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A Guest for the Night: Epitaph on the Perished Hopes of the *Haskalah*

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An interesting feature of *A Guest for the Night,* Agnon's most important work,[1] is its character as historical criticism. It depicts the failure of the multiple responses of nineteenth-century European Jewry to the Enlightenment and its Jewish offshoot, the *Haskalah.*[2] It is the author's testament to the inability of European Jewry to find an adequate replacement for the traditional culture that for centuries had sustained Jewish self-identification and raison d'être in an alien world. Agnon bears witness to the disappointment of the *maskilim,*[3] who had hoped

1. For this assessment, see, e.g., Simon Halkin, *Modern Hebrew Literature: Trends and Values* (New York: Schocken Books, 1950), p. 155; Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 284; Robert Alter, *After the Tradition* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), p. 143.

2. *Haskalah* denotes the Jewish Enlightenment that followed in the wake of the European Enlightenment. The name comes from the Hebrew root *s-k-l,* meaning "to acquire wisdom, to understand, to make intelligent."

3. This term can mean either "enlighteners" or "enlightened ones," depending on whether the root verb is interpreted transitively or intransitively. Either way, it signifies devotees of the Enlightenment.

to forge a modern Jewish identity compatible with the Age of Reason, as well as to his own profound disillusionment with the failure of the *Haskalah*.

Agnon filters the failure of the *Haskalah* through the lens of the emotional and intellectual contradictions that flowed from the breakdown of ghetto and shtetl[4] barriers and the development of alternative modes of Jewish expression during the nineteenth century. These new modes ranged from the bourgeois acculturation associated with progressive forms of Judaism in Western Europe to utopian socialism and Zionist nationalism in Eastern Europe, and included the revival (principally in Czarist Russia after 1850) of the Hebrew language as a medium of Jewish literary expression. Its revivers used this medium for two related purposes: to propagate a secular-humanist viewpoint based on rationality and morality (the twin gods of the Enlightenment) and to attack the traditional life-style of the shtetl, with its physical and intellectual constraints and its stultifying effect on the development of the human spirit.[5]

Hebrew as the Medium of the East European *Haskalah*

The development of modern Hebrew literature in Eastern rather than Western Europe was no accident but stemmed from two significant differences between the situation of East and West European Jewry, one historico-political and the other socioeconomic in nature. The first important distinction between Eastern and Western Jews lay in the political structure. The settlement of Jews in Western Europe had been regulated since the Middle Ages by a system of residence permits (*hezkat ha-yishuv*). This system, operated by community leaders with one eye trained on the reactions of gentile neighbors, effectively controlled the number of Jews who could congregate in one place and prevented the formation of large, residentially segregated Jewish enclaves. The consequent dispersal of the Jews among the gentile population had encouraged some knowledge of local languages (French, German, English) among the Jews of Western Europe, even before emancipation brought secular education within the reach of those who aspired to it. Hence, Enlightenment ideas reached the Jews of Western Europe earlier than their brethren in the East. Following the first partition of Poland in 1772 (which brought large numbers of Jews under the rule of a Russia that had previously excluded them),[6] the policy of the czars had been to confine the Jews as far as possible within the area of Russia-Poland known as the Pale of Settlement. There, Jews were largely isolated in shtetls.

Despite the shtetl's economic dependence as a market town on the Polish peasantry, not to mention its political dependence on the Polish nobility (and, later, on the czar, after the failure of the Polish uprising of 1863),[7] Jewish contact with gentiles was limited to bare essentials. This prevented many from acquiring fluency in the local language, thus reinforcing reliance on Yiddish as their spoken and written means of communication. Lack of facility in Russian and Polish on the one hand and virtual ignorance of Western European languages on the other slowed still further the gradual percolation of the Enlightenment from West to East. Despite the theoretical availability of secular education to all who desired it (for instance, in Russia from 1825

4. These were rural towns in which the Jews often formed a majority and were in any case residentially segregated from the peasants of the surrounding region.

5. As depicted, for instance, in Peretz Smolenskin's *Kevurat hamor* (Vienna: 1874).

6. Y. Slutsky, "Pale of Settlement," 13 *Enc. Jud.* 24.

7. David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 110.

on), most East European Jews remained insulated from European secular culture. As Michael Stanislawski has noted, "At the end of Nicholas' reign, as at its beginning, the overwhelming majority of Russian Jews lived traditional Jewish lives in autonomous communities insulated and isolated from Russian culture and mores."[8] The only way midcentury *maskilim* could disseminate their ideas to large numbers of Jews, especially to the yeshiva students who made up the Jewish intelligentsia, was by using Jewish languages, that is, Yiddish or Hebrew.

