

IN MR. LUBLIN'S
STORE

S.Y. AGNON

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The Conspicuous Absence of the Jewish Bookshelf – The Key to Unlocking *In Mr. Lublin's Store*

EVEN TODAY, MORE THAN FOUR DECADES SINCE *IN MR. LUBLIN'S STORE* WAS PUBLISHED from S.Y. Agnon's archives, a cloud of ambiguity still hovers over the novel. Readers were enchanted by the dozens of vividly drawn, colorful characters that populate the story—Jews and Germans, men and women, young and old from all social strata, thrown together by the narrator in a tale set during his World War I sojourn in Leipzig. Yet no direct answer is ever provided to the question of what Agnon intended as the central theme of this work. Had he lived to bring it to completion under his own hand, what would have been the axle around which the various chapters would have spun? What would be the message of those chapters he published in his lifetime and those arranged by his daughter Emuna Yaron from his archives, as well as the

presumed material he never drafted before his death in 1970. How would the pieces of this unfinished novel been organized into one holistic and cohesive work of prose had Agnon lived to do complete it?

A satisfactory answer to this question can be suggested by reading *In Mr. Lublin's Store* alongside Agnon's novella *To This Day* (translated by Hillel Halkin for The Toby Press, 2009; in Hebrew as *Ad Henah*, 1952). The two works share more than a casual connection: Both take place in Leipzig—in whole or in part—the city that was the undisputed capital of the Jewish and Hebrew “Republic of Letters,” a literary-cultural locus that existed as an independent fiefdom within the larger center of German letters. In both books the conspicuous absence of the “Jewish Bookshelf” is matched by its simultaneous haunting presence. Here we use the metaphor of the Jewish Bookshelf in its contemporary Israeli sense of the living connection of the Jewish people with the cultural, literary treasures that generated Jewish tradition and heritage for generations. In that regard, these novels, which richly explore ways in which Jews struggled (sometimes unsuccessfully) to maintain a cultural and national identity despite the vicissitudes of the Exile, recall Heine's evocative description of our “portable homeland” in the text. In both of these works we encounter the express desire to embrace the full experience of this “bookshelf,” but a desire that cannot be fulfilled on account of the chasm between desire and action.

In *To This Day* the “conspicuous absence” of the Jewish Bookshelf is embodied in the valuable library of the late Dr. Levi, two book-filled rooms, secured behind the locked doors of his abandoned house in Grimma, a town about 25 kilometers southeast of Leipzig. This library is inaccessible to all who might make use of it. The narrator, a projection of Agnon himself into his story, a figure identical to our narrator in *In Mr. Lublin's Store*, pines away for Levi's collection of books, and makes two excursions to Grimma in the hope of rescuing the library from impending war-time danger. However, he does not fully and sincerely exert himself on behalf of his mission, his journeys ending fruitlessly. Only through some miraculous turn of the plot is the library salvaged and reconstituted in Jerusalem, in the narrator's newly built home, where place awaits Levi's books.

Judging by this model, from the fragments that formed the chapters of *In Mr. Lublin's Store*, we glimpse the narrator, standing at the center of the novel, drawn toward the fullness of experience embodied by a missing Jewish Bookshelf. As in *To This Day*, he pursues it from Berlin to Leipzig, and in both books the reader quickly discovers that the narrator, despite explicit statements to the contrary, takes no action to fulfill his stated desires.

The conspicuous absence of the Jewish Bookshelf is multiplied, and appears twice in *In Mr. Lublin's Store*—two separate incidences that come together only at the end of “The Last Chapter.”

