques, indicates that the dialectic complexity of the human Jewish world which is revealed in the novel (fateful irony, naiveté, tragedy along with mysterious harmony) also shares in the general feeling that the course of events in *A Guest for the Night* moves “from the plot of the vanishing goal to that of the obstacle which progressively takes the place of its predecessor, becoming more and more central.”<sup>12</sup>

In these and other studies, which greatly contributed to our understanding of the novel, the key to the Bet-Midrash is presented as a mark and symbol of the irrele-

<sup>7</sup> Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurei Shai Agnon (Essays on S.Y. Agnon's Novels)*, (Hebr.), Tel Aviv 1963, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> In later years, Kurzweil emphasized the principle of “the unity of opposites” – loss and survival – in Agnon's work: “The sensation of continuity [...] with which the rupture itself unites”. (Hillel Barzel, *Terumat Baruch Kurzweil lechecher Shai Agnon*, in: *Sefer Baruch Kurzweil*, Ramat Gan 1975, pp. 82f.; Hillel Weiss, *Parshanut lehamisha misipurei Agnon*, Tel Aviv 1974, p. 22).

<sup>9</sup> Shimon Halkin, *Al oraeach noteh lalun (On A Guest for the Night)* (Hebr.), in: *Le Agnon Shai*, (see n. 6), p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>12</sup> Gershon Shaked, *Beayot mivniyot beyetzivotav shel Agnon (Structural Problems in Agnon's Works)*, (Hebr.), in: *ibid.*, pp. 312f.; *idem.*, *Hasiporet ha'ivrit 1880-1980: Ba'arezt ubatefutza (Hebrew narrative fiction 1880-1980, 2: In the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora)*, (Hebr.), Tel Aviv 1983, pp. 188-195.

vance of the study-hall in the social and cultural reality presented in the novel.<sup>13</sup> Besides the hero-narrator, no one needs the key, neither in Shibush nor here, in the land of Israel. Before he left once again for the land of Israel, the guest gave the new key, to the infant, born to Yerucham Chofshi [freeman] the communist Halutz [pioneer], during the infant's circumcision ceremony, while the old key – which the guest had lost in Shibush (“This is the key given to me by the elders of the old Beit Midrash on Yom Kippur, close to the Ne'ilah service [conclusory]” (p. 439/471) – is found by the narrator's wife at their home in Jerusalem, hidden in his bag's folds:

My wife asked, “what do you intend to do with this key? Send it to Shibush.” I said to her, “They do not need the one they have – and you come and say, impose a second key on them?” My wife said, “If so, what will you do with it?” The saying of those of blessed memory fell into my mouth, that synagogues and Batei Midrashes abroad will establish themselves in Eretz-Israel. I said to her, ‘When they will establish themselves in Eretz-Israel – that man will have the key in his hand’. I rose and hid the key in a box and hung the key of the box on my heart (440/471).

Like the above examined metaphor of the ‘key for the Beit Midrash’, Agnon uses many more, which are both active in the plot but also serving as codes for a deeper meanings, woven into the novel's texture. By ‘woven’ I mean to describe how he combines two different textual sources into the novel: the Halachah and the Aggadah. The next two Talmudic examples will demonstrate this: ‘The Angle of Death's knife’ and ‘The trachea of a fowl – perforated or split’. In each of them the Agnonian expression draws a broad Talmudic context, in accordance with the principle of “Halachah and Aggadah joined together”.<sup>14</sup> This principle creates a literary reality which is a fictional fashioning of the daily, concrete confrontation between the absolute and its actualization in reality; between values and aspirations (Aggadah) and rules by which to live (Halachah). Within this literary reality, every intention, every aspiration, every idea, every legend, are examined in the Halachic context – of fulfillment, of actualization, of practice. In this manner it is possible to evaluate them also within the context of the social and historical circumstances to which they join or belong.

### *The Angel of death's knife*

In his journey to his birthplace Shibush, in a post first world war period, the hero-narrator of *A Guest for the Night* is confronted with three leveled concentric ‘disrupted’ reality: most of the families are shattered and torn apart by diseases and death, divorces and emigration. The townsfolk are torn apart and embroiled in con-

<sup>13</sup> In her essay on the key-irony in *A Guest for the Night*, Yael Feldman presents the key as a literary symbol, possessing many meanings (mythical, psychological, and semiotic), whose main function is to serve as a key for Agnon's ironical attitude towards all the keys in the novel; keys which do not only open, but also lock. Her conclusion is that Agnon leaves the option of a new beginning for the traditional world, for an extra-literary future, beyond the boundaries of the text (Yael Feldman, How does a conversation mean? A Semiotic Reading of Agnon's Bi-lingual Key-Irony in “A Guest for the Night”, in: HUCA, vol. LVI, 1968, pp. 251-269).

