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 A Jewish Existentialist Hero:
Agnon's "A Whole Loaf"

Though virtually unknown outside the Hebrew reading public before he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, S. J. Agnon (1888–1970) had enjoyed almost unanimous critical acclaim in the Hebrew press since the 1920s. His many published volumes of novels, short stories, and folktales have attracted attention not only for their literary virtuosity, but also they deal with the vexatious problems of the spirit which have beset twentieth century man.¹

Interestingly enough, only in the 1920s did critics succeed in penetrating through the ostensibly classical composure of his prose style and glimpse the murky spiritual anguish below, a veritable "dark night of the soul" that had persisted unnoticed for a quarter of a century. Beginning in the 1930s, Agnon developed a highly compressed and suggestive narrative technique, not unlike Kafka's, which was obviously designed to convey the doubt and confusion of the pious, traditional Jew who is also intellectually a citizen of Western Europe with its broad humanistic tradition. Once apprised so shockingly of the power of blackness in the non-realistic short stories of the thirties and forties, critics returned to the earlier works and found there what they had overlooked before. It is in this sense, therefore, that these later stories, collectively entitled "Sefer hama'asim" ("The book of tales"), provide the proper introduction to the entire corpus.²

Fortunately, one of the major stories in this collection, "A Whole Loaf" ("Pat shelema"), has been published in English, affording the English reader an opportunity to enter the world of Agnon with the proper perspective.³ The translator's selection of this particular story

could not have been fortuitous inasmuch as it had been singled out by B. Kurzweil, one of the foremost Israeli critics, as the most characteristic in "Sefer hama'asim."⁴ In our discussion of the symbolic structure of "Pat shelema" we shall refer frequently to Kurzweil's pioneering analysis both because it has set the precedent for subsequent treatments of Agnon, and we feel that it is essentially wrong.

Though Kurzweil's analysis is highly suggestive, it is far from exhaustive and therefore dangerously subjective: instead of tracing the symbolic structure rigorously he hovers impressionistically over the prime symbols and disregards the objective details, the essential questions of technique, and, not of least importance, the significance of the title. Quite often, when a critic concentrates only upon prime symbols to the neglect of their position among the many ramifications and allusions that hold the symbols in a coherent structure, he can easily force the meaning and import of these symbols quite unwittingly. Kurzweil begins and ends with a formula which seems to derive from Faust: the hero fails to recapture his lost spiritual unity because of his unbridled yearning for material things (symbolized by "the whole loaf") and his egotism. Whatever deflects him from the true path is "demonic"; to Kurzweil, in fact, one of the characters in the story is Mephistopheles.

As we shall demonstrate in our analysis, Kurzweil overlooked both the fact that the loaf was "whole" (*pat shelema* is a technical term in Hebrew),⁵ and the obvious allusion offered at the beginning of the story to a Talmudic saying that equates the preparation for the Sabbath to preparation for the world to come. The problem is far more complicated than the opposition of the material to the spiritual, and the outcome is not a partial return, as Kurzweil would have us believe, but frustration. Finally, but of utmost concern, Kurzweil fails to distinguish between the author Agnon who created the story, and the story's hero, the narrating introspective "I."

Even a cursory reading of the story cannot fail to alert the reader to two features, two lines of force around which all the other particles of the story are poised: The point of view of the narrative "I"; and the specific religious atmosphere through which the action moves. Though the first is a rather common phenomenon in this century, we should never lose sight of the fact, so formative in this story, that all objects, characters, and moments are seen through the psyche of the narrator and exist only in their relation to it. The narrator is less egotistical than solipsistic, and his alienation less a willed, selfish aloofness from society (according to Kurzweil) than an ineluctable, haunting perspective on reality.

Furthermore, aside from its subjective peculiarities, the psyche operative in the story is clearly that of a pious Jew; its concern and reactions are those of one whose frame of reference is “the religion of Moses and Israel.”