We first encounter the theme in the narrator's unfulfilled desire to study Torah with Rabbi Jonathan, a Russian-born Torah scholar, who found his way to Leipzig, serving as the rabbi of the Orthodox community of Galician, Polish, Lithuanian, and Romanian Jewish ex-patriots who had gathered in Leipzig under the communal name “*Kahal Yeraim*.” On behalf of this opportunity to learn with Rabbi Jonathan, a master of the Talmud, the narrator abandons working on his *magnum opus* on the history of clothing, at which he had been toiling many long days, decamps from Berlin and relocates to Leipzig, where he hopes to “run through the Gemara” with the rabbi whenever time permits the scholar a break from his rabbinic duties. However, at their very first planned meeting, their joint study is thwarted on account of some inconsequential matter: “I thought, I'll go and see Rabbi Jonathan. After all, it was because of him that I had come to Leipzig. On the way I changed my mind and thought that I would rather look around the city because even when I was a child I had heard people talk about it. *I roamed the city*, the markets and the streets.” The attentive ear will hear the biblical echoes of Song of Songs: “I must rise and *roam the city*, through the streets and through the squares... I met the watchmen who *roam the city*: ‘Have you seen the one I love?’” (3:3) and “I met the watchmen who *roam the city*; they struck me, they bruised me, the guards of the walls stripped me of my mantle” (5:7). The reader sensitive to these intertextualities will understand that the narrator is revealing a hint to that which is in store: one who comes to Leipzig to pursue his love of Torah will not achieve his heart's desire, like the biblical lover who “sought the one I love—I sought, but found him not” (3:1).

Despite repeated attempts to meet with Rabbi Jonathan, they never actually manage to study Torah together, their ongoing encounters being one long string of missed opportunities.

The first time readers encounter the narrator in Rabbi Jonathan's company in Leipzig takes place on a Friday afternoon, the eve of the Sabbath, and one should be mindful of the timing of this meeting, surely not coincidental and one to which we will soon return. He accompanies Rabbi Jonathan to the shop of a knife sharpener, to retrieve a blade used in kosher slaughter from the craftsman who was restoring its fine edge. The rabbi invites our narrator to return home with him, where a woman arrives before any Torah study can take place to ask the rabbi for his assistance with a knotty problem of Jewish law. "He went with her into the library but left the door open since he was alone with her." Having concluded his conversation with the woman, Rabbi Jonathan invites his guest into the library, but instead of engaging the holy texts, he relates the problem that the woman had brought before him. "We went into the library. He motioned to me to sit down in his chair and he leaned against the bookcase. While I was sitting and he standing he began to tell the story." The story having concluded, Rabbi Jonathan, symbolically propped up against his unopened bookcase, considers why he had not consulted his books until then, whereupon the narrator adds, "I left Rabbi Jonathan and went home to prepare the Sabbath meal."

The inability to actualize the desire to study Torah is repeated time and again throughout the novel. "In the evening I went to see Rabbi Jonathan," says the narrator. "We spoke about the things people like us speak about. Among other things I said to him, 'I have heard that you made a joke...'" Those nights, which the Sages say were created for the sole purpose of Torah study (Eruvin 65a), pass between the two would-be study partners in idle chatter (even if it takes place under the guise of study), as the narrator reports, "Every day people come to argue before Rabbi Jonathan so that he has no time to study the Gemara with me. In the evenings when there are no cases we sit together, drink tea and talk about Torah and the deeds of the sages. He tells me some of the agreeable things and appealing stories he has heard from members of his congregation who come to his home for the *melaveh malkah* meal at the end of the Sabbath." (And all this in stark contrast to the Christian, Jakob

Weinwurz, whose “eyes are red from reading too much, even though he reads only at night and only the Bible, in which the Lord lets men know what he wants from them.”) On another occasion, he recalls:

I arrived at Rabbi Jonathan’s house and found him stretched out on the sofa, resting from the day’s work. All day he had been in the slaughterhouse in Halle where they had slaughtered an animal for the Sabbath.... Because of Rabbi Jonathan’s fatigue we did not study. But he got up from the sofa and his wife brought tea and cakes and we sat and ate and drank while talking about the Torah and while he told us about the things he had learned from his rabbis and from the rabbis who had ordained him. He talked and I listened. We sat until after midnight. He talked and I listened. It would have been best had we been able to study, for that is why I came to Leipzig, but a man does not always do what is best, particularly when there is a world war. At such times a man acts not according to his own will but the will of others who are also doing others’ bidding and what others have ordered them to do. This was not the only evening we hadn’t studied, but on other days and evenings as well, because even though we sat down together we couldn’t study. The war brought many cases and litigants who prevented our studying, making their arguments during the day and settling their cases at night.