Since Hebrew had long fallen into disuse as a spoken language (and even as a written language for all but the most learned), Yiddish was the normal means of communication among Jews. But most *maskilim* saw Yiddish as the language of benighted obscurantism, incapable of expressing the scientific and humanistic ideas of the Enlightenment. The *maskilim* of Eastern Europe conceived the notion of reviving Hebrew for this purpose—thus, by a curious paradox, employing the most sacred of mediums for the most secular of messages. (Only later, with the rise of Jewish nationalism, did the use of the Hebrew medium become part of a specifically Zionist message.) Thus modern Hebrew literature was born, developing from the first naïve attempts of Abraham Mapu to adapt the language of the Bible to the purposes of the Hebrew novel,[9] through the baroque prose of S. J. Abramowitz (Mendele Mokher Sefarim), Peretz Smolenskin, and others, to the "more mature and satisfying works of the subsequent [turn-of-the-century] period."[10] The fiction of the

8. M. Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983), p. 185.

9. Mapu's *Ahavat Tziyon* (1853) is generally designated the first Hebrew novel. See David Patterson, *Abraham Mapu: The Creator of the Modern Hebrew Novel* (London: East and West Library, 1964).

10. David Patterson, *The Hebrew Novel in Czarist Russia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1964), p. 65.

maskilim was to reach its culmination in the work of Agnon, who as a post-*Haskalah* writer bridged the gap between the Hebrew literature of the nineteenth and that of the twentieth centuries.

The second important difference between the Jews of Eastern and Western Europe lay in the virtual absence in the East of a bourgeois class like that which had developed, for instance, in prerevolutionary France. The medieval social structure of Czarist Russia embraced only two indigenous classes (besides the clergy), namely, the nobility and the peasantry. East European Jews, belonging to neither class, and more comparable socioeconomically with a bourgeoisie, lacked the opportunities that developed in the West for ideological self-identification with the enlightened humanism of the rising intelligentsia. More important, the elite group of East European Jews who had studied at universities in the more advanced cities of Poland, Russia, or even Germany lacked a receptive audience. Their only possible targets were the Jews who still remained in the shtetl or were just now emerging from its intellectual confines. Not surprisingly, the *maskilim* concentrated on subverting the young yeshiva students who constituted the shtetl intellectuals, as well as the rapidly growing urban working class, by exposing the deficiencies and corruptions of the traditional life-style. But these students could be reached only through the languages of the Jews; and disdaining Yiddish, many *maskilim* turned to Hebrew as the only viable alternative.

As the century wore on, and the rise of nation-states in Europe replaced Enlightenment notions of universal brotherhood with exclusive nationalistic sentiments, the *maskilim* turned more and more to the promotion of Jewish national consciousness and the movement for resettlement of Jews in Palestine. In addition, the spread of populist movements among the burgeoning proletariat, as the Industrial Revolution moved eastward, eventually produced a socialist brand of Zionism, which, though stressing universal as well as national ideals, still chose to express itself in the Hebrew language. Thus Hebrew became the

medium of various forms of Jewish self-expression in the late nineteenth century.

Cultural Dichotomies and Cognitive Dissonance

Ideological options for post-Enlightenment European Jewry were quite diverse. A Jew could, at the outset, accept or reject the Mendelssohnian attempt to reconcile the rationalism of the Enlightenment with the revelation of the Hebrew Bible. Those who accepted this solution in principle (including those who rejected it in practice) went on to develop new forms of Judaism, such as the enlightened neoorthodoxy of Samson Raphael Hirsch and progressive or scholarly Jewish movements like Reform Judaism and the Wissenschaft des Judentums. But many Jews, rejecting the politics of religious accommodation, found themselves facing irreconcilable ideologies with no satisfactory solutions. A Jew could reject the Enlightenment out of hand and remain within the fold of tradition, accepting the obscurantist constraints upon his intellectual development. Or he might divorce himself from Jewish tradition and espouse Enlightenment values instead, only to risk suffering the trauma of gentile rejection, the limitations of what Jacob Katz has called the "semi-neutral society,"[11] and the consequent disillusionment with those who preached universalism but would not practice it. Jews who tried the latter route experienced a twofold alienation—first from their Jewish roots and then from the secular world that rebuffed their desire for social acceptance. Even those who espoused a more sympathetic ideology, such as socialism or Zionism, would find in time that the reality did not measure up to the ideal.