Since the reader must adopt the point of view of the pious, traditional Jew while reading this story, the specific religious aspects of the given situation should be elucidated. The story takes place on and after the Sabbath. According to Jewish law and lore, the holy Sabbath is taken to be the sign of the covenant between Israel and the Lord, a reminder of the fundamental belief that the world was created by Him.⁶ The Sabbath, then, should be observed with joyous sanctity; a man, for instance, should both prepare for the Sabbath and eat abundantly on it in honor of the day.

More specifically, the following quotes from *Hayyei Adam* concerning the bread eaten on the Sabbath will be found germane to “A Whole Loaf.”

It is the custom among all Jewry to bake breads in honor of the Sabbath. There are two reasons for this: in order that a woman might take a *halla* because on Sabbath Eve the first man, who was the *halla* of the world was created; in order that he (the husband) may eat the bread of a Jew.⁷

This passage assumes that the reader knows that *halla* is not merely a white bread eaten on Sabbath and holidays, but a memory of sacred ritual, and even in contemporary practice, the woman baking the *halla*, sets aside and burns a piece of it. To explain the standard practice of baking bread in honor of the Sabbath, the author here suggests two reasons: first, a commemoration of the creation of man; second, the importance of eating bread baked by a Jew. The seemingly simple act is endowed with broad meaning. Later in the text, we read: “A man must slice two whole loaves at each Sabbath meal.”⁸

The term *pat shelema* appears shortly afterwards and thus triggers off a chain of interlocking association: the Sabbath meals; the sanctity of the Sabbath; wholeness; wholeness of family; wholeness of spirit; the life of the spirit; the life according to the law; life within the society of the Law; personal identity. The “whole loaf,” therefore, symbolizes a coherent cluster of spiritual, not material values; the narrator’s unfulfilled desire for a “whole loaf” represents modern man’s yearning for spiritual wholeness. Many of the incorrect readings of this story derive from the failure to discern the connotation of the central symbol. Bread, to be sure, is ordinarily a symbol of materiality; but Agnon is not speaking of

bread in general, but of *pat shelema*, a technical term with religious overtones.

Furthermore, since, as we shall see, the narrator seems to totter on the brinks of Heaven and Hell, it is pertinent to mention that in Jewish lore the righteous in Heaven are often regaled with sumptuous meals. Only when the precise usage of the term is grasped, together with its logical associations, does the story begin to unlock its meanings. The following detailed analysis will demonstrate, among other things, how scrupulously precise Agnon is in the meaning of his key symbol.

* * *

I had not tasted anything all day long. I had made no preparations on Sabbath eve, so I had nothing to eat on the Sabbath. At that time I was on my own. My wife and my children were abroad, and I had remained all by myself at home, so that the bother of attending to my food fell upon myself.⁹

It is no mere coincidence that the situation set by the first three sentences of the story is the exact opposite of the traditional Sabbath situation symbolized by the term *pat shelema*: the Sabbath is not dignified by feasting but desecrated by the involuntary fast of the narrator who simply did not prepare for the Sabbath; instead of enjoying the company of his family on the Sabbath the narrator is “on his own [alone]”; and, what is worse, his family was “abroad [outside the Holy Land]” while he obviously was in Jerusalem. The underlying tone, then, is one of alienation—alienation from the sanctity of the Sabbath, from family. The narrator is dependent for his food on outside, impersonal sources: hotels, restaurants, cafés.

The implications of the situation are magnified sevenfold when one recalls that it is actually a veiled allusion to a popular Talmudic statement: “He who has made preparations on Friday shall eat on the Sabbath,”¹⁰ often interpreted to mean that he who makes preparations in this world can expect reward in the hereafter. This is not the story of one man’s hunger and confusion in Jerusalem on a particular Sabbath, but rather the anguished meditations of a highly sophisticated, pious Jew on the state and destiny of his soul. Throughout the story, Agnon consistently externalizes and concretizes, in realistic situations, the internal throbbing of his soul.