<sup>14</sup> Kagan, (see n. 5), p. 16-34.

troversies, due to opposing social and national trends; they dwell on foreign soil – which is being swept away from under them. And above all, there is a profound spiritual crisis, which is expressed in the alienation of the younger generation, including the Halutzim [Zionist pioneers], from Jewish culture, represented in the novel by the Talmud. All three breakdowns are connected, and reflected with one another.

*A Guest for the Night* is Agnon's attempt to repair the breakdown, to heal the profound cultural divide, the Jewish-Hebrew divide, which is depicted in the novel by all of life's patterns. Agnon writes down the signposts pointing towards the correction, the 'drugs' (the 'medicines' for the malady – 398-400/425-428) in language, the complete deciphering of which requires that the reader is familiar with its codes. If he does, he can also answer the question, whether Agnon's novel must be read as a description of Jewish life's destruction in Eastern Europe, symbolized by the emptying of the Beit Midrash of scholars and worshipers, and by the loss of the key, or rather it must be read as an epic renewal which heads for the future to come.<sup>15</sup>

On the second page of the novel, upon the entry of the guest into the town of Shibush on Yom Kippur eve, as he reveals the sights of destruction, we read:

Even the royal well, the same well from which Sobieski, King of Poland, drank when he returned victorious from the war, its steps are broken, and the plaque that was fixed in his honor is smashed, and the letters of his name, which once were made of gold, are blurred, and weeds as red as blood are growing from among them, as if the Angel of Death had whetted his knife on them. Gentiles men and women [Goyim and Goyot] didn't stand there, and neither songs nor laughter were to be heard from there. And it brings forth water and pours it out on the street, as water is poured out in the neighborhood of the dead (8/2).

Agnon integrates here the image "As if the Angel of Death had whetted his knife on them", in a situation which emphasizes the metaphorical nature of the knife. Although the expression "The Angel of Death's knife" has already become a trite metaphor, once again Agnon merges the knife, employing many linguistic connections, into a scene of killing within the literary reality, in which people slaughter and are slaughtered; the knife – which was first presented as a trite metaphor, is now transformed into a metaphoric-symbolic entity that functions as a central code.

The imagery of "As if the Angel of Death had whetted his knife on them" is first presented as an Aggadic element, but it expands into a central, inclusive metaphor, a 'living metaphor' ("la metaphor vive")<sup>16</sup>, possessing the capability of incessant growth within the text in the course of the novel. This is not just a semiotic unit, condensed in a word or a phrase, but rather it is a dynamic linguistic process, which brings together two realities and "creates frames of reference, present in the text not as distinctive objects, but as linguistic patterns, usually connecting and combining several elements (words, sentences, or sub-structures) scattered throughout the text".<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Dov Sadan, *Ben din veheshbon*, (Between law and account), (Hebr.), Tel Aviv 1963, p. 200; Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, Los Angeles 1968, p. 326.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics*, in: *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and transl. by J.B. Thompson, New York 1983, p. 102.

<sup>17</sup> Binyamin Harshav, *Torat ha-metaphora veva-bedayon ha-shiri* (The Theory of the Metaphor and the Poetic Fiction), (Hebr.), in: *Hasifrut*, vol. 2, 1985, p. 78.

In two chapters, "At the Graves of my Fathers" (no. 16) and "The Death of Freida" (no. 48), the reader is confronted with the 'Frame of reference', that grows out of this expression: "As if the Angel of Death had whetted his knife on them", which construct a metaphoric-symbolic meaning for the entire novel.<sup>18</sup> "I am the mother of Elimelech Caesar, who had left me and went. Wouldn't it be better if he had taken a knife and slaughtered me?" says Freida (79/79), who people nicknamed "The Empress". She rejects the guest's attempts to calm her down and to implant the hope in her, that she'll see her son: "What are you saying? For when my son will return, I'll be lying in the ground, my eyes covered with broken potsherds, and I won't see him. I told her, man's end is to die, and there's no counsel against death" (80/80). The entire chapter constitutes a living embodiment of the action denoting the Angel of Death's knife, which turns the human environment in question to be "the neighborhood of the dead" (8/2). "What can I tell you, my chick, says Freida, I am like a bloated skin bag, in which a knife has been stuck, and its air has gone out" (80/80), for the Angel of death has killed (whetted) with his knife her four sons – three of them in the war and one in a pogrom – as well as her two daughters, whom the soldiers have killed in "a bad matter". Elimelech is the only one left, and was "lying in the hospital" then.