These disappointments generated cognitive dissonance. The incompatibility of tradition and modernity, and the failure in

11. Jacob Katz, *Out of the Ghetto: The Social Background of Jewish Emancipation 1770–1870* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 201.

practice of cherished ideals, whether of the Enlightenment itself or of a particular ideology substituted for Jewish tradition, produced a sense of alienation—from the sacred, from the secular, sometimes from both. It is with these alienated groups that the fiction of Agnon concerns itself. His writings testify eloquently to the plight of the Jew who, opting for a secular alternative to the hallowed forms of Jewish expression, experiences a profound letdown as he falls into the spiritual abyss that yawns between his traditional background and his newly acquired secular knowledge—between the kerygma of the secular millennium and the discovery that Utopia remains beyond reach.

The unbridgeable gap between traditional Judaism and enlightened humanism forced painful choices on the Jews. To sacrifice tradition on the altar of modernity was to give up the safety of the known for the insecurity of the unknown. The Jew who spurned his sacred faith for secular delights, rejecting time-honored group norms in the newfangled quest for personal fulfillment, traded the certainties of communal regulation for the agony of soul-searching and the hazards of anomie. In the end, as portrayed in Agnon's masterpiece, *A Guest for the Night,* order lapses into chaos and (to paraphrase Arnold Band's graphic figure) nostalgia becomes nightmare.[12]

You Can't Go Home Again

A Guest for the Night tells the story of a year in the life of a Jew who returns in 1929, after a twenty-year absence, to the little town in Galicia where he grew up. The protagonist, cast as an anonymous narrator (who, however, represents both Agnon and the Everyman of the shtetl), makes an abortive effort to revive and relive the comforting security of his youth. His return is motivated by disillusionment with the alternative expression of Jewish identity he adopted when "the little books [of *Haskalah*]

12. Arnold Band's *Nostalgia and Nightmare* is the *locus classicus* of Agnon studies.

... made me leave off the study of the Torah."[13] Emigrating to Palestine, he found his dream of Zion unmatched by the reality; his house was burned down by rioting Arabs, so that even in the Jewish homeland he felt alien and rejected. Recast as a Jew in Exile, the narrator returns as a "guest for the night"[14] to his former hometown. There, he confronts the physical and spiritual destruction of a once-flourishing traditional community now in the last stages of decay. The very name of the town, Szibucz (almost an anagram of Agnon's birthplace Buczacz) signifies in Hebrew "breakdown," "disruption," and "confusion." The narrator soon discovers that the few old-timers who still go through the motions of religious observance have lost all sense of its significance. Most of those who seek a meaningful existence have already left town or are on the point of leaving in quest of viable alternatives. The narrator encounters some who remain, or who left but have returned; in every case, they have failed to find a worthwhile substitute for the traditional way. Like the protagonist, they too have learned that "you can't go home again." They have given up an irretrievable treasure for a utopian mirage.

Through his portrayal of these characters, Agnon calls attention to the failure of all the choices the Enlightenment had presented to the Jew. For instance, we meet Schuster, a tailor who, opting for bourgeois assimilation, had emigrated to Germany. There he prospered financially; but his wife could not adjust to Berlin, where "the walls of the houses reach up to the sky and block the air one breathes" (p. 58)—a metaphor for Jewish spiritual suffocation in an incompatible gentile environment. So the tailor returns to a Szibucz decimated by the Great War of 1914–1918, where he has become a failure, reduced to sewing an occasional garment for the rare customer who can still pay for a bespoke overcoat. A second bourgeois way was taken by Leibtche Bodenhaus, whose response to the Enlightenment was to choose German over Hebrew because "in my youth it was the German language that the world thought important" (p. 337). But he has failed to use his knowledge of German for any useful purpose (such as the study of *Wissenschaft*). Instead, he spends his time translating the Hebrew Bible into atrocious German verse—the sole, pathetic contribution he can now make to either Jewish or secular culture.