The following paragraphs in this chapter prove the relevance of the Talmudic statement. The first, describing the oppressive heat in a vivid

accumulation of nouns, verbs, and adjectives all signifying fire and intense heat, is a realistic reworking of verbal pictures of Gehenna, of Hell, often painted in Jewish ethical literature. Significantly, it is cooler at home. As the sun sets and the air cools, the narrator goes out to the street in anticipation of a fine meal. The thronged streets of Jerusalem on a late Saturday afternoon comprise a realistic picture of an idyllic situation: "They came out to glean a little of the atmosphere of Sabbath twilight which Jerusalem borrows from The Garden of Eden [Paradise]." These intentional references to Hell and Heaven serve to expand the metaphysical aspects of the situation stated in the first paragraph.

Once the stage is set, the narrator tells us: "I was borne along with them [the passers-by] till I came to my own path [to a solitary path]." Whatever the narrator must undergo, he must undergo alone, precisely because these events are really externalizations of highly personal internal conditions.

* * *

The old man knocking at the window and appearing, by no means coincidentally, while the narrator is alone in the street, is also an externalization, representing his conscience as a pious Jew, a conscience which takes for its points of reference traditional Jewish Law, the Law of Moses. Baruch Kurzweil has judiciously identified the old man, Dr. Yekutiel Ne'eman with the historical figure of Moses, the lawgiver. The very name is significant: Yekutiel is a name for Moses in legends; Ne'eman means "faithful," alluding to Moses, the faithful shepherd of the people. He "is a very considerable sage and his words are pleasant." But the narrator is not worthy of hearing the "magnificent thoughts we are accustomed to hear from him." Echoing the opening sentences of alienation from the beginning of the first chapter, Dr. Ne'eman rebukes the narrator for having left his family "outside the land" (of Israel), and thereby implies that the narrator himself, and not external conditions, is responsible for his own alienation: conscience stricken, the narrator attempts vainly to save himself from the rebuke, and changes the subject to an objective discussion of Dr. Ne'eman's famous book.

Dr. Ne'eman's book is, of course, the Torah, the Five Books of Moses and all they represent. While the narrator praises the book to placate Dr. Ne'eman, we are presented with two possible attitudes toward the Pentateuch: the scholar's scientific questioning of its authorship; the moralist's approbation of its salutary effect upon human behavior. The

scholars are divided in their opinion: some attribute its authorship to a Lord (. . .) (the four dots correctly interpreted by Kurzweil to represent the ineffable tetragrammaton); others claim Ne'eman wrote it by himself but ascribed it to "a certain Lord whom no man ever saw." The moralist, however, regarding the book not as a matter of scholarship, but a way of life, rejoices that "since it first became known the world has grown slightly better." The relevance of the two attitudes grows clearer as the story progresses, but given the pervasive religious aspect of the story, the moralistic and not the scholarly attitude should be the correct one for the repentant sinner.

The narrator apparently angers Dr. Ne'eman by his empty, ingratiating praise of his book for the latter turns away without answering. The venerable doctor, however, "returned with a pocket of letters to be taken to the post office and sent by registered mail." (The term "registered mail" is conveyed by the Hebrew word *ahrayut* which also means "responsibility.") Putting the letters in his breast pocket, the narrator promises to perform his mission faithfully.

The letters and the narrator's obligation to dispatch them appear obsessively in each of the remaining chapters of the story and are always contrasted with the narrator's desire to eat, later particularized as the yearning for "the whole loaf." Though we agree that Kurzweil has correctly identified the letters as the commandments, both oral and written, by which a pious Jew must live, we dissent from his view of their function in the story and the meaning of the story as a whole. The antithesis, in our opinion, is not between spirituality and materiality, but, more precisely, between the life lived by the commandments, well-defined and binding, and the vague yearning for wholeness and sanctity, a yearning with a definable object but no definite means of realization. The point of the story is that all means, except the traditional means, are doomed to failure. But the narrative "I" is plagued by a psychological ambivalence which, in effect, is the unresolved tension between the yearning for the end without traditional means and the deeply inculcated sentiment that the means, the commandments, are an obligation which must be discharged faithfully and unquestioningly.