The tale of missed opportunities is summarized by the narrator in these words:

What is my heart’s desire? I think I recognize a little of it. In part it is to return to my studies because living in Berlin and doing the research into clothing made me abandon my study of the Talmud and the Talmud abandoned me. I did something else and relinquished both of them at the same time, I set aside the book about clothing, I left Berlin and went to Leipzig, where I counted on Rabbi Jonathan to study with me. But Rabbi Jonathan was busy with litigants and with running the school so we couldn’t study together. Therefore I have time to myself, and can do what

time demands and the hour brings. I wander around the center of Leipzig like the kind of people time regards as unimportant and I gaze at everything I come across and every shop window that shows itself off to me.

His pained disappointment, at the rabbi who burdened him with his own troubles, and at the unachieved goal for which he had travelled to Leipzig, is encapsulated by the narrator when he says: "If I were to summarize all the pages I have studied in Leipzig the 'angel who protects pages' [*Shomer Dapin*] wouldn't be satisfied, but I still didn't abandon my hope for a page of Gemara." This mysterious guardian of pages which Agnon mentions is none other than one of the marauding angels who stand ready to punish scholars negligent in showing proper respect for holy books, those who turn their backs on their books and their learning, as described by the 17th century commentary of R. Shabtai Cohen, the Shakh, on *Yoreh De'ah* 277:1, "The scholars of the Kabbalah are aware of the angel Sh.D., that is *Shomer Dapin*, who causes one that leaves a book or scroll open when exiting the room to forget all of his learning." If truly diligent scholars momentarily abandon their study, this demonic angel gets his fill by wiping their memories. When it comes to punishing our narrator there is nary any learning which can be erased, as he woefully admits about himself, and *Shomer Dapin* is also left empty-handed.

The conspicuous absence of the Jewish Bookshelf in World War I Leipzig is embodied not only in the narrator's ongoing distance from books and learning, as he states, "I returned to my room and opened the Talmud but it didn't respond to me or if it did respond it didn't do so willingly. I had deserted it for days and it deserted me twice over" (following *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 14:4), but in the person of Rabbi Jonathan as well. And in Rabbi Jonathan the absence is doubly present: On one hand, his home contains a room filled with books, overflowing shelves which the best set designer could not have conjured for the scene, yet we do not witness him studying from those books even once throughout the entire novel. On the other hand, despite his many distractions and preoccupations, he is at work composing a book of his own, and it is this book that points to the absence of the larger cultural bookshelf and engagement with learning more than anything else. "Rabbi Jonathan is a

scholar and a virtuous man. He tries to teach through [writing] a book,” reports the narrator, who ironically adds, “This seems strange. A man lives in a city in which there are Jews and books and he sees that the Jews are disconnected from their holy books so why should another book be written? But Rabbi Jonathan says, “The wisdom in all the books is greater than what the generation needs. A book written for the generation that needs it is therefore tedious to create and to give to the generation.”

Agnon based the character of Rabbi Jonathan on Rabbi David Feldmann, who was born in 1884 in Talna, in today’s Ukraine, and served as the rabbi of the Ahawas Torah Synagogue and of the greater Orthodox community in Leipzig, the *Adat Yeraim Maḥazikei HaDat*, between 1910-1933. He passed away in 1955 in Manchester, England, where he had been a rabbi since departing Germany. In the period that Agnon interacted with him in Leipzig he was at work on two works of rabbinic scholarship, *Ir David*, a popular commentary on the *Kitzur Shulḥan Arukh* of R. Shlomo Ganzfried, and *Shiurei HaMitzvah*, on weights and measures in halakhic literature. These two works were published in Leipzig in 1924, about six years after Agnon’s sojourn in Feldmann’s city.