In the second part of the novel, at the chapter of "The Death of Freida", the Angel of Death's knife once again is bursting forth from its semantic 'imprisonment', and becomes an independent metaphor, whose action is not restricted to the specific object (the royal well, the neighborhood of the dead), but rather spreads over the entire novel. This occurs due to the ramified relations it maintains with all the figures of speech of the text:

When I returned to Shibush, I heard that the Empress had returned her soul to the Lord. On the second day of Shavuot [Pentecost] Freida came to the Synagogue for the memorial prayer to the dead souls; she lit candles in memory of her relatives, who had died or had been killed, and she sat among the women and she muttered lamentations and requests by heart, because she couldn't read from the written. Whoever saw Freida in the Synagogue, did not know that the Angel of Death had already sharpened his knife to take her soul. But she had already known that, from Shavuot eve on, and had prepared herself for her everlasting home (269-270/289).

"The Angel of Death's knife" is active throughout the novel's reality – to its length and breadth. But to its complete substance (the metonymic, metaphoric and symbolic all together) one gets only upon deciphering the code, in which Agnon combines two presumably separate textual systems: the one of the novel – *A Guest for the Night*, and the one of the Talmudic tractate of Ketubot, as a combination of Halachah and Aggadah.

Rabbi Johanan declares: Beware of flies which sucked from those afflicted with Ra'atan [a certain skin disease]. Rabbi Zeira would not dwell in their wind [Rashi: where there is one wind blowing on both of them]. Rabbi Eliezer would not enter their tents. R. Ammi and R. Assi would not eat eggs from the same alley. Rabbi Joshua ben-Levi would dwell with them and be engaging himself with the Torah. He said: 'A loving doe, a graceful mountain-goat'

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the theme of slaughtering in Agnon's work, see Rina Kaufmann, Hashohet veshehitato min hahebet hazimhoni (The Slaughterer and his Slaughtering from the Vegetarian Aspect), (Hebr.), in: Migvan. Studies in Hebrew Literature, 1988, pp. 347-366.

(Proverbs 5:19): if the Torah imparts grace to those who study it, will it not also protect them?"

When his time to leave this world came, The Holy one blessed be he, said to the Angel of Death: 'Go, do his will'. He went and revealed himself to him. 'Show me my place', he said to him: 'very well'. He said to him: 'give me your knife, lest it claim me on the way'; he gave it to him. When he arrived there, he raised him and showed him his place. He jumped and he fell on the other side. He seized him by his garment's edge. He said: 'I swear that I shall not leave here'. The Holy one blessed be he, said: 'If he was ever asked [by an authority] regarding his vow [i.e. to have it annulled], he must go back, if not, he need not to go back'. He said to him: 'Give me your knife'. He would not give it to him. A heavenly voice issued forth, saying: 'Give him, for it is required for the mortals'. Elijah would proclaim before him: 'Make way for ben Levi! Make way for ben Levi!'. He went and found Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai sitting on thirteen silken cushions. He said to him: 'Are you ben Levi?' He said: 'Yes'. 'Was a rainbow ever been seen in your life?' He said: 'Yes'. 'If that is so – you are not ben Levi'. The fact however is, that there was not a rainbow been seen, but he said: 'I shall not aggrandize myself'. [A rainbow appears only in a generation deserves to be destroyed. A rainbow not been seen in one's lifetime means he is a righteous].

Rabbi Hanina Bar-Pappa was the beloved of the Angel of Death. When his time to leave this world came, The Holy one blessed be he, said to the Angel of Death: 'Go, do his will'. He went and revealed himself to him. He said to him: 'Leave me for thirty days, so I may rehearse my study', as it is said: 'Happy is the one who comes here with his studies in his hand'. He left him. After thirty days he came back and appeared to him. He said to him: 'Show me my place'. He said to him: 'very well'. He said to him: 'give me your knife, lest it claim me on the way'. He said to him: 'Do you want to do to me as your fellow had done?' He said to him: 'Bring the Torah scroll and see, if there is anything written, which I didn't fulfill?' He said to him: Did you ever dwell with those afflicted with Ra'atan, and engage yourself with the Torah? (Ketubot 77b).

As is required by the Talmudic principle of "Halachah and Aggadah joined together", this story is combined of Halachic topics, and is included in a chapter 7 in 'Ketubot', that deals with cases in which it is necessary to impose divorce, either on the husband (in case he is afflicted with boils), or on his wife – even if one of the spouses refuses to be divorced. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, cites few words out of the verse in proverbs (5:18-20):

May your fountain be blessed and find joy with the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful mountain-goat. Let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be infatuated with love for her always. Why being infatuated, my son, with a strange woman? Why clasp the bosom of an alien woman? –

within the context of bringing the Lord's Torah to those afflicted by Ra'atan, as a support of his opinion, that its study protects those engaging themselves with it, including himself. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi's attitude is completely in contrast to Rabbi Johanan's warning, to keep away from those afflicted with Ra'atan, warning which his contemporaries Sages, as well as those in following generations were careful to fulfill. Not only that Rabbi Joshua ben Levi permits to be in company with those afflicted with Ra'atan, but also he insists that the study of the Torah with them is a commandment and a good deed.