* * *

In the first three chapters we are presented with the situation that is both the backdrop and cause of the action about to take place in the seven subsequent chapters. This division between situation, setting and action

corresponds to the realistic division in time. The first three chapters take place while it is still technically Sabbath; the ensuing quest for “the whole loaf” takes place after sunset when the sanctity and laws of the Sabbath have expired and man must face the workaday world.

The workaday world is ushered in by a brief episode that characterizes post-Sabbath time and adumbrates the narrator’s hesitation to dispatch the letters of Dr. Ne’eman. On account of the tradition that Moses died on the expiration of the Sabbath, the congregation in the House of Study refrained from the study of the *humash* (The Five Books of Moses). It is obvious that the Sabbath and the *humash* both represent sanctity and wholeness, perhaps in different ways. Since the narrator had not prepared for the Sabbath, he could not eat on the Sabbath and had to defer his quest for food until after the Sabbath. The mournful darkness in the House of Study is an omen of things to come. The same failure of unquestioning religious purpose that prevented him from preparing for the Sabbath also motivates his constant vacillation between his obligation to Dr. Ne’eman and his yearning for food, for unmediated spiritual satisfaction. Several times in chapters four, five, and six, the narrator changes his mind, tormented by his own decision. His feverish imagination conjures up visions of the consequences of his pending decision; his taxed reason invents one rationalization after another for his mixed sentiments. Even the final decision to go to the post office is sullied by reservations and regrets: The road is rough; the postal officials will be slow; the food in the restaurants will get cold. The decision lacks the sincerity and devotion, the *kavvana*, which the performance of commandments must have.

Though he stands before the post office, the narrator cannot enter for lack of *kavvana*. The actual obstacle to or distraction from the dispatching of the letters appears in the form of Mr. Gressler, supposedly a friend of the narrator. Like Dr. Ne’eman, Mr. Gressler is an externalization of a part of the narrator’s psyche. As his name (probably of Yiddish or Germanic origin) would suggest, Gressler is a figure of worldly importance as opposed to Dr. Ne’eman, whose significance transcends time and space. Kurzweil’s identification of Gressler with Mephistopheles injects a foreign element into a story in which all attitudes, problems, and symbols are those of normative Judaism. Only when we consider both Dr. Ne’eman and Gressler as opposing parts of the narrator’s psyche, do the details of their descriptions and their actions, both past and present, assume meaning and form a coherent pattern.

Both Gressler's entrance and exit break the realistic illusion of the story: he appears driving a two-horse carriage scattering the pedestrians before him with a malicious glee at a time when there were no longer horses in the city; his disappearance after the chariot overturns (chapter eight) is not even mentioned by the narrator. And yet, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the air of unreality which envelops him, Mr. Gressler is the most clearly defined figure in the story. Recalling the past, the narrator tells us "he was an intelligent and polite person, and although he was a fleshy fellow, his fleshiness was not noticed by reason of his intelligence [wide learning]." A man of affairs, Gressler "is gifted with exceptional wisdom, of the kind which undermines all the wisdom you may have learned elsewhere"; furthermore, he has taken the trouble to show the narrator "all kinds of pleasures." He "had something about him which attracted all who saw him," even those who were fleeing his horses' hooves; the narrator, moreover, is firmly convinced that Gressler prefers him to all other people. Worldly, fleshy, brilliant, attractive, known to the author "from the day [he] reached a maturity of knowledge," Gressler represents all the qualities that, in this story, are opposed to those ideals represented by Dr. Ne'eman.