The second “appearance” of the Jewish Bookshelf’s absence in the novel occurs in Mr. Lublin’s large store—a store devoid of anything even resembling a book—which serves as the exclusive stage for the entire action of the book by the same title. (All other events taking place in the novel are being communicated from within the store through the narrator’s flashback descriptions or surrealistic flights of imagination.) Having taken upon himself the task of watching Mr. Lublin’s empty store, the narrator is caught in the unsettling predicament of having nothing to read: “The main thing is that [a] book would have helped me to pass the time, because here in Mr. Lublin’s store there are no books apart from the telephone directory, a map of the campaigns of the war and a railway timetable. If I were to add to them a catalog of the housewares on sale in Mr. Lublin’s store, this would be Mr. Lublin’s entire library.” The story begins on one of the shortest Fridays of the winter, at an hour that the narrator, who had been on his way to buy Sabbath provisions

and to visit the bathhouse, happens to stop in for a courtesy call at the store of his benefactor, Mr. Lublin. He is immediately caught in a situation from which he cannot extricate himself. "It so happened that Mr. Lublin had to go away on business and he didn't have anyone to look after the store, and stores are not usually closed in the middle of the day. I said to him, 'I'll sit in the store until you return.' Mr. Lublin left me in the store and went off on his business."

From these opening lines, our tale unwinds over a set span of time—no more than three or four hours at most. In the world of observant Jews, Friday afternoon, especially in the winter when sunset arrives early and with it the onset of the Sabbath, is fraught with anxiety and hustle and bustle. The narrator, who has been interrupted from his Sabbath preparations by Mr. Lublin, is forced to suppress his natural, feverish anxiety, exchanging it for a variety of prosaic concerns to distract himself from the imposed idleness, and turns his attention to his surroundings, as we shall see.

Agnon loved depicting the liminal space, standing at a threshold, at twilight, Sabbath eve late in the afternoon, periods which mark lack of clarity, blurring of boundaries, the appearance of new opportunities and new dangers. It is sufficient to mention the first chapter of *A Guest for the Night*, the stories in the collection *Sefer HaMa'asim*, and certainly the opening lines of the enigmatic story "First Kiss": "Friday afternoon; Sabbath eve. Father was out of town on business and had left me alone, like a kind of watchman, to take care of the store." In that story, as well as in this novel, events unfold in the transitional moments before the arrival of the Sabbath, both are set in a store whose owner has left, leaving a narrator alone to guard the shop with no sense of when father (or a father-figure) will return to release him from the duty imposed on him, one which interrupted the normal flow of his life.

In our novel Mr. Lublin interrupts the narrator from his planned schedule, from activities on which he had placed great importance. That particular Friday, 20th of Tevet in the Hebrew calendar, was the anniversary of the death of Maimonides. The narrator was accustomed to follow a specific study ritual on that day: "From the time that I first resolved to do so," reveals the narrator, "I usually divide the anniversary of the death of our late Master Maimonides into three, a third for studying

his code of law, a third for his Mishnah commentary and a third for his book, *A Guide of the Perplexed* and the rest of his essays about the soul and the body. Usually on the evening of 20th of Tevet, the anniversary of the passing of the late Maimonides, I place his books on my desk. As I do every year, I did the same that year, I arranged my desk and placed some books by our late Master on it, and I sat over them until it was time for bed because I hoped to learn the next day what I hadn't learned in the night."