Those who opted for nonbourgeois alternatives have fared no better. Yeruham Freeman, a prototypical utopian idealist who saw socialism or communism as the modern incarnation of prophetic-messianic universal brotherhood, had gone to Palestine to fulfill his Zionist-socialist ideals (changing his name to the Hebrew *Hofshi,* with its *Hatikvah* overtones of Jewish liberation and autonomy). Freeman is bitterly disappointed to find that even in *Eretz Yisrael* management exploits labor, Arabs kill Jews, and workers starve. Expelled by the British for distributing socialist manifestos to Arabs and Jews alike, Freeman has returned to Szibucz, where he ekes out a living by repairing roads that lead, in Kafkaesque symbolism, only to the grave. Our narrator asks poignantly whether Freeman is repairing the road "from the graveyard to the town or from the town to the graveyard" (p. 84). Either way, socialism has signally failed to liberate Freeman from the bonds of tradition and the limitations of life in Szibucz.

Another path for post-Enlightenment Jews in Eastern Europe was to espouse Zionism of a quasi-messianic rather than socialist stamp. This choice, as we saw, did not work for our narrator, who settled in Palestine only to be burned out by Arabs. Szibucz harbors many more Zionist failures. Yeruham Bach, son of the cantor (the last truly pious Jew remaining in Szibucz), had likewise gone to settle in the Land. But after sending for his old father to join him, he was killed by an Arab (p. 14). His given

13. P. 109. Unless otherwise indicated, page references are to S. J. Agnon, *A Guest for the Night,* trans. Misha Louvish (New York: Schocken, 1968). The transliterations of Hebrew names given in Louvish's translation have been preserved here.

14. The Hebrew title is taken verbatim from Jeremiah 14:8: *Oreah natah lalun,* literally, "a wayfarer who turns aside to spend the night."

name Yeruham (like that of the socialist Freeman) conceals an ironic pun; for though *yeruham* means "he will enjoy [God's] compassion," it also evokes the very reverse, by playing on *Loruhama,* the name given to the prophet Hosea's daughter to symbolize God's rejection of Israel upon whom He "will no more have compassion."[15]

For still others in Szibucz, Zionism has failed. A local organizer, asked when he plans to leave for Palestine, answers that he cannot even think of going, because "there is a great deal of work here" (p. 341). The work turns out to consist in traveling around, distributing pamphlets, organizing organizations. This armchair Zionist refuses to visit a group of Jews preparing for kibbutz life on a nearby training farm, because "they do not belong to our organization." Party politics takes precedence over the realization of ideals. Even the dedicated youngsters whom the narrator visits in their clubhouse, the Gordonia,[16] cannot see clearly; in their dark club room, "which is like a blind man whose eyes have died" (p. 100), these young people no longer perceive the spiritual basis of Zionism, thus (from both the Guest's and the author's standpoint) "betray[ing] the religious and moral ideals of the movement and taint[ing] it with corruption."[17] The mentor for whom their clubhouse is named was not the poet Yehuda Leib Gordon, whose work our narrator admires, but rather the socialist Aaron David Gordon, who translated idealistic thought into practical action. This metamorphosis fails to please the Guest, who complains in parable (p. 101) that, whereas Gordon the architect asked for stone to build a temple, Gordon the builder used only brick to construct petty houses. Diaspora Zionists refuse to admit the failure of Zionist ideals in the Land itself, where petty politics divide those who should stand together. Moreover, dedicated youths who do try

15. Hosea 1:6.

16. Gordonia, a pioneering youth movement, was founded in Galicia in 1923.

17. David Aberbach, "Agnon and Jewish Nationalism," *L'Eylah* 21 (1986): 17.

to reach Palestine often cannot get in. Such a one is Zvi, who, despairing of an immigration certificate that never comes, eventually takes ship and swims ashore at Jaffa. Captured by the British, he is deported back to Szibucz, where his friends weep for him while "between one time of tears and another they hope for divine mercy" (p. 477). Thus is the Zionist dream reduced once more to a despairing messianic hope against hope.