We learn, for instance, that the first falling out between the narrator and Gressler is the result of the latter's part in the burning of the former's books, probably books of traditional law and lore. While playing cards on the floor beneath the narrator's apartment, in the home of a converted Jew (i.e. one who has abandoned the life of the Law), Gressler inspired him to set fire to his worthless ersatz merchandise in order to collect the insurance. After the fire (which corresponds to the fire of Gehinnom in the first chapter) the convert collected his insurance but the narrator not only lost everything, but was embroiled in frustrating and costly law suits in a claim against the municipality. But there is a second reason for the estrangement: since, in preparation for his journey to the Land of Israel, the narrator "was devoting [himself] to Dr. Ne'eman's book," and "was neglecting these worldly affairs...Mr. Gressler let [him] be."

Inasmuch as Gressler is actually a part of the narrator, the latter cannot escape him. Gressler turns up on the boat to Palestine, travelling first class, and even assists the narrator to clear customs. Gressler can take care of himself. In Jerusalem the friendship was rekindled "particularly in those days when my wife was away from the country." Again, the very state of alienation, which is the setting for the story as a whole, is also the state favorable for the friendship between them. And though Gressler's company was pleasant and his knowledge prestigious, almost

prophetic, the narrator's conscience bothered him. The real significance of Gressler having been copiously documented, the reader need not assume demonology with Kurzweil, or homosexuality, as intimated by Y. Levinger.¹¹

Returning to the time of the action of the story (chapter eight) we find the narrator entering Gressler's carriage in front of the post office. It is not insignificant that it is the narrator who signals and calls Gressler and not the opposite. In Gressler's presence *both* the hunger and the sense of obligation to post the letters recede from the narrator's consciousness. If the desire for food, later particularized as "a whole loaf," represents man's lust for material satisfaction, as Kurzweil would have us believe, this passage would be pointless. Why should Gressler, Kurzweil's Mephistopheles, distract the narrator from his quest for gratification of the sense and the ego, the very vices that this Mephistopheles is supposed to signify? The passage does assume meaning, however, when we realize that food, or "the whole loaf," symbolizes unmediated spiritual satisfaction.

The tension between the narrator and Gressler or, to verbalize it more explicitly, between the narrator's *entire* psyche and that part which is eminently at home in the world of affairs, is strained to the breaking point by the appearance of Mr. Hofni; the narrator would prefer to avoid him, but Gressler invites him to enter the carriage. Hofni (probably an allusion to one of the rapacious sons of Eli, the priest [I Samuel 3 and 4]), is a "bothersome fellow" whose pride in life is his invention of a new mouse-trap. But Hofni is more than a garrulous gadgeteer who, "when [he] goes gnawing at your brains, it's quite likely that you would prefer the mice to the conversation of the trapmaker." The translator has unfortunately mistranslated the statement "and the mouse-trap is very useful." Agnon says here that the mousetrap is a great *tikkun*, a metaphysical term suggesting the *repair* or *correction* of the imperfections of this world. Looking forward to Chapter 11, we notice the presence there of mice or rats, representing remorse or spiritual disgust. It is obvious, then, that Hofni and his mouse-traps symbolize the artificial and mechanical—futile though apparently facile—approach to correct the imperfections of this world.

In his rage, the narrator seizes the reins from Gressler and clumsily overturns the carriage in his frantic attempt to escape Hofni. As they roll in the dust the narrator screams in pain and indignation but Gressler "kept on laughing, as though he found pleasure in dusting himself with the dust of the horses legs and fluttering between life and death." As the

narrator, who yearns for the whole life, realizes that Gressler delights in the presence of death, the latter disappears from the scene and the entire story. Though Gressler's exit seems to be as enigmatic as his entrance, we should recall that he enters to distract the narrator from the post office and exits when the latter is utterly disgusted with him. Both acts are quite plausible when we realize what Gressler actually represents.