The biblical text that Rabbi Joshua ben-Levi uses here, calls upon man to cleave to his wife and to be faithful to her, adjuring against going after strange or alien women. Anyone who studies this chapter in Ketubot in its entirety will discover, however, that beyond the apparent level, there is another, more profound layer, which imparts to the text a significance to 'those afflicted with Ra'atan': Faithful-



ness to the land of Israel and to whoever dwells in it, binds his fate with its fate, with its illnesses and with its sufferings. Textual reinforcement for the existence of an allegorical-symbolic dimension in the above story – the land of Israel as “The wife of your youth” and any other land a “The bosom of an alien woman” – can be found in the conclusion of the 7th chapter in Ketubot:

Rabbi Hanina said: ‘why are there no people afflicted with Ra’atan in Babylonia? Because they eat teradin [a species of meat] and drink beer containing [in place of hop] cuscuta growing on hizmi? [a type of prickly shrub]. Rabbi Johanan said: Why are there no lepers in Babylonia? Because they eat Teradin and drink beer and wash in the waters of the Euphrates. (Ibid. end of chapter 7.)

It is not coincidental that of all hundreds of Tannaim and Amoraim mentioned in the Talmud [Tannaim = the Sages of the Mishna; Amoraim = sages of the Talmud], Rabbi Joshua ben-Levi – a first generation Eretz-Israeli Tanna, who lived in the city of Lydda in the mid-3rd century – was the only one to be saved from the threat of the Angel of Death’s knife. He was held as such a righteous – that all of his Halachic opinions were accepted; but he is chiefly known, however, as an Aggadist [story teller]. By way of contrast, Rabbi Hanina Bar Pappa of Babylonia, who also requested to be saved from the knife’s threat, at the moment of death, but was refused. His appeal to the Angel of death, arguing he was a righteous too – “Bring a Torah scroll and see, is there anything written in it which I didn’t fulfill?” – was rejected because, it said, there was no basis for comparison, since not like Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, Rabbi Hanina Bar Pappa never stayed with those afflicted with Ra’atan, and would not “Dwell with them and be engaged with the Torah”. In contrast to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who is described here as a person who cares neither for himself, nor for his honor – as Yonah Frankel<sup>19</sup> notes: “Hanina Bar Pappa was distant from the entire world, and acted only for his own honor”.

The link between Joshua ben Levi’s victory over the Angel of Death’s knife threat, and the reality of the land of Israel, is explicitly understood by the comparison of these two stories. Both Rabbi Hanina Bar Pappa and Joshua ben Levi were righteous, and were dealing with the Angel of Death regarding to their own death. But Rabbi Hanina Bar Pappa never dwelled with those afflicted with Ra’atan (because there were no Ra’atan in Babylonia) and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, who lived in the land of Israel (where there was all kind of leprosy) did dwell with them and was engaging himself with the Torah among them. Paradoxically, the location of Ra’atan in the land of Israel imparts a spiritual advantage to its sages, as shown in this story.<sup>20</sup>

The verse cited from the book of Proverbs, which the redactor of ‘Ketubot’ related to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, refers allegorically and metaphorically to the relationships between the God of Israel and the land of Israel – which are considered as of love and marriage. It also alludes to the symbolic betrayal of the people of Israel on the marriage commitments to “the wife of its youth” means the land. The language used to describe this relationships is of a husband and wife, and therefore the betrayal is described as “going after” alien women – means preferring other lands rather than

<sup>19</sup> Jonah Frankel, *Demuto shel rival* (The character of rabbi Jeshua ben Levi), (Hebr.), Proceedings of the seventh World Congress in Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 1977, p. 406.

<sup>20</sup> My thanks to Ms. Yardena Avi-Dor, who drew my attention to this point.

the land of Israel. The reader is now able to transform this idea throughout the entire chapter, from a personal system to a national one, and vice versa.

This preference of the alien women, i.e. other countries, causes the disruption of Jewish life, as it is a violation of the agreement between the Holy one blessed be he and the people of Israel. Agnon put this insight in Daniel Bach's and Elimelech Caesar's mouths, to represent his feelings of pain and anger, but it is also seen by the so many mutilated people (and mainly children) in Shibush, like Ignatz – who was born to a Jewish mother and a gentile father – “Whose nose was taken in the war, and there was a hole in place of the nose” (29/25). There is no one in Shibush who does not have a defect, either due to his origin, or due to temporal circumstances – as an extreme symbol for a flawed human existence.