A Guest for the Night, then, is Agnon's graphic depiction of the *Haskalah*'s failure to forge viable alternatives to traditional Judaism. But what of that tradition itself? Can it somehow be retrieved to atone for those who, in various ways, have failed to achieve the messianic task of *tikkun 'olam* ("putting the world to rights")? As Agnon shows time and again, the narrator's Proustian attempt to recapture the vanished world of piety is doomed to fail. The ancient faith and values are gone forever; the gap between tradition and alienation cannot be bridged. The "guest for a night" is a wanderer who literally can't go home again. We see at last the point of the prophetic question that inspired the novel's title: "Why shouldst thou be a stranger in the land, a wayfarer who turns aside to spend the night?"[18] The old home is no more and can never be rebuilt. As Robert Alter has noted, the typical subject of Agnon's stories is "the physically, culturally, and most important, spiritually dispossessed."[19] In *A Guest for the Night* we see "perhaps the greatest single concern in Agnon's writings ... the problem of the modern man who, spiritually, finds himself with no place to live."[20] Having rejected the sacred traditions, communal norms, and secure life-style, he finds himself equally alienated from the alternatives. For the post-*Haskalah* Jew, as Baruch Hochman puts it: "the present is unbearable, and the past will not die; this is the dilemma in which the typical Agnon hero is caught. He tends to be disori-

18. *Oreah natah lalun,* Jeremiah 14:8.

19. Alter, *After the Tradition,* p. 148.

20. Alter, op. cit., p. 147.

ented, hanging between the madness and meaninglessness of the world as it is and his bondage to a past which neutralizes the present even as it alienates him from it."[21]

The Past That Will Not Die

The narrator's bondage to a past that will not die is expressed in his futile and forlorn attempt to revive the old life of prayer and study in Szibucz. He cannot recapture the substance, only the form. The story opens as he arrives home on the Eve of Yom Kippur, to find the members of his old synagogue performing the rituals of the Holy Day without any real enthusiasm. Daniel Bach (another son of the pious Reb Shlomo) expresses the pervasive cynicism of those who still practice the traditions: "I'm a sceptic, I don't believe in the power of repentance ... and I don't believe the Almighty cares about the welfare of His creatures" (p. 4). Bach lost his faith during the Great War, when he stumbled on the corpse of a Jewish soldier, blown to bits as he stood praying in prayer-shawl and phylacteries. In *A Guest for the Night,* as Sidra Ezrahi has pointed out, the First World War assumes a "mythic significance, recasting the past in the glow of romantic yearnings for a lost age, while giving a temporal frame to the troubles of the present."[22]

The figure of the skeptic Bach forms a counterpoint to that of his father, the cantor, the last pious Jew in town, whose faith persists despite the loss of his other son, killed by Arabs in Palestine. The novel abounds with similar paradoxes illustrating the dichotomy of past certainties and present doubts. Thus, the narrator arrives in town just as a large contingent of his fellow congregants prepares to leave Szibucz for a better life elsewhere. He asks

21. Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 23.

22. Sidra Dekoven Ezrahi, "Agnon Before and After," *Prooftexts* 2 (1982): 78–94.

them point-blank, "How can you leave what is certain and go to seek what is in doubt?" They answer, "We are leaving our place because He whose place is on high has left us" (pp. 12–13) —a subtle wordplay on the polysemous meanings of *makom.*[23]

The departing congregants hand the newly returned "Guest" the key to the Beit-Midrash, the old study house that he used to unlock daily to go in and study Torah. But now he finds the place deserted; plaster and whitewash have obliterated the grubby walls and blackened rafters that formerly bore witness to the constant presence of the pious studying by candlelight. The Guest manages to entice a few "students" back during the cold winter months, by supplying logs for the stove each day; but the clientele is sparse, the only "regular" being an old man, Reb Hayyim, formerly a great scholar, now reduced to lighting the candles and sweeping the floor of the Beit-Midrash. The vicissitudes of years of Siberian exile have destroyed his mind. Others, too, have fallen on hard times; Reb Hayyim's wife supports herself by running a small hotel, which has degenerated into a brothel; a woman named Sarah, reduced to poverty, is forced to part with a family heirloom, a Hebrew manuscript of her late husband's grandfather, which no one but the narrator still knows how to read. Even the communal rabbi turns out to be a pompous man who never reads his library of Torah books and is more concerned with the deference due his position than with ministering to his depleted congregation. The vibrant traditional world of yesteryear has vanished irretrievably, leaving in its place a hollow mockery; the sacred has been utterly profaned.