Gathering his bones from the dust and cleaning himself off, the narrator remembers his hunger and enters "the first hotel that came [his] way"—clearly a rash mistake. Though at first impressed by the fact that this hotel has "fine arrangements and polite and quick service and good food and excellent wine and worthy guests," the light of the dining hall blinds him, the scent of the good food confuses him. In this palace of alien splendor it is quite unlikely that he will find satisfaction. Though he wants to snatch something to eat, the sight of the room and its grave guests inhibit him; sitting at the table and perusing the menu, he feels uneasy. The imposing air of social convention seems to doom his quest. "How many good things there are which a happy man can eat his full of, and how long it seems to take until they are brought to him!" The narrator's exclamation adumbrates the frustration of the final chapters and in a broader sense, that of the entire story.

* * *

The frustration of the last three chapters, during which the narrator is never served his food, echoes his inner distraction and indecisiveness. Since he seeks spiritual satisfaction by unspecified means, or by obviating the means, he has no sure guide to his actions and desires. He fumbles and hesitates. A modern Tantalus, the food escapes his grasp precisely when it seems nearest. The unbreakable concatenation of frustrations begins most accidentally when the narrator attempts to impress the waiter by ordering a *pat shelema*, "a whole loaf." Time after time the waiter brings trays laden with food to other guests but not to the narrator who invents many excuses to explain the delay. He "began rebuking [himself] for asking for a whole loaf, when [he] would have been satisfied even with a small slice."

The feeling of remorse evokes a revealing side incident. The narrator sees a child holding a halla "of the kind that my mother, may she rest in peace, used to bake us for Purim, and which I can still taste now." Remorse kindles nostalgia for the carefree innocence of childhood, the security of family life, and the familiar, still meaningful pattern of reli-

gions observance, i. e. the cluster of associations that one might ordinarily connect with the term *pat shelema*. He “would have given the world for just a mouthful from that loaf.” One mouthful or a small slice would have sufficed, he realizes all too late. In his frantic desire for the totality of experiences associated with *pat shelema*, he unwittingly forfeits his opportunity to enjoy the slightest experience.

Though he wanted to tell the waiter he would do without the whole loaf, he could not open his mouth. As the striking of the clock reminds him of the passage of time, he recalls his obligation to post Dr. Ne’eman’s letters. In his panic, he jumps up, overturning a tray in the waiter’s hands. From the hotelkeeper he learns that it was his own long-awaited meal that he overturned. His own anxiety and guilt regarding the letter prevent his achieving unmediated spiritual satisfaction. By the end of chapter ten his frustration is complete: not only has he overturned the tray with his meal but he realizes that “the post office doors were already closed, and even if [he] were to go there it would be no use.” The closing of the doors, of gates, is a common Rabbinic metaphor suggesting the end of a period of divine grace or compassion. As in the scenes of frustration in Greek mythology, his spirit flits back and forth from the kitchen to the post office, free of the body but caged by its insatiable yearning.

If the story, up to this point, has always been on the verge of fantasy, chapter eleven introduces us into the realm of nightmare. “They did not fetch me any other meal,” sighs the narrator, and as the guests rise to leave, he is left alone in the litter of “bones and leavings and empty bottles and a dirty tablecloth” still obsessively waiting for his meal. The room is darkened, except for one light burning faintly. Even the letters “had become dirty with the muck and the mire and the wine.” The creaking of a key in the lock “like the sound of a nail being hammered into the flesh” informs him that he is locked in. The rustling of mice nibbling at the food (an externalization of his own remorse) terrifies him: “he’ll gnaw at me.” Even the cat, hailed by the narrator as “my salvation” does not frighten the mice but rather joins in the nibbling. When the last light goes out, the cat’s eyes glow in the dark. At this climax of the phantasmagoria, he both falls again and hears Gressler’s carriage outside. Here, for the first time, Gressler does not heed his call: the practical, worldly side of his personality cannot help him now. The narrator is now completely alone in this dark infernal setting.

Dozing off, he sleeps through the night amidst the refuse of the restaurant. In the morning he is wakened by the cleaners who are astonished to find him among the litter, perhaps a part of the litter. As they

laugh, a waiter (probably the one who was to serve him the previous night) identifies him by his absurd request: "This is the one who was asking for the whole loaf." His absurdity has become his identity.