Even Yerucham Chofsh [the freeman] was harmed by the marriage of his parents, which was broken and blemished in his father's fault, as he used his talents to deceive people, both in family life and in studying the Gemara [Talmud] (chapter 26). This caused his son a severe emotional damage, as he became totally alienated to his surroundings: “Just as he doesn't speak to people, so they do not talk about him” (90/91). The severance of any ties between Yerucham and his fellows, on the one hand, and the reason for all – the land of Israel, on the other hand, leave them all as living-dead, as Yerucham admits, referring to himself as well: “Some of them fell sick with Malaria and other illnesses and died, their bones were scattered throughout all the cemeteries over the land, and those who did not die, are considered as dead” (89/87). Like Yerucham, Rabbi Hayim, who more than anyone else, symbolizes the Jewish religious world, ruined from inside and out – does not speak to anyone and is alienated from his surroundings, as described concerning all aspects of life: in his attitude toward the rabbi of the Shibush – he renounces any human feelings, and his attitude toward his wife is totally selfish and alienated (148-149/155-156). The result is a total disrupt: of a family, and of the community. Without a dialogue there is no life. Just as well – without an open dialogue between the Halachah and the Aggadah, the Halachah will degenerate. The end of Rabbi Hayim's life proves this. By way of contrast – despite the fact that both the narrator and Rabbi Hayim had left their wives and children for an extended period of time, and went on exile – the narrator maintains an incessant dialogue between Halachot (laws) and Aggadot (tales), and apparently due to this ‘joining them together’ will return to his wife, his children and to the land of Israel (335/360).

Agnon characterizes here the same tensions between the land of Israel and Babylonia, which are clearly sensed in the Talmudic text of Ketubot. The intensifying connection, that the guest keeps and develops with the Halutzim [pioneers], or with those preparing themselves to immigrate to the land of Israel, or similarly, his forming ties with the “free” (i.e. non-religious) young people in Shibush – Yerucham Chofshi [freeman] and Daniel Bach [Hebrew abbreviation for ‘Ben-Horin’, liberated], are regarded by the official representatives of traditional Judaism as a severe deviation. The Narrator, like Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, seeks for closeness to the sick and afflicted in Shibush, those located on the fringes of society because of their defects and deformities, and opposes thereby to the other sages, represented in the Aggadah by the figure of Rabbi Shimon Bar-Yochai. He remembers that Dr. Milech, the vegetarian physician – “Kuba” – his best friend from childhood, closer to him than anyone else in Shibush, “once [he] told me, that when I'll

grow up, I would go to a lepers' place and treat them" (385/412). Both the narrator-guest and Kuba, the doctor, resides in Shibush and are treating the sick.

In conclusion, the motive of the "Angel of Death's knife", binds internally the text of *A Guest for the Night* with the text of tractate 'Ketubot', not only by the story cited above of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and those afflicted with Ra'atan, rather by its continuation and its Talmudic context as a whole (the topic, the chapter and the tractate). This binding demands that the reader, who wants to understand the novel's full meaning, must decipher its code, by which Agnon had combined Halachah and Aggadah of both systems in his text, in a way that they richen each other, builds and are built by each other. Rabbi Joshua ben Levi and the Narrator – both are representing the solution of living in the land of Israel, despite its difficulties – are symbolically able to avoid the knife's threat, which is the metaphor for the life in Shibush.

### *The trachea split lengthwise*

Similar to tractate Ketubot, tractate Hullin too constitutes a textual system parallel to that of *A Guest for the Night*. Deciphering the ramified system of signs hinting to the codes common to both systems, which are scattered throughout the entire novel, might advance our understanding of its meaning. "whoever hears could think that we are sitting there [in the land of Israel] with our hand folded, and are offering our neck for the slaughter, like our Jews in Shibus", says Arella to the guest."I went outside and looked at the passersby. A child came from the house of the slaughter and had a slaughtered chicken in its basket" (94/95). Many of the book's heroes, inhabitants of Shibush, and members of their families, are killed or slaughtered during the war and the pogroms, among them the four sons and two daughters of Freida 'the Empress', the three daughters of Aaron Shizling, Gindel's brother, who says to the guest: "What do you say to my troubles, they take a little bird and wring it's neck" (363/388-389). Among the many markers connecting between the laws of ritual slaughtering, brought in tractate Hullin, and the harsh death of many of the inhabitants of Shibush, the following marker is conspicuous in its alienation:

Once, when I and he were without others, I asked him how he was. He whispered to me, 'God will do what is good in His eyes', and closed his eyes. I thought he was asleep; I saw his lips move silently. I drew closer to him and I heard him saying, 'and these are ksherot [kosher], whether the trachea of a fowl is perforated or split'. Since he was aware of me, he whispered to me, 'this is the Halachah [law] that the disagreement began with' (402/429).