Besides irony, Agnon employs much symbolism. The very name of Szibucz, as we saw, denotes breakdown and decay. The first two people our hero encounters are physically handicapped, symbolizing their crippled minds and spirits. No child has been

23. "Manihim anu et mekomenu mipnei she-ha-makom hinihanu." Agnon, *Oreah natah lalun,* p. 18 (in *Kol sippurav shel S. Y. Agnon* [Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1953]).

born in the town for many years, a fact that prefigures the impending doom of a Judaism whose survival depends on the continuity of generations. The people of Szibucz wear worn-out clothes that match the threadbare quality of their lives. The heaviest symbolism of all surrounds the key to the Beit-Midrash. Our protagonist, retrieving it from those who have abandoned shtetl and Torah, hopes it will unlock for him not merely the study house but also the life he gave up years before. But his quest to recapture the past is soon frustrated; he loses the key and finds himself locked out of the Beit-Midrash and all it represents. The past is a closed book that cannot be reopened. Even when the locksmith—a mysterious old man who evokes the prophet Elijah playing on the messianic theme of *"Today!"* that may not come[24]—makes him a duplicate key, the Guest wonders whom to entrust it to when he leaves Szibucz, and how to preserve a tradition whose practitioners are no more. In the end, he offers the key as a circumcision gift to a baby boy born just as he leaves and named in his honor—one more expression of the forlorn hope the Guest will not abandon. But, as David Roskies has pointed out, the "hope of spiritual rehabilitation through a duplicate key to an Old House of Study in a fictional shtetl in Poland is not much in the way of consolation."[25] In sum, the characters and events lead to an inexorable conclusion: No one has found a replacement for two millennia of Jewish tradition, and the old ways have vanished for ever.

Agnon's Writing: Religious or Secular?

Critics agree on Agnon's place at the pinnacle of modern Hebrew literature. But they disagree on whether modern Hebrew literature in general is continuous with Jewish tradition or constitutes a break with it. First, is this literature religious or

24. B. Sanhedrin 98a.
25. Roskies, op. cit., p. 132.

secular? Second, does the answer to that question determine whether modern Hebrew literature (or a particular sample of it) represents continuity or a break with Jewish tradition? Both of these questions may be addressed to *A Guest for the Night*.

First, is Agnon a religious writer? Here we must consider what "religious" means. The mere fact that he employs the holy tongue, or even that his style mirrors the classical idiom of late-rabbinic Hebrew, does not dispose of the question. We must also consider Agnon's themes and his treatment of them.

A Guest for the Night abounds with religious themes. Both the form and the substance of the narrator's reflections proclaim the author's intimate acquaintance with the contents of Bible and Talmud. To select just a few from dozens of examples, Agnon cites the following talmudic maxims: With respect to the study of Torah (p. 94), "all your possessions will not equal its value"[26]; with reference to good deeds (p. 98), "for so long as a man lives in this world he can acquire virtuous acts and good deeds, of which a man eats the fruits in this world and the capital remains for the next"[27]; and concerning the gift of prophecy (p. 114), "since the day the vision was blocked, prophecy has been taken away."[28]

Agnon's intimate knowledge of liturgy and ritual emerges throughout the story. Indeed, he makes the narrator's visit last for almost a year partly in order to present the entire cycle of Jewish ceremonial observance, including the Kiddush recitation that precedes the Sabbath meal (p. 127); the requirement of a blessing before and after eating even a mere snack of tea and cake (p. 33); specific references to the daily worship (p. 118); details of festival prayers, above all, the closing service on Yom Kippur (pp. 17–20); the Passover seder (pp. 259–262); the custom of eating dairy foods on Shavuot (p. 285); as well as esoteric details

26. Y. Peah 1d, on Proverbs 8:11.
27. M. Peah 1, 1.
28. B. Bava Batra 12a.

like the practice of praying without prayer-shawl or phylacteries on the Fast of Tish'a B'Av (p. 363). Ironically, Agnon puts this custom in the mouth of a gentile of Szibucz, who rebukes an ignorant Jew for getting it wrong.

