



Agnon's Tales
of the Land of Israel

edited by

**JEFFREY SAKS &
SHALOM CARMY**

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AGNON'S TALES OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies Series

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Foreword

THE CENTER FOR ISRAEL Studies is dedicated to deepening Yeshiva University's relationship with the State of Israel. Our area studies approach to Israel, its land and peoples, brings together Yeshiva University's rich faculty, museum, and library resources to explore Israel in all of its complexities. Our work is expressed through diverse scholarship, publications, academic programs, museum exhibitions, public events, and educational opportunities.

I am most pleased to introduce *Agnon's Tales of the Land of Israel*, edited by Jeffrey Saks and Shalom Carmy. As one of the luminaries of contemporary Modern Orthodox thought, Shalom's broad knowledge of all things Jewish—and philosophical—is always astonishing to me. He is one of the true “holy men” of our community.

Jeffrey Saks is the acclaimed translator of Agnon into English, one of the foremost Agnon scholars today, and now editor of *Tradition* journal. His accomplishments are the pride of Yeshiva University, where he earned his BA in Yeshiva College, his MA in the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Judaic Studies, and his ordination at RIETS. We are honored to count him a Leon Charney Senior Fellow of the Center for Israel Studies.

This marvelous volume is the fruit of a conference organized by Carmy and Saks on our historic Washington Heights campus in 2016, under the auspices of the Center for Israel Studies. This was a magical event, bringing together both the most senior scholars in the field and the younger generation of Agnon lovers for an inspiring day of learning.

Alas, since that day our numbers have been depleted by two, with the passing of Prof. Alan Mintz ל"ה and of Rabbi Ozer Glickman ל"ה. The Jewish world is less for the loss of each of these amazing human beings, scholars, and leaders.

FOREWORD

For the Yeshiva University community, the loss of Rabbi Glickman is especially bitter. Ozer, my friend Tony, was a mainstay of YU and of our Modern Orthodox community. He was a founding member of the CIS board and eagerly joined the organizing committee for this conference. He was a *maayan ha-mitgaber*, an “ever flowing spring,” of scholarship, civility, and kindness, of Torah, *derekh eretz*, *temimut*, smiles, and encouragement. A self-avowed amateur in Agnon studies, Ozer was anything but an amateur as he rattled off Agnon’s rich Hebrew and revelled in each turn of metaphor.

We are most pleased to dedicate this volume in memory of our teacher and friend, Rabbi Ozer Glickman, secure that somewhere in a corner of the heavenly *beit midrash* he occasionally curls up with the writings of Agnon, on occasion basks in the *shiurim* of Reb Shmuel Yosef—and always radiates the light of the *Shekhinah*. יהי זכרו ברוך

We thank our partner and my academic home, the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, for its support of this project, as well as the Agnon House of Jerusalem for its partnership in the conference. *Agnon’s Tales of the Land of Israel* is a product of the academic and even spiritual depth of scholarship and teaching that flows from Yeshiva University in all its many parts, recently brought together under the rubric of *Judaic Studies @ YU*. CIS is a proud constituent of this exciting initiative.

Agnon’s Tales of the Land of Israel, both the conference and this volume, was made possible by the Dr. Joseph and Faye Glatt Fund of the Center for Israel Studies. We especially thank President Richard Joel for his commitment to CIS from the very beginning and his family for facilitating this gift.

We thank our Provost, Vice President for Academic Affairs, and CIS board member Prof. Selma Botman, for her continuing commitment to CIS, and for sharing her memories of Rabbi Glickman. Dr. Ari Berman, our president, is a true friend of the Center for Israel Studies, of Revel, and of academic Judaic Studies at Yeshiva University. We thank Rabbi Berman for his support of all we do.