The reader – the receiver, who desires to understand the message of the writer-sender through the last, unclear words of R. Hayim, must turn to the language of the Halachah, in which the text, or a part of it, is encoded – the language of the Gemara, which consists of texts which are unendingly reflexive, between Halachah and that Aggadah. The halachic expression "and these are ksherot, if the trachea of a fowl is perforated or split" (Mishnah, Hullin 3:4; BT Hullin 56b)<sup>21</sup>, functions in

<sup>21</sup> "The trachea is the tube in living creature which extends from the throat to the lung, and its form consists of a series of rings. And the Halachah determines: if the trachea is split lengthwise,

the novel as a code – a system of signs, that enables transmission of information between the two systems – the literature of the Mishna and Talmud, on the one hand, and that of the modern Hebrew literature, on the other hand. Rabbi Hayim's statement alludes to the controversy he had with the rabbi of Shibush (149, 402/156, 429). This controversy disrupted the life of both Rabbi Hayim, and of the community of Shibush; it was the trachea, presented by means of realization as a metaphor, that caused his illness and also his end:

I asked her: 'and what caused him to fall ill?' Zipora said: 'Opinions differ. Some say that he went to the rabbi, to take leave of him, and there was the trachea of a fowl, lying in front of the door outside, and he tripped on it and fell' (393/420).

Rabbi Hayim's illness was caused by his slipping and falling, and he "has pains in his legs" (ibid.); however, Kuba, who treats him and give him medicines, says: "I am not worried about his legs. It's another sickness that worries me" (401/428). Kuba treats the narrator-guest as well:

... And he looked into my throat ... He examined me from top to bottom ... and named out passing defects and permanent defects, and he taught me what I should do for my throat, and what I should do for my heart. '... I will not leave you until you promise me, that you will come here tomorrow noon, for lunch. And do not fear that I'll feed you nevelot [non-kosher meet of animals slaughtered not according to the Halachah] and trefot [diseased animals, and therefore non-kosher too]. I do not eat, neither temutot [animals on the point of death], nor nevelot, nor trefot (387/414).<sup>22</sup>

The trachea is mentioned in some other places in *A Guest for the Night*, connected to a situation in which the author, by his heroes, deals with the disruption of social or familial relationships between man and his fellows, or family, and between him and his locality or surroundings.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast with tractate Zevachim [sanctified sacrifices], which deals with slaughtering for the Temple needs, tractate Hullin, also called '*Shechitat Hullin*' [slaughtering of non-sacrificial animals], discusses the laws of slaughtering for men's need, those pertaining to the Jewish way of life, and are obligatory for all Israel since the destruction of the Temple – both in the land of Israel and abroad. The Halachic expression "And these are kesherot [kosher], if the trachea of a fowl is perforated or split", is discussed in the third chapter of tractate Hullin, "And these are the trefot [not kosher]" – which lists in detail the marks, showing how a proper slaughtering, in respect to the Halachah, can be distinguished from improper slaughtering. It also distinguishes between defects in animals, which flaws it for consumption, according to the Halachah, and those defects – when the afflicted part still contains elements of recovery – that do not flow it. This also applies to the trachea: "I would rather say, if anything remains above, and anything remains below – it is permitted" (Hullin 45a, in name of Rabbi Johanan). In the process of de-

---

it is kosher, whether in a beast or in a fowl. This [is the law in any case] in which something above and something below remains, for the more the trachea stretches, the more the split closes, for the weight of the lung stretches it and returns and heals". (Encyclopedia of the Talmud [Hebrew]: Gargereta [trachea]).

<sup>22</sup> See above note 18.

<sup>23</sup> See: Rachel (69-71/66-68) and also: Hullin 57b; Elimelech (271-272/292); Mr. Riegel (285/306).

ciphering the central meaning, encoded within the Halachic expression under discussion, the reader is required to conduct a dialogue, both with the inherent conceptual content, and with the artistic accoutrements. The split trachea is both the diagnosis and the disease. It is close to the heart and the lungs, and consists of rings from one end to the other. It is the organ that connects the body to the head, through which one breathes and from which his voice is issued. The voice in *A Guest for the Night*, and not the key, is its covert "hero", who constantly marks the 'is' and the 'lacks': The voice of the Talmud, which is silenced in Shibush, reappears as the narrator's opens the Beit Midrash (chapter 72); the voice of Rabbi Hayim, which is silenced (94/95); the voice of the well and of the river Strifa (12/7); the voice of the ground of Shibush (this is the only voice to which the narrator does not listen: "But I paid no attention to the voice of the ground" (8/2)). The trachea split lengthwise represents the rupture which has disrupted all forms of Jewish existence, in its personal-familial sphere (Rabbi Hayim's family); in the social sphere (between the various groups within the Jewish society, and between Jews and gentiles, amongst whom they dwell); in the national sphere (between the land of Israel and the Diaspora); and in the cultural-spiritual sphere (between the Jew and his culture). The severance from the Gemara [Talmud] is like a severance from a source of life, and is followed by, not only a dangerous severance from the Hebrew Literature's sources of growth in particular, but also the loss of the peoples' life cognitive and metaphoric reservoir, in which emotions and thoughts, urges and values, laws and tales [Halachot and Aggadot] are hidden.