For the second time in this story the narrator picks himself up, dirty, aching, and still hungry. Leaving the hotel, he goes home to wash, his mind constantly bedeviled by his obligation to post the letters, an obligation which could not be discharged since it was already Sunday when post offices were closed "for things that the clerk did not consider important." Significantly, the story's end resonates with terms from its beginning. The narrator remarks as he sets out again on a quest for food: "I was all alone at that time. My wife and children were out of the country, and all the bother of my food fell on me alone." We, the readers, are left with an indeterminate ending: will the narrator begin again the agonized process in search of "the whole loaf" or will he simply go out to buy food while looking back upon his narrated experience.

* * *

The indeterminate ending and the enigmatic characters constitute a daunting interpretive challenge. While other interpretations have been and will be presented, we would argue that the text of *A Whole Loaf* provides abundant material for the above interpretation.¹² For though the actual story-telling must be the beginning and the end of all our considerations, taken literally, the narrator's quest for a whole loaf cannot, by itself, organize the various incidents and allusions into a coherent, meaningful artistic whole. It cannot give structure to the story. The structure is rather built up painstakingly by the consistency of the referents of the surface incidents. The totality of referents lend the story its coherence and its meaning.

In this sense, then, we can speak of the symbolic structure of the story. Each incident, each character, each allusion, functions not only on the level of realistic storytelling, but refers to general concepts and transcendent values. The recurrence of key signs such as the "whole loaf" and the letters of Dr. Ne'eman, and the logic with which other elements of the story adhere to them, justifies their being called symbols. And though the use or implication of some symbols may be peculiar to Agnon, this is not a *private* symbolism. Both the key symbol and the atmosphere in which the symbols breathe are easily identified with a known culture pattern: traditional, normative Judaism. The entire story can be regarded as an extensive, complex modern *midrash* upon the

implied Talmudic statement: "He who has made preparations on Friday shall eat on the Sabbath." Agnon is thereby saved from the hermeticism of many symbolist writers, and his stories of the type of "A Whole Loaf," can command and effect wider audiences.

The common comparison of Agnon to Kafka, therefore, requires careful modification. One might, for instance, see parallels between this story and Kafka's "Hunger Artist." But there are significant differences. The referents in a Kafka story belong to no specific tradition, a phenomenon which explains the proliferation of interpretations; in Kafka criticism, the line between exegesis and eisegesis is indeed tenuous. The comparison with Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, whose tales Agnon imbibed in his youth, is more rewarding for in Agnon, as in Nahman, symbolism is not merely a private method of grasping reality; their symbols are palpably religious symbols transferred into literature.¹³ In both writers, doubt propels their fictions as well as the desire for redemption, for the "whole loaf."

Looking through the symbols toward the broader implication of the story, we notice that here, too, the comparison with Kafka is misleading. Though, like Josef K., the nameless narrator of "A Whole Loaf" is quite alone, his loneliness is neither eternal nor complete: his family can be brought home to Jerusalem; he can post the letters for Dr. Ne'eman which, we are given to understand, would end his indecision and even allow him to eat something; and, above all, his God is not dead. Though God does not appear in the story, His presence is implied in the religious setting: the Sabbath, the "whole loaf," Dr. Ne'eman and his book, the letters. God exists but the narrator, representative man, is not properly attuned to His presence. It is precisely in this crucial aspect of the story that the dichotomy between the author, Agnon, and the narrator, is of utmost significance. The author has created a world in which God's presence is implicit and has put into this world a narrator who cannot feel this presence at all, or at least with sufficient force to motivate action, even though he obviously knows of God and His specific manifestation in Jewish tradition. And yet, we, the readers, are not sure what the narrator has learned from his experience. Herein lies the haunting power of the story.