Steven Fine,
Dean Pinkhos Churgin Professor of Jewish History,
Director, Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies
New York and Jerusalem

In Memoriam: Rabbi Ozer Glickman ז"ל

RABBI OZER GLICKMAN WAS a learned rabbi with a remarkable intellect and an inspirational dedication to his students, colleagues, and family. Equally comfortable dazzling a large audience with his wit and insights as offering quiet wisdom and guidance to a single individual, he modeled a spiritual life that combined his love of Jewish law and ethics, American legal theory, and business.

This volume is dedicated to his life and spirit. As his former colleagues, friends, and family remember so well, Ozer was philosophical, deeply reflective, and refined, combining a profound knowledge of Torah with the exquisite cultural sophistication of a widely honored scholar. Broadly well-read and multilingual, he could opine as comfortably on Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas as on the works of Rambam and Rashi. He was in every respect a vibrantly cultured citizen of the world.

Ozer and I conversed often on subjects as diverse as family business transfer in China, Egyptian politics, and American poetry and literature. A charming raconteur, he was always ready to recommend a new novel or share his opinions on contemporary political and social life in addition to his passion for transactional business practices. However, it was when he spoke about his students that his always animated face would light up even further. He would volunteer stories of regularly meeting students either on or off campus to advise them about their studies or the business world. He cared genuinely about their success and devoted himself to helping them secure internships and jobs after graduation.

Yeshiva University, together with his many friends and international business associates, will miss this thoughtful and compassionate man who contributed so much to our University and the world at large. I am most pleased that this volume dedicated to the writings of S.Y. Agnon is

IN MEMORIAM: RABBI OZER GLICKMAN

dedicated to the memory of my friend Ozer. Rabbi Glickman truly loved all things Hebrew, and Agnon was among his favorite authors. This is a truly fitting tribute by our Center for Israel Studies, on behalf of the entire Yeshiva University community.

May the memory of Rabbi Ozer Glickman ל"ז be a blessing to us all.

Selma Botman
Vice President and Provost
Yeshiva University

Preface

LATE IN *T'MOL SHILSHOM*, *Only Yesterday*, S. Y. Agnon's epic novel of the Second Aliyah, the decade of Jewish immigration leading up to World War I, readers are privy to a highly symbolic dream playing itself out in the unconscious of the tragic hero, Yitzhak Kummer. A would-be pioneer, Kummer finds himself torn between secular Jaffa and ultra-Orthodox Jerusalem. One need not be Sigmund Freud to unpack the symbols in the dream in which he finds himself

in the street barefoot without shoes, his head bare. He heard the sound of prayer and followed the sound. He came to a two-story house, the bottom story in ruins and you climbed a ladder to the top story where they were praying. And the ladder stood straight. He leaned the ladder and ascended. When he put his head in, the door closed on him from inside and his body was outside.¹

The novel is replete with the symbols of hats and shoes, variably interpreted are clear indicators for “that which is above and that which is below” (cf. Mishnah Hagigah 2:1). Yitzhak being barefoot and bareheaded in the dream telegraphs his disconnect from both Earthly and Heavenly “Jerusalems,” as does his being suspended inside-outside, hanging off the second story of the building, unable to access the prayers being recited above. The dream is a symbol for the tragic vision of *T'mol Shilshom* (and the tragedy of so many young people of the Second Aliyah), the unsuccessful attempt to combine the thesis and antithesis of Judaism: traditional observance and Zionism.

And yet, the late Israeli novelist Aharon Appelfeld cautions us that the conventional reading of this novel—and so much of Agnon's writing—is

1. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, 573.

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misleading. It is too convenient to assume the great author set out the tensions in religious life with such neat symmetry. In fact, the binary reading of *T'mol Shilshom's* symbols is suspicious:

True, [such symmetry] may be found in nature, but things are different where the soul is concerned. [Here, in this novel as elsewhere,] it is an illusion. Jerusalem is a city of paupers, of fanatical traditionalists, and not at all a place of genuine faith . . . There exist truly religious people in Jaffa as in Jerusalem. Indeed, Agnon did not divide people into religious and secular, but held that some Jews had a spiritual Jewish quality that others lacked.²

While balance is required, it is unclear what rests on each side of the scales. Yehuda Amichai captures something of this fraught balancing act in one stanza of his poem "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Why Jerusalem?"