As an artist, Agnon's attitude toward the Gemara is not a limited religious one, but an attitude which is both cultural and artistic. The Gemara is a source which is – simultaneously – verbal, symbolic, allegoric and philosophic. This is not a return to the Beit Midrash, but rather a new binding of the Jew with his sources of identity, and with the central parts of the culture he had lost, by means of restoring the damaged, or missing rings of the trachea, which leads to the mending of the split and thereby healing the cracked 'voice'. The disruption between the young generation – whether outside the land of Israel (Daniel Bach, Elimelech Caesar [the emperor], Yerucham Chofshi [the freeman] ), or whether in the land of Israel (The Halutzim) – and the world of the Talmud is the most severe one. Agnon the author, like his hero narrator, are longing to utter once more the voice of the Gemara, which has become silent, so that it won't sound like the voice "of a key that has become rusty" (94/95), and as the voice of those studying Gemara "in order to demonstrate analytical force and erudition, instead of the true nature of the Torah" (135/140), who in the end "distort the Gemara(s)" (134/140). When the guest enters the Beit Midrash to pray the Kaddish in memory of Rabbi Hayim, he learns that –

The prayer book had not been opened for several months and no prayer had been recited from it, and the Ark's door had not been opened, and no scrolls of the Torah had been taken out for reading, except by the dead, who are coming at nights to the Beit Midrash. The same is true for the other books. They are laid in their cases, one book here and one book there, as if prostrated and could not get up (411/439).

The narrator-guest mends the disruption: he lights a candle, he takes the Gemara and studies, and from now on, the voice of the Gemara (mentioned 7 times in this chapter) becomes a central cultural entity:

"I raised my voice until the voice of the Torah overcame the voice of time ..."

"From one hour to another the voice had changed, as if it came from the Gemara itself ..."

"Between one candle to another I thought to myself, that at that hour there was no one else studying Gemara in town, but me. It was not to aggrandize myself that I thought thus, rather I was happy, that I was preserving the world ..." (411-412/439-440).

### *The key*

The code of *A Guest for the Night* is to be found in the extensive system of signs, which extends over the entire work. The signs of the Halachah and the Aggadah connect the poetic and conceptual reality of the novel with that of the Talmud, and create a semantic, structural and cultural continuity between two literary systems (the new one and the old one), between the expanses of national existence (the land of Israel and Babylonia – in the Gemara, or the land of Israel and Eastern Europe in the novel), and between the two parts of culture which are separated one from the other – the religious and the secular. The hero, who looks at his existence from many points of view, sees the existing severance – between the world of the Talmud and all that it represents, and the world of the Hebrew literature, and all that it represents – as a disruption (a 'split') which if not being mended will eventually destroy the connections between the body and the head, and cause its death. The fear of the Angel of death's knife hovers, not only over Shibush and its residents, not only over Freida and her children, but also over Jewish culture, over the split trachea, over the Gemara which has become silent. Only he, who had lived among 'the lepers' in the land of Israel, like Rabbi Joshua ben Levi at his time, can negate the fear of the knife, and be saved from a harsh death. Whoever sits and studies the Torah for himself, like Rabbi Hanina Bar Papa in Babylonia cannot overcome the sword. At the end of the novel, the narrator moves the knife from the negative frames of reference (of death and slaughter) to the positive-visionary frames of reference – of the circumcision, where the knife of the circumciser and the new key (for the old Beit Midrash) meet.

The two examples presented here are insufficient to show the ramified links between the two systems, but they do to cast doubt whether Shibush and its destruction constitute the main subject of the novel. The deciphering of the code of Halachah and Aggadah reveals that from the novel's beginning to its end, the narrator is occupied with the building of a corrected vessel, instead of the "broken vessels of our soul", which will have the power to preserve the elements of content and form, poured into the Gemara. Agnon is neither a symbolist, nor an exegete; accordingly he has no interest in signs alone, and he does not make do with isolated events, nor with new interpretations. As an artist, as a neoclassicist, his goal is the rehabilitation and revival of the great patterns of the Jewish universe (the tractates of the Talmud), which the members of the new generation have difficulties in opening and deciphering, with the old weighty keys.

In *A Guest for the Night*, from the first line to the last, Agnon casts a new key for the Gemara, which in his eyes is the manifestation of supreme art, which links the memories and the experiences, both personal and collective, to the comprehensive cultural consciousness, which is based on the responsibility of the Halachah to the

Aggadah.<sup>24</sup> The key cast by the artist is not a key made of metal, but rather the one made of letters and words, cast in a mold, in which the artist melts from anew the language of the Gemara and the language of the new Hebrew literature into one artistic language, which, once again, imparts renewed conceptual and poetic force to the Hebrew language and its symbols.