Besides his desire to portray the traditional observances of the Jewish religious calendar, Agnon may have had another, more subtle motive for making the Guest's visit last not quite a year. In fact, the visit ends after *eleven months.* (He arrives on the eve of Yom Kippur and takes his departure some weeks after Tish'a B'Av but before the advent of Rosh Hashanah.) In other words, the Guest's sojourn in Szibucz lasts for exactly the period of mourning, during which the bereaved must recite Kaddish everyday. And indeed, throughout his stay, the Guest has faithfully mourned the passing of the beloved, traditional world of his fathers.[29]

Not merely religious motifs but also religious sentiments pervade the story. Above all, as he mourns his lost heritage, we feel the desperation of the erstwhile devotee of Torah to recapture the ambience of the study house by reviving its forms, though he cannot resurrect its substance. This, despite our protagonist's opening disclaimer: "I am not one of those who compare the present to days gone by, but when I see the petty standing in the place of the great and the poor in deeds in the place of men of great achievement, I grieve over this generation, whose eyes have not seen Israel's greatness, who believe that Israel never had any greatness at all" (p. 9).

The disclaimer must be taken with a grain of salt; Agnon's whole purpose is precisely to compare the degraded present with the glorious past. So, too, when the narrator complains: "I am not one of those who argue with their Maker, but at that moment I said: Master of the world, Thou who didst create the whole universe, and in whose hands the universe lies, is it difficult for Thee, if I may say so, to give a little pleasure to Thy

29. I am indebted to Professor Arnold Band for sharing this insight with me.

sorely tried and loving sons?" (p. 115). Here he surely protests too much, for a principal theme of the book is the narrator's (and author's) implied dispute with the God who has abandoned Israel by letting Israel abandon Him.

Agnon's religious orientation is further expressed in the narrator's assertion that the Jews are God's chosen people, and in the talmudic depiction of Jews as the sons of kings and prophets:

> What is written in these [holy] books? The Holy One, blessed be He, created the universe according to His will and chose us from all the peoples and gave us His Torah so that we should know how to serve Him. ... The Torah surrounds those who study it with goodness and virtue and enhances their favor in the eyes of the world. ... For what reason did the Holy One, blessed be He, choose us and lay upon us the yoke of the Torah and the commandments, for is not the Torah heavy and difficult to observe? ... I will explain it by a parable. It is like a king's crown ... does the king refrain from putting the crown on his head because it is heavy? On the contrary, he puts it on his head and delights in it ... if I am not a king, I am a king's son, and I ought to know. But this man [a talmudic idiom meaning "I"] has forgotten, he and all Israel his people, that they are the sons of kings. The books tell us that this forgetfulness is worse than all other evils—that a king's son should forget he is a king's son. (p. 29)

Although the narrator ascribes these sentiments to "the books," they represent an affirmation of his own (and the author's) traditional stance. At the same time, Agnon expresses his own doubts about the value of clinging to the past, when he puts into the mouth of a young girl, Rachel, the following reply:

> Why should I take on myself the burden of past generations? Let past generations look after themselves and my generation look after itself. ... And as for what you said, that every daughter of Israel should think of herself as a daughter of kings, there's nothing more foolish than that. Today, when the crowns of kings are lying in museums and no one takes pride in them, you come and

say: Every daughter of Israel should think of herself as a daughter of kings. (p. 30)

The narrator's ambivalence toward traditional Judaism is implicit also in his constant rebuke of those who preserve its forms but debase its values. Thus, he complains of those who still assemble for daily prayer in Szibucz: "They disagree about the text of the prayers, quarrel over every custom that one of them brings from his home town as if it had been handed down from Mount Sinai" (p. 96).

In like fashion, when a poor drayman (the *balagola,* symbolically the lowest man on the Jewish totem pole) gets lost in a snowstorm, the town's rabbi criticizes the narrator for deciding to recite *Avinu malkenu*—an invocation of God's mercy—on a day when this prayer is not normally offered (p. 166). For the faithful of Szibucz, form has totally eclipsed substance.

These and many other examples suggest a sense in which we may fairly call Agnon a "religious" writer. His description, not merely of traditional customs, but also of the emotions that should ideally inform them, betrays his sympathetic stance. At the same time, the narrator's searing indictment of the degeneracy of Jewish life in Szibucz, coupled with his inability to recapture his own lost faith, raises for some critics of modern Hebrew literature another question: Can Agnon's writing properly be classified as continuous with Jewish tradition?

Continuity or Revolution?