Why is Jerusalem, Yerushalayim, always two,
the Heavenly and the Earthly?
I want to live in an in-between Jerusalem,
Without banging my head up above or gashing my feet down below.
And why is Yerushalayim in the dual form like hands, *yadayim*,
and feet, *raglayim*?
I want to live in Jerusal, singular,
Because I am just I, singular, not an I-im.³

Amichai's poem gives further lie to the naïve notion, exploded by Appelfeld, that Jerusalem (as distinct from Jaffa) is an island of equanimity and balance. Embedded in the holy city's very plural name is the tension of celestial, ideal Jerusalem, and very real, and imperfect, terrestrial Jerusalem. Instead of an oasis of tranquility he hopes to achieve, what Yitzhak actually discovers through the bite of a dog that has become mad through his own paintbrush, is Jerusalem as the locus of the return of the repressed. When the narrator opens his tale with, "Like all our brethren of the Second Aliyah, the bearers of our Salvation, Yitzhak Kummer left his land and his birthplace and his city and ascended to the Land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to be rebuilt by it," astute readers will hear echoes of the biblical command to Abraham: "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's home, to the land that I will show you"

2. Appelfeld, "Between Shelter and Home," 9.

3. Amichai, *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 503. The poet plays off the grammatical fact that the name Jerusalem is in the plural form (in a way similar to certain English nouns which only exist in the plural form, pants or eyeglasses).

(Gen. 12:1). Unlike, Abraham, Yitzhak never leaves “father’s home” behind, since it can never leave him. Like so much of Agnon’s work, *T’mol Shilshom* is a study in how the past exerts its pull over the present and future.

If this theme is central to Agnon’s magnum opus, it is no less present scattered throughout his sprawling canon of works whenever the Land of Israel is concerned. The desired land is meant to be a place which restores balance to the Jewish people after their long exile—but, like Amichai’s plural “Jerusalems,” the Holy City and Land (to say nothing of the later State) are two-faced. Depending on which side of the lens one views *Eretz Yisrael* through, the vision of what can be achieved there appears clearer or more distorted. This typically Agnonian dual vision of the Land of Israel is given its most celebrated treatment in his magisterial novella “In the Heart of the Seas.” First published in 1934, it is a tale of the journey to the Land of Israel by a group setting out from Agnon’s own hometown, Buczacz. Written in the style of nineteenth century hasidic tales, the novella’s weaving of folklore and *aggadah*, lore, into modern literature helped cement Agnon’s reputation as the greatest Hebrew author of his time. The story was singled out for praise for its idealization of the Love of Zion, at a time that the Yishuv was undergoing great struggles. Between 1933 and 1935 over one hundred and fifty thousand Jews had arrived in Palestine, more than all that had arrived in the years of the British mandate up until that point. It should be noted that Hitler’s assumption of the Chancellorship of Germany in January 1933, led to a wave of German Jewish immigration. Contemporary critics were especially mindful that this was the background on which the novella was composed. Agnon’s tale is a *mélange* of both a realistic as well as supernatural narrative of ascent to the Holy Land, and was interpreted as a cautionary statement to the immigrants and builders of the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel: Zionism cannot only focus on the here-and-now, physical construction, but must recall the miraculous story that undergirds our work. It is a vision that emphasizes love of the land over labor, and the supernatural over nature. An attentive reader will notice the dual frequencies on which the story is broadcast and the contrast between the natural travel tale of the group versus the mysterious voyage of miracle-man Hananiah who floats along “in the heart of the sea” atop a magical kerchief.