On the eve of his return from Shibush to the land of Israel, the guest notes his wife that his eyesight has been somewhat dimmed.

'It is because you sit in the Beit Midrash and envelope yourself in the dust of the books', says she, 'have you asked the doctors?' I said to her 'My hand does not move from those of the doctor!'. 'And what did the doctor tell you?'. 'what did the doctor tell me? This is what he told me'. 'did you come here to study Gemara?'. my wife said, 'if so, then we shall return'. I said to her, 'and what will be with the key?' ...

I stare at the walls of the old Beit Midrash and I say to them, 'don't you see that my time has come to go up to Eretz-Israel?'. The walls of the Beit Midrash stoop themselves as if they want to hug me, because I am going to Eretz-Israel. I say to them 'if you wish, I load you on my shoulders and take you with me.' The walls of the Beit Midrash replied, 'we are too heavy, and a single man cannot load us on his shoulders, rather take the key and ascend, and when the time comes we shall follow you'. I say to them, 'how do you intend to ascend, perhaps each stone will ascend by itself? not so, but I want you to ascend together, lest you are ashamed that you are ascending empty-handed; behold, I shall set my children down among you (417-418/445-446).

*A Guest for the Night* is an optimistic book, a book of renewal, not of decline. It opens with the knife of the Angel of Death, and concludes with the knife of the circumciser; it opens with the split trachea, and concludes with the sight of birds returning to Israel, flying over R. Shlomo's head in Ramat Rachel (a kibbutz adjoining Jerusalem), who sees them as evidence of approaching Redemption (442-443/474). Likewise, Tractate Hullin opens with a chapter entitled "All may slaughters", and ends with the commandment of "Sending forth from the nest" (chapter 12) – which is connected with the vision of Redemption, as well as to the laws of "Sending forth from the nest". Agnon was dealing in many of his works with this issue of "sending forth from the nest", concerning the young people, the 'Halutzim', leaving their parents 'there', in the Diaspora – the nest, while immigrating to the land of Israel, or being taken there. Similarly, many signs and symbols – both Halachic and Aggadic – are common to the tractate of Ketubot (BT chapter 13) and *A Guest for the Night*, regarding the superiority of the land of Israel over the lands of exile. For example: Rabbi Hanina Bar Pappa repairs its roads (112b); Yerucham Hofshi [the freeman] - "everyday, from the hour of sunrise to the hour of sunset he sits in a town's street, repairing it after being ruined ..." (84/84); and the artist, Agnon, sits and prepares a new 'key' – i.e. the novel *A Guest for the Night* – to heal the connection between the two systems of Hebrew Culture, by a parallel system of

<sup>24</sup> "Because of his attribute of modesty, not to appear as one who comes to teach, and not merely to describe, Agnon revealed less than he concealed. What was forbidden to the author is obligatory for his readers. An analysis of the strata of the novel will reveal Agnon to be, not only a master author, but also as an authority on this topic" (Jacob Katz, Agnon mul hamevucha hadatit, (Agnon confronts the religious confusion), (Hebr.), in: Le Agnon Shai, (see n. 6), p. 165. This statement was written about Tmol Shilshom (Yesterday, the Day Before), but is equally true about the entirety of Agnon's work.

symbols which makes possible not only a communication, but also a linguistic-cultural transformation, connected with the return to the land of Israel:

The key is hidden\*<sup>25</sup>, where I had concealed\* it, and I returned to my work. And whenever I remembered it, I would think to myself, 'synagogues and study halls are destined to...' and I would open my window and look\* outside [outside the land of Israel], perhaps they are rolling and coming to establish themselves in Eretz-Israel. Alas, the land is desolate and silent, and the sound of the steps of the synagogues and the Batei-Midrashot [study-halls] is not to be heard. And the key is still resting, waiting\* with me for that day (440/472).

The discovery of a cultural-literary code is similar to the discovery of a genetic one: they share the same goal, to gain awareness of its generational laws, whether biological or cultural. The importance of deciphering this code lies in the discovery of the laws and order of the literary text, as well as in the possibility of seeing the individual artistic work within the typological cultural framework. In this manner, we rediscover structures and meanings, which require us to reestablish our attitude toward its various components.

---

<sup>25</sup> The Hebrew root of the word "hidden" (Tzaffoon) is the same as for word "code" (Tzoffen). Agnon uses these words several times in this chapter, close to the novel's end. He also uses many words using the same group of letters ט-פ-נ (tz-p/f-n) in other meaning – like "I see" (tzoffe), or "wait" (metzape) etc. [These words are signed by asterisk].