Three prominent critics of Hebrew literature, Barukh Kurzweil, Simon Halkin, and Dov Sadan, have debated the relationship of modern Hebrew literature to traditional Judaism. Kurzweil takes issue with Halkin and Sadan on the question whether this literature represents continuity or break with tradition. Halkin maintains that modern Hebrew literature, as the handmaiden first of the *Haskalah* and then of Zionism, represents a link in an unbroken chain of Jewish culture. Although recognizing the disharmony between "this new body of Hebrew letters, mainly secular in character, and the religious Jewish folk life from which it sprang,"[30] he does not think its secularity per se disqualifies the literature from representing a continuous development of the tradition. For Halkin, then, Agnon's oeuvre, even if defined as secular, would constitute no break with Jewish tradition.

Dov Sadan likewise rejects the view that modern Hebrew literature represents a break with tradition. But he sees this literature, not as a secular creation of the Enlightenment, but rather as a synthesis that reconciles the conflict between the thesis of Jewish religious tradition and what Sadan regards as the "temporary antithesis" of the *Haskalah.* The Jewish literature that emerges in response to this crisis constitutes a new cultural synthesis, which derives its ultimate inspiration from the religious faith that is the source of all Jewish culture. For Sadan, Agnon's work is part of an ongoing process that by the very nature of the dialectal process represents continuity rather than revolt, regardless of its religious or secular designation.[31]

Barukh Kurzweil takes issue with the characterization of modern Hebrew literature as continuous with Jewish tradition. For Kurzweil, this literature, born of the *Haskalah,* is by definition a secular phenomenon. As such, it can only represent a break with traditional Judaism, whose religious values it deliberately set out to subvert.[32] Moreover, he sees it as an outgrowth of Sabbataian antinomianism and hence a secular perversion of Jewish tradition. However, Kurzweil's antagonism toward modern Hebrew writers does not extend to Agnon. He assigns the latter to what he calls the "tragic" period of Hebrew literature, that is, the aftermath of the *Haskalah,* when Hebrew writers began to realize "that the ideals of Enlightenment humanism

30. Halkin, op. cit., p. 33.

31. Dan Miron, "Dov Sadan," 14 *Enc. Jud.* 618–620.

32. Barukh Kurzweil, *Sifrutenu ha-hadashah: hemshekh o mahapekhah?* (Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 1958), pp. 13, 19.

would not suffice as a new basis of Jewish existence, since the vague hopes of 'progress' they had aroused proved illusory."[33] For Kurzweil, the "tragedy" was made doubly bitter by the fact that just as these writers began to turn back from the values of the gentile world to inner Jewish values, there came the shocking discovery that religious faith, the foundation of Jewish life, had evaporated. Lost faith cannot be restored, no matter how ardently one may desire it; and in Kurzweil's view, the sentimental scribbling of those who yearn to recover Judaism but cannot resurrect their faith should not be called religious literature.

Even so, Kurzweil claims that "tensions between the Jewish past and present" with which Agnon deals "endow this fiction with an intrinsically bi-polar quality ... that ... enables Agnon to treat Jewish reality with an objectivity unprecedented in modern Hebrew literature."[34] Thus, in contrast to his reviling of Zionists and *maskilim* alike as apostles of secularity, Kurzweil sees Agnon as a hybrid, both a religious and a secular writer, who presents "a recapitulation of the sacral Jewish past ... an attempt to transcend the break between the past and the present by creating the possibility of a 'new continuum,' by implying the primacy of the timeless meta-historic over the finitude of history."[35] In the event, for Kurzweil, Agnon's empathy with traditional values (which, in typically orthodox stance, Kurzweil characterizes as "objectivity") saves his work from the twofold taint of damning secularity and discontinuity with the Jewish past.

In closing, I find the question of Agnon's religiosity greatly illuminated by anthropologist Clifford Geertz's seminal definition of religion: "A system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and

33. James Diamond, *Barukh Kurzweil and Modern Hebrew Literature* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983), p. 89.

34. Diamond, op. cit., p. 96.

35. Diamond, op. cit., p. 97.

clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[36]

Geertz's definition captures the ambience of Agnon's work—perhaps encapsulates its essence. Viewing the "Guest" as Agnon's alter ego, his psyche stamped indelibly with his early training in traditional Judaism, one is tempted to claim that Agnon's writing constitutes a religion in itself. But that is another story.

36. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87–125, "Religion as a Cultural System."