Agnon had ascribed this very same practice to Reb Shlomo Horowitz, tragic hero of his novella "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town": "That day happened to be the twentieth day of the Jewish month of Tevet, and it was the sage Reb Shlomo's practice to devote that whole day to the works of Maimonides inasmuch as it was the anniversary of the death of Maimonides, of blessed memory, and in the evening he would share any new insights that he had gleaned from his studies." But in that story as well as in ours the desired study of Maimonides' writings is never achieved. The great scholar Reb Shlomo had spent the freezing cold day trudging to visit the widow and orphans of his beloved rival Reb Moshe Pinchas, and was left unable to devote himself to this once-a-year study day: "Due to the onslaught of visitors, [Reb Shlomo] had not had a chance that day to study and at any rate had not gleaned any new insights. And when the town leaders arrived and with them the great scholars, he told them, "Today is the anniversary of the death of Maimonides, of blessed memory, and it would be fitting for us to speak about him, but because of the infirmity of my body I have not studied today." Without stating so explicitly, Agnon hints to us between the lines that this 20th of Tevet will be Reb Shlomo's last. In a world where Torah study is central, even inadvertent absence of the experience carries with it mortal peril—as we will witness before our narrator leaves Mr. Lublin's store, although in an unexpected way.

As previously mentioned, Mr. Lublin's store is devoid of any books:

So I sit in Mr. Lublin's store where there is not even a fragment of Hebrew writing and needless to say no book by the late Master Maimonides. I thought, today is Maimonides' memorial day

and I'm sitting alone with nothing but the memory of his name. I was like the villager who set out to go to the city on the eve of Yom Kippur to pray together with the community, but lost his way and reached a desert. He didn't have the weekly prayerbook with him or the one for the High Holy Days but only the memory of the day. The ḥasidim do right by making the commemoration of their rabbis' death a day of joy and drinking. What shall I do on Maimonides' memorial day? Should I pour myself a glass of cognac? Maimonides, of blessed memory, condemns the drinking of intoxicating beverages.

With no other options, and in the absence of any books—that same “conspicuous absence” which serves as the central theme of the story—the narrator distracts himself from his original plan, turning his attention to things his circumstances present before him at that moment: “I didn't know what to do so I stood up and paced about. The walls restricted my steps so I opened a window to extend my space from the outside. I can't say that the world outside is more beautiful than the world inside, but the spirit longs for breadth. If it is wise it escapes from itself to itself, if not it is tossed from place to place without getting anywhere.” Instead of turning inward through study, to the depths of Jewish existence, the narrator turns his gaze outward to the non-Jewish surroundings, to a foreign, constricting, gentile world, in which the Jews—to their detriment—have found themselves caught. The narrative, which takes shape over chapters 3 through 5, becomes the province of the craftsmen in the old shops in the courtyard of Böttcher Street, Mr. Lublin's four tenants. Through the microcosm of these multifaceted and contrasting characters, Agnon succeeds in penetrating the mysteries of the German psyche, exposing the darkness lurking in its depths.

In all cases, the narrator's gaze which had until this point encircled Mr. Lublin's store and surrounding shops like a radar beam, surveying the three-dimensional space of human existence around him, revealing the secrets of the Teutonic soul, is suddenly frozen by the arrival of Mr. Jacob Stern. The startling entrance of this old acquaintance from his youth, a notable citizen of his hometown in Galicia, arrests the wandering movements of his imagination, and launches him into a mental time-travel,