If "A Whole Loaf" and, therefore, more than twenty other stories of Agnon are to be classed as existentialistic literature, the specificity of their existentialism must be defined. To be sure, the narrator is neither a Sisyphus doomed to eternal frustration, nor a hero for whom any *engagement* whatsoever is a commendable feat of moral courage, nor one

for whom a vague form of human *tendresse* is satisfying, nor even the “man of faith” who has made his leap of commitment. The usual existential hero comes into the story without a background, personal or traditional, which could be a moving force in his life. The narrator of “A Whole Loaf,” however, comes to the story with an *essence*: he is obviously a tradition-oriented Jew. The story is an account of a temporary suspension of this *essence*, a “dark night of the soul” in the life of the narrator. The sense of temporary suspension of belief is, incidentally, also typical of Bratslav theology. The phrase “I was all alone at that time,” which resounds at the beginning and end of the story, indicates that the event narrated is now a matter of the past, a past, the memory of which, lives on in the subjective *presence* of the narrator. During this past period of temporary suspension, the narrator could be considered an existential hero who must make a crucial decision, an act of will that shall define him. Our narrator’s act of will, however, is more a quest to regain a lost identity, an attempt at redefinition. The right way is both open and clearly delineated: by posting Dr. Ne’eman’s letters, i.e. by observing the Mosaic commandments, he can regain the state of spiritual contentment symbolized by the “whole loaf.”

NOTES

1. S. J. Agnon, *Kol Sipurav Shel Sh.Y. Agnon*, 7 vols. (Jerusalem 1952). To this set, Agnon added an eighth volume in 1962. After he died in 1970, his daughter, Emunah Yaron, published eight more volumes of his writings.

2. In the 1952 edition, “Sefer hama’asim” is found on 103–249 of Vol. VI entitled *Samukh Venir’eh*.

3. “A Whole Loaf” trans. I. M. Lask. *A Whole Loaf*, ed. Sholom J. Kahn, (Tel-Aviv. 1957): 316–331. The Hebrew original first appeared in *Moznayim* Vols. 28–29, 1933.

4. “Nituah hasipur ‘Pat shelema,”” *Masekhet haroman* (Jerusalem, 1953), 84–89.

5. In his notes on “A Whole Loaf” appended to the anthology by the same name on 340–341, S. J. Kahn asserts: “But I feel in it, also, a somewhat pathetic desire for completeness and ‘wholeness’ in a drastically imperfect world.” Unfortunately, his espousal of Kurzweil’s reading blocks his further penetration into the story. Y. Levinger, in his article on this story (in the Festschrift *LeAgnon Shai*, 179–183) seems to be on the verge of an adequate insight into the nature of this ‘wholeness’ when he asserts that whatever value we attribute to ‘the whole loaf’ must stem from religious categories. However, Levinger fails to explain the crucial antithesis of the story between ‘the whole loaf’ and the letters. Furthermore, since the emphasis here is upon the narrator as an isolated individual, there seems to be no point to Levinger’s remarks about society or his innuendos concerning illicit relations.

6. I take as my source of law and lore Abraham Danzig’s *Hayyei Adam* of 1810 both because of its great popularity and its date which approximates the period which, to

Agnon, represents the Golden Age against which he measures the spiritual ills of modern man. The references are to the section dealing with the Laws of Sabbath, Article I, paragraphs 1 and 2.

7. Danzig, *op. cit.* Laws of Sabbath, Article I, paragraph 4.

8. Danzig, *op. cit.* Laws of Sabbath, Article VII, paragraph 2.

9. Inasmuch as we are writing a running commentary on the story, the citation of pages is unnecessary. Brackets are used to indicate a substitution of a more precise translation or the substitution of the third person for the first person of the text.

10. Babylonian Talmud, *Avoda Zara* 3a.

11. Levinger, *op. cit.*, 182–183.

12. For a well-argued alternative interpretation see Avraham Holtz, “Mishlemut la’avoda zara: Iyyunim be ‘Pat shelema’ leShai Agnon,” *HaSifrut* Vol. III, no. 2, (Tel-Aviv 1971), 295–311.

13. *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*, translation, introduction, and commentary. Arnold J. Band (New York 1978).