It was precisely this ability, in this specific story, to relate the “two faces” of the Land of Israel which was singled out by the Nobel Committee in the prize citation of 1966: “Mr Agnon... In one of your stories [“In the

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Heart of the Seas”] you say that some will no doubt read it as they read fairy tales, others will read it for edification. Your great chronicle of the Jewish people’s spirit and life has therefore a manifold message.”⁴ It should not be surprising that Agnon chose to retroject himself as a character into “In the Heart of the Seas,” despite its setting one hundred years before its composition—“Rabbi Shmuel Yosef, the son of Rabbi Shalom Mordechai ha-Levi of blessed memory, who was versed in the legends of the Land of Israel, those legends in which the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, is hallowed; and when he commenced lauding the Land, people could see as it were the name of the living God engraved on the tip of his tongue”⁵—for that was how he envisioned the purpose of his artistic output especially in his Land of Israel stories.

These themes wove themselves into the many varied presentations at a conference convened by the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies on October 31, 2016, in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of Agnon’s Nobel Prize. Dedicated to the topic of “Agnon’s Tales of the Land of Israel,” the event brought together leading scholars of Hebrew literature from the United States, Canada, and Israel. It was co-sponsored by the Agnon House, Jerusalem, a National Heritage Site dedicated to the work of the S.Y. Agnon and the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies. This volume is based upon the lectures delivered at that conference, supplemented with essays contributed by scholars who were unable to be with us in New York.

Zafrira Lidovsky Cohen, Alan Mintz, Moshe Simkovich, and Wendy Zierler each present treatments of specific stories of the “old” Land of Israel, especially as it was depicted in relation to the lands of the exile. To our great sorrow, Professor Alan Mintz ז”ל died suddenly in May 2017. Alan was among the world’s leading scholars of Hebrew literature and had renewed his sharp scholarly fascination with Agnon in his later years. We are grateful to his student, Dr. Beverly Bailis, for preparing his essay from the transcript of his conference presentation.

T’mol Shilshom, Agnon’s epic depiction of Jaffa and Jerusalem of the Second Aliyah, is analyzed in essays by Shalom Carmy and Hillel Halkin, and discussed at length by Avraham Holtz, who shares insights from his multi-decade work on an annotated, scholarly edition of that novel, in conversation with Jeffrey Saks. Turning to more recent periods, Steven Fine,

4. “Nobel Prize Banquet Speech” in Agnon, *Forevermore & Other Stories*, 264.

5. Agnon, “In the Heart of the Seas,” in *Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town and Other Novellas*, 74.

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Jeffrey Saks, and Laura Wiseman present essays which explore some of the complexities of the Land of Israel in the period of the State of Israel and modern Jewish experience. Finally, Shulamith Z. Berger presents a documentary history of Agnon's relationship with Yeshiva University, uncovering pearls from the YU archives.

We are grateful to Yeshiva University, and especially to Professor Steven Fine, Director of the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies, for their ongoing commitment to bridging the distance between Israel and New York, to the benefit of both communities. Professor Fine's vision in convening the Agnon conference, along with his efforts to guarantee the dissemination of that day's teaching, study, and scholarship through this volume, are deeply appreciated as is his generous wisdom and enduring friendship. David Selis, a graduate student at the Bernard Revel School of Jewish Studies, and Center for Israel Studies associate, helped with copy editing. His sound advice and good judgement were most helpful. The people of Wipf and Stock publishers were most professional, and we appreciate their work in producing this volume, the second in the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies Publication Series. We especially thank the Leon Charney Legacy Fund of the Center for Israel Studies and the Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press for their support of this project.

Rabbi Ozer Glickman ז"ל, a founding member of the academic committee of the Center for Israel Studies, was an important partner in conceptualizing and planning the conference. Ozer had begun to draft a paper on Agnon's "In the Heart of the Seas" for this volume before his untimely loss. Those that knew him, and his love of Israel, can imagine how he would have analyzed the story whose plot is outlined above. He is sorely missed by his many colleagues and students, friends, and *talmidim*. We dedicate this volume in his memory.

Jeffrey Saks
Shalom Carmy
Jerusalem and New York

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