back to the Old Home, *der alter heim* of Buczacz. (Although the town is never explicitly named, readers of Agnon will immediately recognize it as the author's birthplace in eastern Galicia, located in today's western Ukraine.) The arrival of Stern in the "Last Chapter"—whose tone so obviously connects it to the genre of surrealistic stories of the *Sefer HaMa'asim*—instantly revives the distant past as more than mere nostalgic memory: "I was so happy to see him that I didn't take the bad years into account, as if there were still peace in the world and he and I live in our town and stroll together, as kind to the city as the city is kind to us." Not only is the past resurrected but the library of books conspicuously absent from Mr. Lublin's store take their place once again at the center-stage of our tale: "In those days [of old] I was among those studying in the old beit midrash, which was still filled with books like all the good study houses. Since I was the only one left of all the students in the study house I felt that the books had been written for me alone and I had to read them all. I divided my days into three parts, one third to Talmud, one third to the rabbinic legal codes and a third to the rest of the books." Clearly, it is no coincidence that the character, whose entrance in the final chapter of the story disrupts the whole narrative, is named "Jacob Stern"—a name which brings to mind the verse, "A star rises from Jacob, and a scepter comes forth from Israel" (Numbers 24:17; Jacob being a metonym for the Jewish people, "Stern" being German for star), on which the Sages comment: "Israel declared before the Holy One blessed be He, 'Master of the World, how long shall we be oppressed at his [the non-Jewish] hand?' He replied, 'Until that day about which it is written *A star rises from Jacob, and a scepter comes forth from Israel*—when a star arises from Jacob and ignites the kindling of Esau" (Deut. Rabbah 1:20; following Obadiah 1:18).

The entrance of Jacob Stern, whose star arrives to brighten the dim store, distracts the narrator from his immersion in the non-Jewish milieu by which he was forcibly surrounded, idly passing the time in preoccupations of his present physical surroundings. But Stern simultaneously transports him away from the absence of the Jewish Bookshelf, returning him to the world in which he was born and bred. And through Jacob Stern, we reencounter Maimonides, front and center:

With this I end the third section in the last chapter about Mr. Jacob Stern from my town who suddenly appeared while I was sitting alone in Mr. Lublin's store in Leipzig on the eve of the Sabbath that occurred on the anniversary of the death of Maimonides of blessed memory. Why do I mention the death of Maimonides of blessed memory? Because from the time that I first resolved to do so, I usually divide the anniversary of the death of our late Master Maimonides into three, a third for studying his code of law, a third for his Mishnah commentary and a third for his book, *A Guide of the Perplexed*. But on that day I didn't study the code or the commentaries or the *Guide* because I was sitting in Mr. Lublin's store. For that reason the events of the day are engraved in my heart because of what was missing on that day.

Maimonides is not alone in reentering the narrator's consciousness with the sudden arrival of Stern. Along with that medieval sage arrives, in full force, despite their absence until now, and not as mere memory: the narrator's hometown, the expansive library of the old beit midrash, his childhood home, and most significantly, his father, of blessed memory, who appears to the narrator in full glory:

My eyes filled with tears because I dreamt that I had seen my father, my teacher. I greeted him but he didn't return my greeting because he was in mourning. I asked him, "Father, who are you mourning?" He said, "You, my son, I mourn for you." I said to him, "This mourning is over. Even I have forgotten when I died." He replied in amazement, "Over? If this is so, we are allowed to study Torah." He stretched his hand towards the bookcase and took down a volume of Maimonides' code of law. I thought (not in a dream but awake while I was sitting in Mr. Lublin's store), "If this is the case the day hasn't been wasted. I'll study one or two laws from Maimonides' book."

The novel is a long description of the narrator's ongoing, unfulfilled longing to recapture squandered learning—first the missed opportunities with Rabbi Jonathan, later for the wasted day in Mr. Lublin's store when

he was prevented from his annual study of Maimonides' teachings. These two incidences of the missing "bookshelf" unite in the "Last Chapter." It was around this theme that Agnon planned to organize this unfinished novel, by whose end we witness the epiphanous vision of the narrator and his dead-but-now-revived father learning together from a volume of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, bringing the theme to its conclusion.

And there's the rub: The desire is achieved, bringing the experience of actual Torah study and engagement with the bookshelf to fruition. Yet, the surreal shadow of death hovers over the whole experience. Not the actual death of the father, but the metaphorical death of the son, for whom the father resting in the "World to Come," mourns as if he, the son, had left this world. The father believes with all his heart in the eternal power of the Jewish Bookshelf and the vibrancy of the world of the old *beit midrash*. He mourns for his son, whose distance from the books on the shelf and from study of their treasures causes a death sentence to be passed on our narrator—spiritual, religious, and cultural death.

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